



“But these women are not ordinary women. They are preachers. They are preachers. They are Vaiṣṇava. By their association, one becomes a Vaiṣṇava.”

– Morning Walk, Bombay, March 27, 1974



To Śrīmatī Jāhnavā-devī

Did Śrīla Prabhupāda Want Women *Dīkṣā-gurus*?

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Did Śrīla Prabhupāda Want Women *Dīkṣā-gurus*?



EYE OF THE STORM

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Preface

Among Vaiṣṇavas there may be some difference of opinion due to everyone's personal identity, but despite all personal differences, the cult of Kṛṣṇa consciousness must go on.

– Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 4.28.31, purport

What's the *eye of the storm*? It's the area of calm at the center of a cyclone; a place of peace in the midst of raging turmoil. Turbulence and confrontation show up without an invitation; even among devotees. The hearts and minds of the contestants get absorbed in the fight. Alliances are formed and lines are drawn. Bystanders and fence-sitters may experience perplexity, confusion; even despair. For the opponents winning becomes paramount; but the debris from the battle affects everyone. Relations are strained; the atmosphere turns tense. In a thousand years though, who will remember the feelings, the pressure, the uncertainty and the fear? But, while it's taking place, the thunderstorm of debate captures the imagination and stirs the emotions.

It's entirely expected to witness a variety of views and of conflicting conceptions; especially within a worldwide movement. We all carry our baggage, our cultural influences; our psychological imprints from this and from previous lives. These color and filter our reactions to people and ideas; our perceptions and leanings are shaped by our exposure to the *guṇas* – the modes of nature – and the company we keep. Thus we become predisposed towards certain attitudes, certain opinions; certain points of view within the spectrum of possible beliefs. Thus even within a spiritual movement we find “conservatives” and “liberals”; “traditionalists” and “progressives”; “purists” and “revisionists”; “rightists” and “leftists,” “hawks” and “doves.” This phenomenon is inevitable and, at least in ISKCON, it has positive features; it allows us to attract and engage individuals from different backgrounds and mindsets. Differences are symptoms of a vibrant organization; they show that people care about the issues and the direction of the movement. After all, having differences of opinion is intrinsic to our being individuals; as Śrīla Prabhupāda explained in a lecture on *The Nectar of Devotion* on 31 October 1972, in Vṛndāvana:

Kṛṣṇa is not alone. Kṛṣṇa is not *nirākāra*. Kṛṣṇa is not impersonal, because He has got so many personal associates. *Nityo nityānām*. All these personal associates, they're individual persons. We are all person. You are person, I am person. We are all individual. I have got my individual opinion; you have got your individual opinion. Oneness means when these individual opinions are coincided in the matter of surrendering to Kṛṣṇa; that is oneness. Oneness does not mean that all these individuals become one, homogeneous. No. They keep their individuality, but they become one in the service of Kṛṣṇa. That is oneness. . . . Kṛṣṇa consciousness

means all persons agree to work for the satisfaction of Kṛṣṇa. That is Kṛṣṇa consciousness. That is oneness. Oneness does not mean we lose our individuality. Sometimes, individually we fight. Just like in the legislative assembly, our representative, M.P.'s, they go and fight. There is a deliberation. But that purpose is to serve the country.

It's natural for devotees to differ on what's best for pushing the mission forward, or even disagree on certain matters of philosophy and its application. Ideally we should bring to the table the discipline of self-control, the willingness to listen, the honesty of seeking the truth, the openness to embrace the best idea. In any case, we shouldn't be too surprised when a conflict arises; we shouldn't panic. To some extent Śrīla Prabhupāda even *expected* to see disagreement among his strong-minded leaders, even within the GBC itself. But he also wanted them to honor a decision, once taken. The following informal exchange in Māyāpur, during a lunch break in the GBC meetings, offers a glimpse of this principle:

Prabhupāda: So your GBC meeting?

Hṛdayānanda: They're going quickly. . . .

Prabhupāda: Pick up some fight. (laughs) There was no fight?

Hṛdayānanda: Just little fight.

Prabhupāda: (laughs) Don't fight. Then everything will be spoiled.

Hṛdayānanda: Not very much fight this time. It was much more peaceful than before.

Prabhupāda: (chuckling) Yes. For Kṛṣṇa's business why there should be...? Even there is fight it should be mock fight, not real fight. Then it is right.

Gargamuni: Yeah, most of the fights we have aren't personal. They're just difference of opinion.

Prabhupāda: No, that will go on. Then majority vote. Then it's decided.

– Room Conversation, Māyāpur, 1 March 1977

Let's also remember that difference in emphasis doesn't necessarily mean difference in philosophy. Śrīla Prabhupāda offered us a vast range of devotional engagements, and devotees can focus on the service they find more compelling, more interesting and more compatible with their nature. Deity worship, university outreach and cow protection, for instance, require different competencies; especially when performed as a specialist; but each of these services – if done sincerely – can satisfy Śrīla Prabhupāda immensely. Thus there are devotees focused on reviving *varṇāśrama*, including some of its traditional aspects, while others are, say, absorbed in breaking ground within the scientific community or the world of academia. Their orientation, their priorities; their values and references may differ, but on fundamental principles they all agree. They might still disagree, however, on what constitutes a principle and what a detail.

Let's recognize that those who don't endorse the idea of women *dikṣā-gurus* are animated by legitimate concerns; their reluctance should not be simply dismissed as an anachronism. Their worries are noble; their unease justified; their nervousness defensible. They aspire to re-establish a model of society that expresses and transplants the beauty of the Vedic cultural heritage, its unparalleled

moral splendor; its potent religiosity. Why? Such a lifestyle would facilitate and enhance the spiritual growth of devotees and of humanity at large. Theirs is a godly project and their trepidation for the introduction of women *dīkṣā-gurus* is an expression of their devotional mood. They fear this intrusion will threaten and perhaps shatter their hopes to recreate the divinely inspired structure that would facilitate living as the Lord wants us to live. Their aim is to mold ISKCON into a society that honors and obeys the guidelines for simple living and high thinking that Śrīla Prabhupāda so fervently envisioned and recommended. And not just within rural settings; they wish to reproduce, as much as possible everywhere, social systems and interactions informed by traditional standards and inspired by timeless values.

The role of women is obviously central to this vision; and the idea of women in a formal role as *dīkṣā-gurus* is taken as a challenge threatening to ruin the intended equilibriums; the very existence of women *dīkṣā-gurus* almost represents a rebellion against a God-given balance; their very presence appears as a living manifesto of revolt against godly, traditional duties. These devotees see the idea of women *dīkṣā-gurus* as a debilitating, degenerating factor, as an expression of the debasing influences of the mundane, misplaced, Western utopia of equality among genders. We feel the pain of these devotees and respect their trepidation. An ISKCON with women *dīkṣā-gurus* is for them a foreign and misguided movement, one they can't relate to or recognize as theirs; it's an ISKCON they don't want to see happening. Our suggestion – developed throughout this book – is that those two worlds, those two apparently opposite conceptions of ISKCON, are not mutually exclusive; they don't need to collide and destroy each other. We believe they can coexist and even reciprocally nourish each other. The great Caitanya

Tree provides room for multiple dimensions. One approach can focus on going deeper within the cultural roots, on reviving the best aspects of the Vedic legacy and demonstrating an example of ethical, sacred stability; the other approach can focus on expanding the branches in multifarious directions, penetrating the ever-changing landscapes of the modern age, demonstrating the dynamism of Gauḍīya Vaisnavism, its adaptability and the resilience of its principles within unfamiliar terrains. Simultaneously, both groups can cultivate, harvest and enjoy the sweetness of the fruits of *bhakti*.

How to mitigate the ongoing tensions, the latent or manifest intellectual tussles? What could the key be to better harmony and understanding? What cultural model could provide ISKCON with a dynamic equilibrium; with stability within its multiplicity? *Unity in diversity* can provide the essential continuum of our multifaceted Society. There is strength in unity; there is richness in diversity. In fact, in a broader sense, *unity in diversity* is our very philosophy, the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava description of reality:

Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu confirms the conclusion of *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* on the strength of His philosophy of *acintya-bhedābheda-tattva*. That philosophy holds that the Supreme Lord is simultaneously one with and different from His creation. That is to say, there is unity in diversity.

– Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, *Madhya-līlā* 9.360, purport

Unity in diversity is ISKCON's underlying worldview and theological doctrine – its *theory of everything* – and a corresponding mood pervade our worldwide community. Śrīla Prabhupāda so fervently desired to see *unity in diversity* firmly

established that he wanted all ISKCON leaders to come together every year to make it a reality:

I am therefore suggesting that all our men meet in Mayapur every year during the birth anniversary of Lord Caitanya Mahaprabhu. With all GBC and senior men present we should discuss how to make unity in diversity. But, if we fight on account of diversity, then it is simply the material platform. Please try to maintain the philosophy of unity in diversity. That will make our movement successful.

– Letter to Kirtanananda, 18 October 1973

But, one might ask, how to apply *unity in diversity* in connection with women *dikṣā-gurus*? It might look as if one option, allowing women *dikṣā-gurus*, should exclude its opposite, prohibiting them. How to manage the polarity? How to find some synchronization and prevent ongoing conflict? One way to have unity could be to prevent women from becoming *dikṣā-gurus* but allow them to become *śikṣā-gurus*; this could be considered as fulfilling both the need for unity (throughout the whole world, only men can initiate) and diversity (different roles for different genders). Another attempt at *unity in diversity* could be to accept the tenet that women can become *dikṣā-gurus* but allow them to initiate only in some places and not in others. Both options, however – as this book explains – present serious theological and logistical problems. Another way – we believe a better way – to fulfill the need for unity is embracing the fundamental, overarching principle that women, if qualified, can become *dikṣā-gurus*. Diversity shall be honored and satisfied by the freedom of all aspiring disciples to take initiation from the *dikṣā-guru* of their choice, male or female. Śrīla Prabhupāda’s teachings, especially his

books, provide ISKCON with unity, with a common reference and foundation; diversity is expressed by the multiple opportunities for spiritual instruction, by the variety of preachers and teachers we can choose as our guides according to our individual inspiration. In any case, the principle of unity presupposes and calls for a common authority, a final arbiter and settler of all disputes, diatribes and debates. Śrīla Prabhupāda personally established the formula:

Wherever there are individuals there is bound to be difference of opinion. Therefore for this purpose I have formulated the GBC. Therefore any new programs or proposals or discrepancies should be submitted before the Governing Board Commission and then their conclusion should be submitted to me for the final approval.

– Letter to Rupanuga, 14 February 1973

As a movement, we no longer enjoy the luxury of being able to submit our issues to Śrīla Prabhupāda “for the final approval.” This is sad but unavoidable. We are left with the GBC. That’s it. That’s Śrīla Prabhupāda’s vision and injunction for perpetuating top leadership in ISKCON; for providing the whole movement with a highest living authority. Less than ten days after creating the GBC, Śrīla Prabhupāda wrote: “I have set up the Governing Body Commission to handle management, questions of philosophy, and personal problems.” (Letter to Upendra, 6 August, 1970) Less than ten days before leaving this world, Śrīla Prabhupāda said: “The institution depends on the GBC.” (Room Conversation, Vṛndāvana November 5, 1977)

What if the GBC reconfirms its stand and, for the third time, sanctions the validity

of the principle of women *dīkṣā-gurus*? What would we do if we don't like that decision? Should we keep fighting it till our last breath? Or would it be better to relax, respect the GBC's judgment and let history take its course? If having women *dīkṣā-gurus* is good idea – in line with *sādhu*, *śāstra* and *guru* – some good result will come of it. If it isn't such a good idea, the future will tell; posterity, statistics, the fossil record, revelations through dreams, God... *somebody* will show it; and ISKCON can always modify its course.

We know; some devotees won't like the conclusion of this book; but, at least, we can assure them that we remain open; if anyone can submit better scriptural evidences, better historical references, better quotes, better reasoning, better arguments, and – therefore – a better conclusion, we are completely open to consider publishing a new book. It's not a challenge; it's an invitation and a promise.

At the *Eye of the Storm* we work to identify that center of clarity, that space of lucidity within the hurricane of controversy. For this project we were blessed with the contributions from outstanding Vaiṣṇavas; they brought to bear their cumulative experience of hundreds of years of devotional service in ISKCON. Some had extensive personal association with Śrīla Prabhupāda; some are recognized scholars, distinguished authors and accomplished teachers; they analyzed the views of the protagonists, their various arguments; they researched and discussed the subject; they studied Śrīla Prabhupāda's words and the Gauḍīya Vaisnava tradition. Are their conclusions correct? We leave the verdict to the reader.

– *The Publishers*



Did Śrīla Prabhupāda Want Women Dikṣā-gurus?

The Governing Body Commission (GBC) of ISKCON has formally and repeatedly recognized the principle that “a mature, qualified, female devotee may accept the role of an initiating spiritual master.” (Resolution 425, 2005 and resolution 305, 2009) Notwithstanding, certain ISKCON devotees have been promoting a rethink of that conclusion. The dialogue that ensued has inspired various disciples and grand-disciples of Śrīla Prabhupāda to research and reflect upon the subject. This group – which included representatives from all orders of life (*brahmacārī*, *gṛhastha*, *vānaprastha* and *sannyāsī*) and also initiating spiritual masters – concluded that the decision of the GBC is perfectly in line with the teachings of His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda, Founder-Ācārya of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. This writing conveys their considerations and their conclusions.

What Evidence Should We Take as Conclusive?

How do we know if women can be *dikṣā-gurus* or not? What is the evidence (*pramāṇa*)? In the presence of conflicting opinions and arguments, which references to accept as final and conclusive? How to apply the need for philosophical reconciliation (*samanvaya*) among apparently contradictory statements? The following verse comes to our aid. It was spoken by Yudhiṣṭhira Mahārāja in the *Mahābhārata* (*Vana-pārva* 313.117) and was quoted by Lord Caitanya in *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta* (*Madhya-līlā*, 17.186):

*tarko 'pratiṣṭhaḥ śrutayo vibhinnā
nāsāv ṛṣir yasya mataṁ na bhinnam
dharmasya tattvaṁ nihitaṁ guhāyām
mahājano yena gataḥ sa panthāḥ*

Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu continued, “Dry arguments are inconclusive. A great personality whose opinion does not differ from others is not considered a great sage. Simply by studying the Vedas, which are variegated, one cannot come to the right path by which religious principles are understood. The solid truth of religious principles is hidden in the heart of an unadulterated, self-realized person. Consequently, as the śāstras confirm, one should accept whatever progressive path the mahājanas advocate.”

Śrīla Prabhupāda often quoted the above verse, especially its conclusion (*mahājano yena gataḥ sa panthāḥ*):

One has to follow the authorities. *Mahājano yena gataḥ sa panthāḥ*. Great authorities should be followed; otherwise, if we simply depend on the scriptures, we are sometimes misled by rascals, or else we cannot understand or follow the different spiritual injunctions. The best path is to follow the authorities.

– *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 3.16.23, purport

Mahājano yena gataḥ sa panthāḥ: one should follow in the footsteps of great personalities.

– *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 4.23.4, purport

Certainly the great personality, the authority ISKCON devotees should follow, and whose statements they should accept as conclusive, is Śrīla Prabhupāda. Any interpretation, opinion or belief should be weighed against the Founder-Ācārya's instructions. Śrīla Prabhupāda wrote (*Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 7.7.26, purport): “Ācāryavān puruṣo veda [*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 6.14.2]: one can understand the truth fully when he has taken shelter of an expert ācārya.” Anything allegedly “Vedic” that minimizes or dismisses the teachings of the Founder-Ācārya should be considered Vedic only in form but not in substance. Actually, in *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta* (Ādi-līlā, 12.10), Śrīla Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja Gosvāmī uses even stronger words:

*ācāryera mata yei, sei mata sāra
tānra ājñā laṅghi' cale, sei ta' asāra*

The order of the spiritual master is the active principle in spiritual life. Anyone who disobeys the order of the spiritual master immediately becomes useless.

Which brings us to the crucial question: What did ISKCON's Founder-Ācārya say about the possibility of contemporary women serving as initiating spiritual masters?

What Śrīla Prabhupāda Said?

The answer is that Śrīla Prabhupāda repeatedly stated that women can (and should) become gurus. In both verbal and written communication Śrīla Prabhupāda consistently confirmed the principle:

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 January 1969

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.

– Śrī Vyāsa-pūjā Lecture, London, 22 August 1973

Women in our movement can also preach very nicely. 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 Kṛṣṇa then he is to be accepted as guru.

– Letter to Malati, 25 December 1974

Prabhupāda: Jāhnavā-devī, Lord Nityānanda's wife, she was ācārya . . . It is not that woman cannot be ācārya.

– Room Conversation, San Diego, 29 June 1972

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



Prabhupāda: Yes. Jāhnavā devī was Nityānanda’s wife. She became. . . . The qualification of guru is that he must be fully cognizant of the science of Kṛṣṇa. Then he or she can become guru. *Yei kṛṣṇa-tattva-vettā, sei guru haya.* [break] In our material world, is it any prohibition that woman cannot become professor? If she is qualified, she can become professor.

– Interview with Professors O’Connell, Motilal and Shivaram, Toronto, 18 June 1976

One may wonder why there should be continued debate and controversy in the presence of these (and other) direct, unambiguous statements. When Śrīla Prabhupāda spoke so clearly in favor – and *never* made any categorical statement against – why do some ISKCON devotees still resent and protest the *principle* of women serving as initiating spiritual masters?¹ What is the need of argumentation when the Founder-Ācārya has already kindly provided the conclusion? What’s wrong with the GBC asserting the same principle (“a mature, qualified, female devotee may accept the role of an initiating spiritual master”)? This writing addresses the arguments presented by devotees who object to the idea that women can be *dīkṣā-gurus*. We recognize that among those who oppose the GBC resolutions there are varieties of opinions; some, for instance, reject the concept that a woman could become a *dīkṣā-guru* in ISKCON; while others show openness to the principle but would like to impose certain restrictions (for instance: Women

¹ A passage in Śrīla Prabhupāda’s purport to *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 4.12.32 has been taken by some as contrary evidence: “Sunīti, however, being a woman, and specifically his mother, could not become Dhruva Mahārāja’s *dīkṣā-guru*.” Later, in a dedicated section, we will discuss this sentence; for now let us note that: a. the original transcript (what Śrīla Prabhupāda *really* said) has a different emphasis and different words; b. in Sunīti’s time the system of initiation was substantially different and it did include restrictions for women; c. Śrīla Prabhupāda never promoted the fact of Sunīti not initiating Dhruva as the universal standard for all women at all times.

can become *dikṣā-gurus*, but they must demonstrate to be transcendently situated). The following sections attempt to address the inconsistency and inaccuracy of the various arguments. We don't doubt anyone's good motivations; we believe that all Vaiṣṇavas involved in this discussion have the benefit of ISKCON at heart and we offer our prostrated obeisances to all of them, begging forgiveness for any offence we might commit during this writing. Our addressing of their opinions should not be taken as a personal attack, and therefore we won't mention their names, only what they say.

“Women *Dikṣā-gurus* are Against *Śāstra*”

We will directly address this argument below; for now let's consider that, as explained in the *Mahābhārata* verse quoted above, “*śrutayo vibhinnā*,” the scriptures present a multitude of statements and it's easy to mistake an injunction applicable only to a certain circumstance for an universal principle. Therefore the standard of following the *ācārya* is essential to identify the path of true dharma. Let's take for instance the *śāstric* injunction that in Kali-yuga nobody should take *sannyāsa*:

*aśvamedham gavāmbham
sannyāsam pala-paitṛkam
devareṇa sutotpattim
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.”

This statement is found in the *Brahma-vaivarta Purāṇa* (*Kṛṣṇa-janma-khaṇḍa* 185.180), and is quoted by Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu Himself in *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta* (*Ādi-līlā* 17.164). Solely on the strength of this quotation we might therefore be tempted to conclude that “It's against *śāstra* to take *sannyāsa* in Kali-yuga.” One might even come to the point of criticizing great *ācāryas* like Rāmānujācārya or Madhvācārya for taking *sannyāsa*; one might venture to disapprove of the acceptance of the renounced order of life by Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura and Śrīla Prabhupāda, or by the Supreme Personality of Godhead Himself, Śrī Kṛṣṇa Caitanya Mahāprabhu. This of course would be extremely offensive; it would also be a case of superficially quoting *śāstra* disregarding the teachings of those who know the meaning and application of *śāstra*. In connection with taking *sannyāsa* in Kali-yuga the behavior of the *yuga-avatāra* and of His pure devotees have a higher weight of authority than merely citing the Purāṇic reference. When facing apparent discrepancies or contradictions we need to reconcile them, acknowledging that what the *ācārya* says or does is the most authoritative evidence.

In regard to the issue of women *dikṣā-gurus*, the above considerations are certainly valid but might ultimately be irrelevant: So far we have not seen even a single clear statement from any *śāstra* prohibiting women from initiating disciples. Until its proponents provide *śāstric* evidence of the idea that “women *dikṣā-gurus* are against *śāstra*,” we must conclude that the argument lacks validity. The absence of *śāstric* prohibitions against women *dikṣā-gurus* is also recognized by respected exponents of other Vaiṣṇava *sampradāyas*. For instance, speaking on behalf of the

Madhva-sampradāya, Srīman Ananta Krishna Acharya of the Palimar Maṭha in Uḍupī, had this to say:²

Question: Do you feel that the *śāstras* and Vedic or Vaiṣṇava history allow scope for women to act as *dikṣā-guru*?

Answer: Yes, if she has taken proper *dikṣā* – Kṛṣṇa-mantra – from a Vaiṣṇava guru.

Question: Are there any prohibitions that you can cite from scripture or history that would specifically restrict women to act as *dikṣā-guru*?

Answer: I can't cite anything specific.

Question: Would your *sampradāya* allow women *dikṣā-guru* today. If yes, why? If no, why not?

Answer: There would be no objection from the *śāstric* point of view, but there could be an objection from the social point of view.

This last sentence accurately describes the present circumstances in ISKCON: There are no prohibitions in the scriptures or in the words of Śrīla Prabhupāda; only some degree of social (and psychological) resistance to the principle. Another scholar, Professor M.A. Lakshmi Thathachar, of the Academy of Sanskrit Research in Melkote, Karnataka, speaking on behalf of the Rāmānuja-sampradāya (Śrī Vaiṣṇavism), said the following:³

2 Interview by Devāmṛta dāsa

3 Interview by Sudhir Caitanya dāsa

Question: Is there any history of female *dikṣā-guru* in your *sampradāya*? If so, where and why? If not, why not?

Answer: Āṇḍāl, the celebrated wife of Kūreśa, was an ideal Śrī Vaiṣṇava woman, *ācāryāṇī*. She used to guide students on the spiritual path. Among the Śrī Vaiṣṇava saints, Āṇḍāl, the spiritual daughter of Periyālvār or Viṣṇucitta, ranks high. Her composition, *Tiruppavai*, is considered to be the epitome of the entire *Vedas*.

Dr. A.V. Ramana Dikshitulu, M.Sc., Ph.D., Pradhāna Ācāraka (Head *Pūjārī*) of Bālajī Mandir in Tirumala, Andhra Pradesh – also representing the Rāmānuja-sampradāya – answered in this way:⁴

Question: Do you feel that the *śāstras* and Vedic or Vaiṣṇava history allow scope for women to act as a *dikṣā-guru*?

Answer: Yes.

Question: Are there any prohibitions that you can cite from scripture or history that would specifically restrict women to act as *dikṣā-gurus*?

Answer: No. The *ātmā* is transcendental to the body, and spiritual power comes from the *ātmā*, not the body. So there should not be any prohibition.

Question: Is there a history of female *dikṣā-gurus* in your *sampradāya*?

Answer: Yes, we have such a history.

4 Interview by Pūrṇacandra dāsa

Question: Are these female gurus considered bona fide?

Answer: Yes.

Question: Would your *sampradāya* allow women *dikṣā-guru* today?

Answer: I don't see why not.

“Śrīla Prabhupāda’s Statements Saying that Women Can Become Gurus Should Be Taken as General Encouragements; They Are Not Meant to Be Taken Seriously or Followed”

Faced with the various written and verbal instructions by the Founder-Ācārya, a particularly vocal opponent attempted to redefine and dismiss all of them:

So such quotations from Prabhupada have to be viewed as “statements of encouragement”, and not “statements of ideology”.

– Email dated 14 October 2012, PAMHO text 24196129

The letters of “general encouragement” that you quote . . .

– Email dated 21 November 2012, PAMHO text 24384880

The obvious question, of course, would be: Why would Śrīla Prabhupāda encourage his ladies disciples to do something he didn't really want them to do? Why would he encourage women with false statements? So they would keep collecting money and doing other services? This interpretation makes Śrīla Prabhupāda appear opportunistic and even manipulative. If we accept this

approach as bona fide, anything Śrīla Prabhupāda ever said or wrote can be easily made relative and ultimately dismantled. Anyone who dislikes *anything* in the vast body of Śrīla Prabhupāda's teachings, can just say, “You know, that was said only as *encouragement*, it wasn't really true; we don't need to take it seriously.” Once we start walking down this road, where do we end? But let's take a look at some examples of “encouraging statements”:

If you have got extra time, I encourage you to learn Sanskrit along with your husband.

– Letter to Arundhati, 1 April 1970

This book distribution is especially an important program and it is first class preaching work. So I encourage you to work with all the senior men there in America and encourage them to distribute more and more of this transcendental literature.

– Letter to Sudama, 16 February 1973

I very much liked your Chicago festival, and I encourage you to increase it next year.

– Letter to Sri Govinda, 29 September 1974

I can understand from your letter that you are beginning to appreciate the Krishna Consciousness Movement and I encourage you to join wholeheartedly and fully in the service of Lord Sri Krishna for this will be the most glorious thing in your life.

– Letter to Bhaktin Toni, 18 February 1973

Should we conclude that, actually, Śrīla Prabhupāda didn't really want Arundhatī devī dāsī to study Sanskrit? Or that he didn't really wish to see the book distribution and the Chicago festival "increase"? Did Śrīla Prabhupāda truly want that Bhaktin Toni "join wholeheartedly," or was he saying it only as *encouragement*? It's just too easy and too wrong to minimize or dismiss whatever statement of the Founder-Ācārya we might not like. That's not the Vaiṣṇava way; it's actually more like the Śaṅkarites' approach: They (illegitimately) divide all injunctions of the scriptures into *paramārthika* (really real) and *vyavahārika* (conventionally real). The impersonal-sounding passages are given the highest status; but when the *Vedas* describe the personal form of God that's taken only as metaphorical.

The Vaiṣṇava method is *samanvaya*, the reconciliation of the various statements within an overall harmonious understanding ("tat tu samanvayāt," *Vedānta-sūtra* 1.1.4). We are not allowed to just discard *any* of the teachings of the Founder-Ācārya. We should take him seriously when he speaks about traditional family values ("Vedic system advises women to become very chaste & accept the husband as master." Letter to Nandarani, 8 October 1967) *and* when he points out that spiritual prominence in the household depends on spiritual advancement ("The actual system is that the husband is Spiritual Master to his wife, but if the wife can bring her husband into practicing this process, then it is all right that the husband accepts wife as Spiritual Master." Letter to Silavati, 14 June 1969).

We should maturely perceive the harmony between such *apparently* discordant statements, without capriciously discarding one and embracing the other. No, both should be cherished, meditated upon and put into practice according to the

circumstances of the individuals involved. Let's consider, for instance, the two following letters, which appear to provide different orientations:

I am always thinking of your New Vrindaban . . . my special request is that you should try to maintain as many cows as possible in your New Vrindaban. The first thing is that whether the girls and women who live there are agreeable to work as I have suggested; namely 1) to take care of the children, both from health and educational point of view, 2) to keep the whole temple, kitchen, etc. very clean, (At the present moment, things are not kept very clean. You are right that if some outsiders come, they will view our situation as not very hygienic.), 3) cooking, 4) churning butter.

– Letter to Kirtanananda, 24 June 1969

Six months later Śrīla Prabhupāda wrote to a lady disciple:

In India all the acaryas 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 December 1969

There is no contradiction; there is no need to accept only one of these letters while rejecting the other. Both "statements of encouragement" are genuine instructions.

Śrīla Prabhupāda wanted to see the New Vrindaban ladies “churning butter” and he wanted to see other ladies proving “by practical example that there is no bar for anyone in the matter of preaching work.” Similarly, when Śrīla Prabhupāda told his disciples, gathered on 22 August 1973 in London, for his Vyāsa-pūjā: “My dear sons and daughters . . . You’ll have to become spiritual master. You, all my disciples, everyone should become spiritual master.” he meant it, he wanted it; it wasn’t just some sort of diplomatic *encouragement*.

“Sunīti Did Not Initiate Dhruva; Therefore Women Should Never Become Dikṣā-gurus”

Among all arguments, this was perhaps the most frequently presented; let’s carefully analyze its validity. The *published* version of Śrīla Prabhupāda’s purport to Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 4.12.32 says:

Dhruva had a feeling of obligation to his mother, Sunīti . . . his *patha-pradarśaka-guru*. *Patha-pradarśaka-guru* means “the guru, or the spiritual master, who shows the way.” Such a *guru* is sometimes called *śikṣā-guru*. . . . According to sāstric injunctions, there is no difference between *śikṣā-guru* and *dikṣā-guru*, and generally the *śikṣā-guru* later on becomes the *dikṣā-guru*. Sunīti, however, being a woman, and specifically his mother, could not become Dhruva Mahārāja’s *dikṣā-guru*.

First of all, let’s acknowledge that the original transcript of Śrīla Prabhupāda words shows a different emphasis. What Śrīla Prabhupāda really said, what the tape recorder captured and the transcriber typed was:

According to sastric injunctions, there is no difference between *sikṣa guru*

Dhruva had PURPORT
 THIS WAS A feeling of obligation to his mother, Sunīti.
~~Practically~~ *It was* who Sunīti gave him the clue by which, ~~at the present~~ *times had enabled*
~~him to now be carried personally~~ *him to now be carried personally* ~~to~~ *to*
~~moment~~ *moment* ~~Dhruva Mahārāja was able to go to the~~ *Dhruva Mahārāja was able to go to the* Vaikuntha ~~planet~~ *planet* //
~~personally carried by the associates of Lord Viṣṇu.~~ *personally carried by the associates of Lord Viṣṇu.* ~~Remember the~~ *Remember the*
~~was thinking if he could take his~~ *now remembered her and wanted to* ~~take his poor mother along with~~ *was thinking if he could take her* ~~her~~ *take her* poor mother along with
 him. Actually, Dhruva Mahārāja's mother, Sunīti, was the ~~his~~ *his* ~~patha-~~ *patha-*
~~pradarśaka guru.~~ *pradarśaka guru.* ~~Patha-pradarśaka guru~~ *Patha-pradarśaka guru* means the ~~guru~~ *guru* or the
 spiritual master who shows the way. Such ~~a~~ *a* ~~guru~~ *guru* is sometimes called
~~sikṣa guru.~~ *sikṣa guru.* Although Narada Muni was his ~~dikṣa guru,~~ *dikṣa guru,* ~~(initiating~~ *(initiating*
~~spiritual master)~~ *spiritual master)* Sunīti, ~~the~~ *his* ~~mother of Dhruva Mahārāja,~~ *mother of Dhruva Mahārāja,* was the
 first who gave him instruction how to achieve the favor of the
 Supreme Personality of Godhead. It is the duty of the ~~sikṣa guru~~ *sikṣa guru*
 or ~~dikṣa guru~~ *dikṣa guru* to instruct the disciple ~~the~~ *in* the right way, and it depends
 on the disciple to execute the process. According to sastric in-
 junctions, there is no difference between ~~sikṣa guru~~ *sikṣa guru* and ~~dikṣa~~ *dikṣa*
~~guru,~~ *guru,* and generally the ~~sikṣa guru~~ *sikṣa guru* ~~becomes later on~~ *becomes later on* ~~dikṣa guru.~~ *dikṣa guru.*
 Sunīti, however, being in family relationship with Dhruva, his
 mother, and ~~also~~ *a woman's* ~~woman~~ *and is practically* ~~she~~ *she*
~~could not become the~~ *could not become the* ~~dikṣa guru of Dhruva~~ *dikṣa guru of Dhruva*
~~Mahārāja.~~ *Mahārāja.* Still, he was not less obliged to Sunīti. There
 was no question of ~~carrying~~ *carrying* Narada Muni to ~~the~~ *the* Vaikunthaloka,
 but Dhruva Mahārāja thought of his mother, ~~for carrying her to the~~ *for carrying her to the*
~~Vaikunthaloka.~~ *Vaikunthaloka.* ~~This was simply a contemplation of Dhruva Mahārāja.~~ *This was simply a contemplation of Dhruva Mahārāja.*
Whatever The Supreme Personality of Godhead, ~~whatever~~ *whatever* He contemplates, im-
 mediately ~~it~~ *it* becomes fructified. Similarly, ~~even~~ *even* a devotee ~~is~~ *is*
 is completely dependent on the Supreme Personality of Godhead,
 can also fulfill his contemplations by the grace of the Lord. The

and diksa guru, and generally the siksa guru becomes later on diksa guru. Sunīti, however, being in family relationship with Dhruva, his mother, and also woman, could not become the diksa guru of Dhruva Maharaja.

– Original transcript of Śrīla Prabhupāda’s purport to *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 4.12.32, before editing by Hayagrīva dāsa

Śrīla Prabhupāda stresses the “family relationship” between Sunīti and Dhruva; the sentence “being a woman” (which Śrīla Prabhupāda never spoke) shifts the emphasis on Sunīti’s gender; the expression “being a woman” appears only after the editing. Most probably Hayagrīva Prabhu didn’t expect that his slightly imprecise editing, the words he added (“being a woman”) would become, after almost forty years, the pivotal but fictitious battle cry of those who oppose women *dikṣā-gurus*. In any case, what the original expression “and also woman” (or even the published “being a woman”) tells us? All that we can legitimately conclude is that in Dhruva Mahārāja’s time, a Satya-yuga in the Svāyambhuva Manu *manvantara* – approximately one billion nine hundred million years ago – women were restricted from giving initiation, at least among the members of the royal order or to their sons. That’s all. How relevant is this information to the topic of ISKCON’s women *dikṣā-gurus* today? The methods of initiation then and now are quite different; at that time humanity was following the *vaidika* system, in which women couldn’t even *take* initiation, what to speak of *giving* initiation:

Śūdras and women are not admitted to a *vaidika* initiation.

– Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, *Madhya-līlā* 24.331, purport

There is no rule preventing ladies from becoming *dikṣā-gurus* in the *pāñcarātri*ka

system; in fact there are dozens of historical examples of ladies *dikṣā-guru* in Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, including in the *dikṣā* lineage of Śrīla Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura. The reference to Sunīti being ineligible to give initiation may offer a fascinating glimpse into a cultural norm of bygone ages; but there is no indication that Śrīla Prabhupāda intended to transplant that custom in his International Society for Krishna Consciousness. Śrīla Prabhupāda *never* extended the above detail beyond the particular circumstances of Sunīti and Dhruva. Śrīla Prabhupāda never turned this anecdote into a universal principle applicable to all women at all times. If the Founder-Ācārya didn’t, why should we?

The proponents of the “Sunīti argument” *imagine* that Śrīla Prabhupāda was saying “As Sunīti couldn’t initiate Dhruva, no woman can ever initiate anyone,” which, clearly, Śrīla Prabhupāda never said. They squeeze out a meaning, an instruction for ISKCON (“women cannot initiate”) that is simply not there in Śrīla Prabhupāda’s words – neither in the original transcript, nor in the published version. To give an example of how false impressions can be generated, let’s take a look at what Śrīla Prabhupāda once wrote in a purport of *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta*:

According to the *pañcarātra* injunction, only a householder *brāhmaṇa* can initiate. Others cannot.

Should we now start agitating to stop *sannyāsīs* from initiating? Should we start pressuring the GBC to ban *sannyāsīs* from being *dikṣā-gurus* because “Śrīla Prabhupāda said it”? Probably it would be better to wait a bit, especially as that purport goes on, revealing something different:

Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu gave us His opinion in the *verse kibā vipra kibā*

nyāsī, etc. This indicates that the Lord understood the weakness of society in its maintaining that only a *gṛhastha-brāhmaṇa* should be a spiritual master. Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu indicated that it does not matter whether the spiritual master is a *gṛhastha* (householder), a *sannyāsī* or even a *śūdra*.

– Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, *Madhya-līlā* 4.111, purport

Similarly, we might be tempted to stop all discussion at the statement “being a woman” or “and also woman” – but Śrīla Prabhupāda’s instructions go on, broadending our understanding and revealing something different in his other books, lectures, conversations and letters. Attempting to elevate the “being a woman” or “and also woman” sentences to being the supreme and final statement on the subject of women *dikṣā-guru* is totally unjustified; as unjustified and unfair as it would be to promote that “only a householder *brāhmaṇa* can initiate.” The “Sunīti argument” rests on three mistakes:

- a) Imposing an imaginary meaning (a universal prohibition on women initiating) that was never intended or expressed.
- b) Ignoring the different primary emphasis of the original transcript (the “family relationship” instead of the gender).
- c) Disregarding the fact that the system of initiation in place at the time of Sunīti was radically different than now.

As far as this third error, Śrīla Prabhupāda explains in *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta*:

The following injunction is given in the *Hari-bhakti-vilāsa* (1.194)

regarding *mantra-adhikārī*, the qualification for receiving *mantra* initiation:

*tāntrikeṣu ca manreṣu dikṣāyām yoṣitām api
sādhvīnām adhikāro ‘sti śūdrādīnām ca sad-dhiyām*

“*Śūdras* and women who are chaste and sincerely interested in understanding the Absolute Truth are qualified to be initiated with the *pāñcarātriaka-mantras*.” . . . If one actually wants to serve Kṛṣṇa, it doesn’t matter whether one is a *śūdra*, *vaiśya* or even a woman. If one is sincerely eager to chant the Hare Kṛṣṇa *mantra* or *dikṣā-mantra*, one is qualified to be initiated according to the *pāñcarātriaka* process. However, according to Vedic principles, only a *brāhmaṇa* who is fully engaged in his occupational duties can be initiated. *Śūdras* and women are not admitted to a *vaidika* initiation.

–Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, *Madhya-līlā* 24.331, purport

Sunīti could not initiate in the Vedic age; but, at least in principle, she could become a *dikṣā-guru* in ISKCON.

“But Books Are More Important than Other Sources”

One might argue that words in Śrīla Prabhupāda books have a higher value of evidence than his instructions in lectures, conversations or letters and therefore the expression in the purport to *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 4.12.32 – “being a woman” (or even the original “and also woman”) – surpasses and supplants all other references and stands as the topmost, ultimate instruction on the topic of women *dikṣā-gurus*.

We tend to agree with the general idea that books constitute, in general, stronger evidence than other sources; at the same time it's a fact that, when taken out of context, certain passages in Śrīla Prabhupāda's books might generate confusion and even false conclusions. For instance, in the eight chapter of *The Nectar of Devotion*, one of his most important works, Śrīla Prabhupāda wrote (emphasis ours):

One should begin the worship of the demigod Gaṇapati, who drives away all impediments in the execution of devotional service. In the *Brahma-saṁhitā* it is stated that Gaṇapati worships the lotus feet of Lord Nṛsiṁha-deva and in that way has become auspicious for the devotees in clearing out all impediments. Therefore, **all devotees should worship Gaṇapati.**

This sounds like a straightforward, clear and all-encompassing instruction; should we take it as a foundational injunction for the whole of ISKCON for the next ten thousand years? Should we promote installing Gaṇapati (Gaṇeśa) in every temple and in every devotee's home in the world? Perhaps it would be better to wait a bit, as, when specifically asked about worshiping Gaṇeśa, Śrīla Prabhupāda wrote, in a letter:

Concerning Ganesa worship, it is not actually necessary for us. But, if someone has a sentiment for getting the blessings of Ganesa in order to get large amounts of money for Krishna's service, then it is alright, but anyone who takes up this kind of worship must send me at least 100,000 dollars monthly—not less. If he cannot send this amount, then he cannot do Ganesa worship.

– Letter to Bhakta dasa, 1 February 1975

And Śrīla Prabhupāda wrote at least three more similar letters saying that worshiping Gaṇeśa is not necessary. Which evidence is more relevant as a guideline for the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, the passage in *The Nectar of Devotion* or these letters? Of course, we are not implying that Śrīla Prabhupāda's instructions in his letters or other sources are *always* more important than those in his books. We are simply saying that, especially when a point is controversial or needs clarification, for reaching a mature conclusion we should study all of Śrīla Prabhupāda's instructions (in books, lectures, conversations, letters, etc.). Otherwise we can become victims of the *ardha-kukkuṭi-nyāya*, the half-hen logic, which Śrīla Prabhupāda often deprecated:

[W]e are presenting *Bhagavad-gītā* as it is. We cannot use the *ardha-kukkuṭi-nyāya* [Cc. *Ādi-līlā* 5.176]—half. I take half of the hen. I take the rear part, and the front part I reject. This kind of logic, argument, will not be very successful. You have to take as it is, *in toto*, and you have to understand. That is understanding of *Bhagavad-gītā*. Then we can discern what source is more relevant and authoritative on a particular subject.

– Lecture on *Bhagavad-gītā* 13.13, Bombay, 6 October 1973

The same principle also applies to Śrīla Prabhupāda's teachings. The ancient detail of Sunīti not initiating her son should not be taken out of context and placed on an artificially high pedestal. Exactly as in the case of Gaṇeśa worship, we should carefully analyze how Śrīla Prabhupāda answered explicit enquiries. For instance in Toronto, a couple of years after the Sunīti purport had been written, Prof. O'Connell *specifically* asked: "Is it possible, Swamiji, for a woman to be a

guru in the line of disciplic succession?”⁵ What Śrīla Prabhupāda replied? He did *not* say: “No; just like Sunīti did not initiate Dhruva, no woman can ever initiate anyone.” No, actually Śrīla Prabhupāda said, “Yes. Jāhnavā devī was – Nityānanda’s wife. She became.” We have heard the argument that Jāhnavā devī, due to her exceptional status as the divine consort of Lord Nityananda Himself, *doesn’t count*. But Prof. O’Connell didn’t ask: “Is it possible, Swamiji, for an eternally liberated manifestation of the internal *śakti* to be a guru in the line of disciplic succession?” He simply asked if “a woman” could become guru; “a woman” in the sense the professor would have normally defined “a woman” according to his experience of what “a woman” is. And Śrīla Prabhupāda was aware of the sense and the context of the question because that whole section of the interview dealt with *women* – not with goddesses and *gopīs* from Goloka. The three previous questions had dealt with “the place of women” in ISKCON; if women could become *paṇḍitas*; and if there were any such *paṇḍitas* in the West. When Śrīla Prabhupāda confirmed that, yes, a woman can become a guru in disciplic succession he was talking about a *normal* human woman who learns the science of Kṛṣṇa consciousness. Jāhnavā-devī wasn’t presented as an exclusive excellent exception, as a personality beyond the beyond that women can never emulate. No, Jāhnavā-devī was mentioned as an illustration of a principle, as a model that normal women could follow. Therefore, notwithstanding her superexcellent status as a divine *śakti*, Śrīmatī Jāhnavā-devī is, as a reference and as an example for ISKCON ladies, immensely more relevant and important than Sunīti.

Another argument we heard goes something like this: “Yes, Śrīla Prabhupāda did write: ‘I want that all of my spiritual sons and daughters will inherit this title of

Bhaktivedanta . . . Those possessing the title of Bhaktivedanta will be allowed to initiate disciples.’ (Letter to Hamsaduta, 3 January 1969) but because the Sunīti purport was written *after* that letter, the conclusion is that women cannot initiate.” If we consider the facts in the proper perspective, we must recognize that the letter comes almost two billion years *after* the Sunīti story. In the Sunīti episode Śrīla Prabhupāda shares a snapshot from a long-gone age; in the letter instead he gives direct instructions to his disciples in the twentieth century and to all of his future followers (emphasis ours): “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.” Śrīla Prabhupāda never presented Sunīti’s actions as the archetypical example of initiations in ISKCON. Whether Sunīti had initiated Dhruva or not is ultimately inconsequential to us. But the letter shows Śrīla Prabhupāda’s intentions for ISKCON; his plan, his blueprint for hundreds of spiritual generations. The letter is immensely more relevant and important for ISKCON than Sunīti’s private occurrence. And this can also be demonstrated by a simple “thought experiment”: Imagine for a moment that the facts of history were reversed; that 1) Sunīti had actually initiated Dhruva and that 2) Śrīla Prabhupāda had actually written, “I want that all of my spiritual sons and daughters will inherit this title of Bhaktivedanta, but only the male disciples possessing the title of Bhaktivedanta will be allowed to initiate disciples; female disciples will not be allowed.” The letter would nevertheless be a more authoritative, more solid reference for ISKCON than whatever Sunīti did in that long-gone Satya-yuga. If in that letter the Founder-Ācārya had written that women should not initiate disciples; regardless of whatever Sunīti might have done – even if she had initiated 10,000 disciples – her example would still be irrelevant for ISKCON.

5 Interview with Professors O’Connell, Motilal and Shivaram, Toronto, 18 June 1976

“The Idea of Women *Dikṣā-guru* Comes from Western Feminism and Should Be Rejected”

There are three main considerations in addressing this argument. First: Who would consider Śrīla Prabhupāda a “feminist”? But it’s the Founder-*Ācārya* who repeatedly stated the principle that a woman can become guru. It’s tempting (for those who oppose the principle) to try to put some distance between the Founder-*Ācārya* and the idea of women *dikṣā-gurus*; to invoke some sort of “cultural conspiracy theory” and lay the blame on Western feminism. Of course, there may be ISKCON devotees with a “feminist” leaning supporting women *dikṣā-gurus*; but it doesn’t logically follow that everyone who draws the same conclusion after studying Śrīla Prabhupāda’s statements is a “feminist.” The fact remains: Śrīla Prabhupāda repeatedly stated that he wanted his ladies followers to preach and, sooner or later, to make disciples. Second, Śrīla Prabhupāda did stress equality between men and women on the spiritual platform; this might look *similar* to feminism but is based on a completely different worldview. Third, in their missionary activities the *ācāryas* do take in consideration the mentality and culture of the places in which they preach. This is pure, proper and powerful, their motivation being to help people coming to Kṛṣṇa consciousness by making the message relevant and relatable. This strategy is not a symptom of weakness, of pandering to the inclinations of the ignorant and the misguided; it’s rather a sign of the *ācāryas*’ compassion and their deep understanding of how to apply spiritual principles to different circumstances. But let’s start with a couple of quotations showing that Śrīla Prabhupāda didn’t have a high regard for artificial “women’s liberation” attitudes:

Woman requires protection. According to Vedic culture, woman has no independence, because they cannot keep their independence. It is not possible. A sixteen-year-old boy can go safely all over the world, but a sixteen-year girl cannot. . . . In the Western countries, the women are given freedom like man, but that is unnatural. Unnatural. Therefore these poor souls are being exploited by the other section. It is a great deficiency of the Western sociology.

– Lecture on *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 1.15.20, Los Angeles, 30 November 1973

Sandy Nixon: How do you feel about women’s lib? . . .

Prabhupāda: That I don’t want to discuss because... [laughs] [laughter] . . . As you have asked, I may explain that how foolish women are being cheated by the intelligent man. . . . In your country, they have given you liberty. Liberty means equal rights, is it not? Man and woman has got equal rights.

Sandy Nixon: They’re trying in this country.

Prabhupāda: All right, trying. But you women, you cannot see that this so-called equal right means cheating the woman. Now I say more clearly that a woman and man meets. Now they become lover. Then they have sex, and the woman becomes pregnant, and the man goes away. The simple woman, she has to take charge of the child and beg from government alms, “Please give me money.” . . . Therefore I say they are cheating you in the name of independence.

– Room Conversation, Philadelphia, 13 July 1975

The above quotations (and the many, many similar ones) should settle it: Śrīla Prabhupāda was not a *feminist* in the conventional sense of the word. At the same time Śrīla Prabhupāda repeatedly emphasized that equality does exist on the platform of the soul. He even spoke of men and women having the same “rights”:

Woman: Swamiji, would you say something about the place of women in your movement?

Prabhupāda: There is no distinction between man and woman. That is clearly said in the *Bhagavad-gītā*. *Mām hi pārtha vyapāśritya ye ‘pi syuḥ pāpā-yonayaḥ striyo śūdrās tathā vaiśyāḥ* [Bg. 9.32]. . . . Because in the spiritual platform there is no such distinction, man, woman, or black, white, or big or small. No. Everyone is spirit soul.

Woman: The women could become *paṇḍitas*, then.

Prabhupāda: Oh, yes. *Te ‘pi yānti parām gatim*. Not only come, she can also attain perfection. There is no such restriction. Kṛṣṇa said. . . . 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

On another occasion Śrīla Prabhupāda said:

Just like a man’s body and a female’s body, woman’s body, the bodily structure is different. How you can say they are equal? No. When you see the external structure of the body of man and woman, there is difference.

But despite this difference, when the man and woman think in connection with Kṛṣṇa, they are equal. That is wanted.

– Arrival Lecture, Philadelphia, 11 July 1975

Let’s take note of how Śrīla Prabhupāda answered a disciple who had asked if women should be included in the category of people whose statements are not to be accepted:

Prabhupāda: So a crazy man’s statement is not accepted. Child’s statement, crazy man’s statement, unauthorized person’s statement, blind man’s statement, we cannot accept.

Ātreya Ṛṣi: A woman’s statement?

Prabhupāda: Huh?

Ātreya Ṛṣi: A woman’s...

Prabhupāda: If a woman is perfect in Kṛṣṇa consciousness... Just like Jāhnavā-devī, Lord Nityānanda’s wife, she was *ācārya*. She was *ācārya*. She was controlling the whole Vaiṣṇava community. . . . She was controlling the whole Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava community.

Ātreya Ṛṣi: Do you have references about that in any of your books, Śrīla Prabhupāda?

Prabhupāda: I don’t think. But there are many *ācāryas*. Maybe somewhere I might have mentioned. It is not that woman cannot be *ācārya*.

– Room Conversation, San Diego, 29 June 1972

Should we conclude that Jāhnavā-devī, in sixteenth century’s India, “was controlling the whole Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava community” due to the corrupting influence of Western feminism? Or should we acknowledge that the theology and sociology of the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas allow women to rise to roles of prominence if qualified?

The third way to address this argument (“The idea of women *dikṣā-guru* comes from Western feminism”) is by stressing that it’s the practice of the *ācāryas* – and especially of Śrīla Prabhupāda, who preached worldwide – to consider the local current cultural attitudes in their presentation of Kṛṣṇa consciousness. Lord Caitanya Himself and all the subsequent *ācāryas* both innovated and blended it with their culture. They did not merely fit it, and they did not merely innovate. There was balance. This naturally requires great wisdom and a keen discrimination between what constitutes *a principle* and what constitutes *a detail*:

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.

– Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Ādi-līlā 7.31-32, purport

In the same *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, Śrīla Prabhupāda also wrote:

To broadcast the cult of Kṛṣṇa consciousness, one has to learn the possibility of renunciation in terms of country, time and candidate. . . . The teacher (*ācārya*) has to consider time, candidate and country. He must avoid the principle of *niyamāgraha*—that is, he should not try to perform the impossible. What is possible in one country may not be possible in another. The *ācārya*’s duty is to accept the essence of devotional service. . . . Sanātana Gosvāmī wrote his Vaiṣṇava *smṛti*, *Hari-bhakti-vilāsa*, which was specifically meant for India. In those days, India was more or less following the principle of *smārta-vidhi*. Śrīla Sanātana Gosvāmī had to keep pace with this, and his *Hari-bhakti-vilāsa* was compiled with this in mind. . . . What is required is a special technique according to country, time and candidate. Without the sanction of the spiritual master, we should not try to imitate. . . . We should not introduce anything whimsically, without the sanction of the bona fide spiritual master.

– Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Madhya-līlā, 23.105, purport

Śrīla Prabhupāda’s followers ought to consider the negative consequences of disobeying the Founder-*Ācārya*’s instructions “My dear sons and daughters. . . You’ll have to become spiritual master. You, all my disciples.” (Śrī Vyāsa-pūjā Lecture, London, August 22, 1973) Besides the frightening individual and collective repercussions of disregarding the mandate of the Founder-*Ācārya* (and of holding back qualified Vaiṣṇavis), capriciously neglecting such a direct order would also drastically curtail our capacity, as a movement, to be heard and appreciated by the discerning public all over the world. We will attract upon

ISKCON both the displeasure of Śrīla Prabhupāda and the disapproval of many contemporary audiences. As a senior *sannyāsī* and *dikṣā-guru* recently wrote:

Let us do a little rational calculus here:

1. If the GBC does not allow Vaishnavis to be gurus, we risk stifling qualified devotees, and we risk destroying our chance of being a major cultural force in the West.
2. If we allow some test cases of Vaishnavi gurus, we risk very little for the simple reason that there is an extremely small number of female candidates. ISKCON has withstood the fall downs of GBC chairmen, BBT Trustees, super high-profile gurus with thousands of disciples. Do we really think that in modern ISKCON with its hundreds and thousands of projects and millions of followers, that the possible missteps of one or two lady gurus in a few locations will seriously damage our worldwide movement? Hard to believe.

Conclusion: we have, potentially, an enormous amount to gain, and we risk extremely little, by giving this a chance. Simply the risk of stifling and repressing advanced devotees, apart from the damage to our image, should make us act. Are those opposed to Vaishnavi gurus willing to test their theory? I'm willing to test mine. Without a reasonable test, ISKCON will remain divided. Let nature and Krishna show us the way, and let us at least try to do something that may energize our movement and expand its relevance. Given our struggle to regain relevance in the West, let us try.

– Email dated 11 November 2012, PAMHO text 24334502

We suggest we should avoid hiding behind allegations of feministic influences and should seriously consider the consequences of disregarding the words of Śrīla Prabhupāda *and* of showing contempt for the sensitivities of the twenty-first century. The same senior *sannyāsī* addressed a Godbrother who had been expressing concerns about allowing women *dikṣā-gurus*:

Dear [name withheld],

Please accept my obeisances. Jaya Srila Prabhupada. With all due respect, I feel you keep trying to problematize simple, clear, resolved issues:

1. Prabhupada said several times that all his disciples should be gurus.
2. Devotees should serve to the best of their abilities.
3. Most of the educated world will censure us if we deny women the opportunity to serve to their best ability.

Your repeated calls for more information on what 'nature' means, or what modern culture requires, frankly puzzle me. So does the notion that we should never do anything that Prabhupada did not directly do or enact, even if his words approve it. Granted we must proceed cautiously, but the evidence provided to us so far is in fact sufficient to warrant moving forward cautiously.

– Email dated 26 October 2012, PAMHO text 24260977

The same *sannyāsī* had also written:

Yes, we have unchanging, eternal principles and practices that Prabhupada would not change. But there is no reason to believe he would not implement a policy that he already approved and which current circumstances made vital to keep ISKCON relevant to educated Western audiences.

– Email dated 11 October 2012, PAMHO text 24181530

“Women Dikṣā-gurus are Against Varṇāśrama”

This has been one of the most common – and one of the weakest – complaints. Why weak? The first reason is that no proof has been presented to demonstrate that having women *dikṣā-guru* is against the principles of *varṇāśrama*; the objection is more of an assumption than a real argument.

Besides lacking proof, a crucial fallacy of the “*varṇāśrama* argument” is what is known in logic as “false dilemma;” a situation artificially presented as a “either this *or* that” while it may actually be a “this *and* that” (or a third option). In other words, Śrīla Prabhupāda certainly instructed women to be loyal spouses and responsible mothers (in line with standard canons of *varṇāśrama*), *and* Śrīla Prabhupāda *also* recommended that they should become preachers and teachers of spiritual knowledge, up to the point of initiating disciples. There is no contradiction or disharmony between the two instructions. Śrīla Prabhupāda certainly wished to see devoted 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) and also eagerly wanted to see his disciples, both male and female, engaged in spreading Kṛṣṇa consciousness (“we want so many preachers, both

men and women.” Letter to Jayagovinda, 8 February 1968). Such injunctions are not mutually exclusive; to present them as incongruent, or to accept one and reject the other, would be a disservice to both Śrīla Prabhupāda’s mission and to the principles of *varṇāśrama*. As recently expressed in a correspondence between devotees:

On Thursday a woman is doing perfect stri dharma and has siksa disciples who she has trained for years in Krsna consciousness. Her husband is pleased with her preaching and she is a good wife and mother. On Friday they have a small ceremony in her home where she gives her disciples the mantra and their names and hears their vows. How, between Thursday and Friday, did her stri dharma get compromised? How did she become a feminist? What terrible thing happened at the ceremony that destroyed varnasrama and ISKCON?

– Email dated 3 December 2012, PAMHO text 24438948

Additionally, the same individuals go through various stages in life, and in each phase certain responsibilities become more prominent and adequate, as indicated in the following two letters Śrīla Prabhupāda wrote to the same lady disciple; in three years his instructions significantly changed:

At present your most important duty is to compose books with the help of your husband. I am very much anxious to see that you begin this work as soon as possible.

– Letter to Arundhati, 10 July 1969

For you, child-worship is more important than deity-worship. If you cannot spend time with him, then stop the duties of pujari.

– Letter to Arundhati, 30 July 1972

Isn't it reasonable that women who had been dutifully engaged in their domestic duties would assume other duties once the children have grown and moved on with their life? There is no contradiction between focusing on being a caring parent in youth, and, later in life, assuming responsibility for the spiritual growth of spiritual children.

Gradations of Benefits

Another problem with the “*varṇāśrama* argument”: It subtly claims to have a better idea than Śrīla Prabhupāda’s vision for applying *varṇāśrama*. The argument also ignores the fact that within various duties and engagements some have a higher priority and offer superior benefit. In the following letter, specifically in connection with women’s duties, we see that Śrīla Prabhupāda gave directions to organize their traditional, “*varṇāśrama*” motherly duties so as to nurture the preaching (besides nurturing their children):

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

– Bhaktivedanta Vedabase, *Letters from Śrīla Prabhupāda’s Secretaries and ISKCON Officers*, Letter to Jadurani, 15 December 1974, From Paramahansa

The “*varṇāśrama* argument” is tainted with several inaccurate assumptions, one being that *varṇāśrama* conventions (not principles) are universal and supreme. While it’s a fact that Śrīla Prabhupāda often stressed the importance of *varṇāśrama*:

Without coming to the system of Varnasrama dharma there is no question of human society.

– Letter to Madhudvisa, 15 September 1971

If we do not take to the principles of *varṇāśrama-dharma* by accepting the four social orders (*brāhmaṇa*, *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya* and *śūdra*) and the four orders of spiritual life (*brahmacārī*, *gṛhastha*, *vānaprastha* and *sannyāsa*), there can be no question of success in life.

– *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*, 5.19.10, purport

It’s also a fact that, while emphasizing the value of *varṇāśrama*, Śrīla Prabhupāda repeatedly stressed that “spiritual life is not dependent upon it”:

Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu did not give much importance to the Vedic system of varnasrama which is very important for mundane people because Krishna Consciousness is above everything.

– Letter to Tamala Krsna, 14 April 1970

The varnasrama system is for convenience sake in the material world. It has nothing to do with spiritual life. Acceptance of varnasrama means a little easy progress to spiritual life, otherwise it has no importance to us. For example, all my European and American disciples have no varnasrama

position, but spiritually because they have followed the rules and regulations and also my instructions, their advancement spiritually is being appreciated by everyone. Always remember that varṇāśrama life is a good program for material life, and it helps one in spiritual life; but spiritual life is not dependent upon it.

– Letter to Hamsaduta, 19 October 1974

Therefore we should be extremely careful not to subject the principles of spiritual life to lower, mundane considerations. Actually Śrīla Prabhupāda directly indicated that the customary norms of *varṇāśrama* don't fully apply to the dynamics of the transmission of spiritual knowledge:

In the system of *varṇāśrama-dharma* there are various duties for the *brāhmaṇas*, *kṣatriyas*, *vaiśyas* and *śūdras*. Actually the *brāhmaṇa* is supposed to be the spiritual master of all other *varṇas*, or classes, but as far as Kṛṣṇa consciousness is concerned, everyone is capable of becoming a spiritual master because knowledge in Kṛṣṇa consciousness is on the platform of the spirit soul. To spread Kṛṣṇa consciousness, one need only be cognizant of the science of the spirit soul. It does not matter whether one is a *brāhmaṇa*, *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya*, *śūdra*, *sannyāsī*, *grhastha* or whatever.

– Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, *Madhya-līlā* 8.128, purport

Another inaccurate assumption in regard to *varṇāśrama* is that its regulations are something fixed for all times and circumstances and that the *ācārya* can't adjust *varṇāśrama* norms to the specifics of time, places and individuals involved. Śrīla Prabhupāda gives the example of himself as an *ācārya* adapting *varṇāśrama*

principles to missionary activities:

Every *ācārya* has a specific means of propagating his spiritual movement with the aim of bringing men to Kṛṣṇa consciousness. Therefore, the method of one *ācārya* may be different from that of another, but the ultimate goal is never neglected. . . . The *ācārya* must devise a means to bring them to devotional service. Therefore, although I am a *sannyāsī* I sometimes take part in getting boys and girls married, although in the history of *sannyāsa* no *sannyāsī* has personally taken part in marrying his disciples

– Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, *Ādi-līlā*, 7.37, purport

The above illustrates the principle we have been stressing all along: The *ācārya* – and of course for ISKCON its Founder-*Ācārya* – has the last word on how to apply cultural and spiritual principles to the circumstances. The essential principle of progress in *varṇāśrama* is following the *ācārya*:

*ācāryam mām vijānīyān
nāvamanyeta karhicit*

[Śrī Kṛṣṇa said:] “One should know the *ācārya* as Myself and never disrespect him in any way.”

– Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam, 11.17.27

ISKCON's Founder-*Ācārya* clearly and publicly states that he *wants* women to preach:

Did Śrīla Prabhupāda Want Women Dikṣā-gurus?

It is the concern of the *ācārya* to show mercy to the fallen souls . . . we are thoroughly instructing both men and women how to preach, and actually they are preaching wonderfully . . . Both men and women are preaching the gospel of Lord Caitanya Mahāprabhu and Lord Kṛṣṇa with redoubled strength . . . it is a principle that a preacher must strictly follow the rules and regulations laid down in the *śāstras* yet at the same time devise a means by which the preaching work to reclaim the fallen may go on with full force.

– Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Ādi-līlā 7.38, purport

Without neglecting any other duty or minimizing any other instruction, we should honor and facilitate the fulfillment of Śrīla Prabhupāda’s vision and desire that his followers, men and women, thoroughly study his books and effectively spread the message of Kṛṣṇa to all kinds of audiences. That would constitute the accomplishment of *varṇāśrama* ideals:

I am confident that in the future all my student boys and girls will preach this Krishna Consciousness in the western world more successfully.

– Letter to Dayananda, 22 July 1967

Now I see that in our society the girls are more intelligent than the boys.

The way of discussion with Dr. Staal requires a little bit of knowledge in the *sastras* which is called *siddhanta* . . . these siddhantic conclusions are being mentioned in all my books, and the boys and girls in our Kṛṣṇa 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 Kṛṣṇa Consciousness movement.

– Letter to Kṛṣṇa Devi, 17 February 1970

The “*varṇāśrama* argument” could also be presented in the following form:

1. ISKCON should implement *varṇāśrama*.
2. Women *dīkṣā-gurus* sabotage *varṇāśrama*.
3. Therefore women cannot be *dīkṣā-gurus*.

The first premise, that ISKCON should implement *varṇāśrama*, needs definition and clarification (which type of *varṇāśrama* are we talking about? What elements should be included and which discarded as inapplicable?); therefore the premise doesn’t represent an absolute or clear-cut injunction. It is fair to say that Śrīla Prabhupāda did want to implement *varṇāśrama* but not to the extent that it would seriously hamper spreading Kṛṣṇa consciousness. The second point (“Women *dīkṣā-gurus* sabotage *varṇāśrama*”) is not based on *śāstra*; it simply represents a subjective and speculative opinion. Furthermore, Śrīla Prabhupāda’s teachings indicate that women *dīkṣā-guru* weren’t against the form of *varṇāśrama* he envisioned. The whole argument is very, very weak, since it rests on a conditional injunction (to implement *varṇāśrama* to some extent) and on human reasoning directly contradicting the Founder-Ācārya. Besides, the fundamental principle of *varṇāśrama* is enunciated by Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhagavad-gītā* (4.13): *cātur-varṇyam mayā sṛṣṭam guṇa-karma-vibhāgaśaḥ* “According to the three modes of material

nature and the work associated with them, the four divisions of human society are created by Me.” Roles and positions in society should never be determined just by birth but by qualities and activities. Devotees should serve according to their nature and ability. When a woman demonstrates her aptitude as a preacher and a spiritual teacher, trying to artificially impose on her a different role is against the principles of *varṇāśrama*. Śrīla Prabhupāda, for instance, wrote:

Regarding lecturing by woman devotees: I have informed you that in the service of the Lord there is no distinction of caste or creed, color, or sex. In the *Bhagavad-gīta*, the Lord especially mentions that even a woman who has taken seriously is also destined to reach Him. We require a person who is in the knowledge of Krishna, that is the only qualification of a person speaking. It doesn’t matter what he is. Materially a woman may be less intelligent than a man, but spiritually there is no such distinction. Because spiritually everyone is pure soul. In the absolute plane there is no such gradation of higher and lower. If a woman can lecture nicely and to the point, we should hear her carefully. That is our philosophy. But if a man can speak better than a woman, the man should be given first preference. But even though a woman is less intelligent, a sincere soul should be given proper chance to speak, because we want so many preachers, both men and women.

– Letter to Jayagovinda, 8 February 1968

***Varṇāśrama* in the Three Modes**

As with everything in this material world, our ideas of *varṇāśrama* also come in

three main flavors. The three modes of nature tinge our perceptions and shape our views; when in *sattva-guṇa*, goodness, we envision a *varṇāśrama* that's realistic and inclusive. The underlying spirit is *unity in diversity*; as Lord Kṛṣṇa 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.” Nurturing the soul's potential beyond the physical and social circumstances becomes the focus of this enlightened *varṇāśrama*. 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.

When in *rajo-guṇa*, passion, we take the bodily divisions as central and essential; as Kṛṣṇa says in the *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. We may consider the birth as woman as a lifelong, inexorable condemnation to a lower status. Since passion stimulates egoism, we assume an inflated sense of self-importance and become preoccupied with selfish interests. We concentrate on protecting the privileges of our rank, our position in the system (*brāhmaṇa*, male, etc.).

As far as *tamo-guṇa*, ignorance, Śrīla Prabhupāda explains in his purport to *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 3.29.8: “One who approaches the Supreme Lord to render devotional service, but who is proud of his personality, envious of others or vengeful, is in the

mode of anger. He thinks that he is the best devotee. Devotional service executed in this way is not pure; it is mixed and is of the lowest grade, *tāmasaḥ*.” Under the influence of this mode we try to impose roles and rules according to rigid, unrealistic, or even imaginary notions. We promote one understanding and one understanding only of *varṇāśrama*; regardless of its applicability and relevance. In this indiscriminating mode we try to fit everyone into our limited and limiting schemes; as a result we do violence to others, stifling their growth. But Śrīla Prabhupāda said:

Śrī Kṛṣṇa Himself has enumerated the basic principles of a caste system that is real and universal. 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”

We should carefully analyze our motives for implementing *varṇāśrama*; we should ensure we imbibe Śrīla Prabhupāda's mood, priorities and intentions. Otherwise the establishment of *varṇāśrama* – if too affected by the lower modes – might create more problems than it solves. In addition, when we study *varṇāśrama* in the *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* we realize even more clearly that the role of a mother and that of a spiritual master share closely related functions.

Every Mother Should Deliver Her Dependents from Birth and Death

Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 5.4.14 reveals that:

Lord Rṣabhadeva . . . strictly followed the principles of *varṇāśrama-dharma* and acted accordingly. In due course of time, the principles of *varṇāśrama-dharma* had become neglected; therefore through His personal characteristics and behavior, He taught the ignorant public how to perform duties within the *varṇāśrama-dharma*.

Part of His mission was to re-establish *varṇāśrama* by example, and He specifically instructed humanity that the duty of the mother is non-different than the role of the guru: To deliver one's dependants from birth and death. Lord Rṣabhadeva said:

One who cannot deliver his dependents from the path of repeated birth and death should never become a spiritual master, a father, a husband, a mother or a worshipable demigod.

– Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 5.5.18

Śrīla Prabhupāda wrote in the purport: “Everyone should be very responsible and take charge of his dependents just as a spiritual master takes charge of his disciple.” There is therefore no incongruity for a woman to first play the role of a responsible mother and then accept spiritual children; both roles involve the duty of delivering her dependents. The two functions are equivalent: A woman should not become a mother if she can't offer – by precept and example – the instruments of liberation; which, in substance, is the function of the *dīkṣā-guru*. We must conclude that the alleged incompatibility of the roles is imaginary only.

Mothers and Gurus Share the Same Broad *Rasa*

In fact the role of spiritual master and the role of parents fit within the same broad category of *vātsalya-rasa*; the parental mood. *The Nectar of Devotion*, Chapter Forty-three, enumerates a number of “respectable elderly personalities with parental love for Kṛṣṇa.” The list includes mother Yaśodā and mother Devaki, but also Kṛṣṇa's guru, Sāṅdīpani Muni. Certainly human dealings also display plenty of similarities between the psychological attitude of parents towards their children and of *dīkṣā-gurus* towards their disciples. Both roles share significant common characteristics; Śrīla Prabhupāda wrote:

The father and mother are also as good as the Spiritual Master.

– Letter to Gopal Kṛṣṇa, 21 June, 1969

“Women Should Be Protected; Therefore They Should Not Become *Dīkṣā-gurus*”

The first answer is that disciples and sons are non-different; therefore a woman with disciples would be even *more* protected.

There is no difference between *putra* and *chatra*. *Putra* means son, and *chatra* means disciple.

– Lecture on Śrī Īsopaniṣad, Los Angeles, 8 July 1971

Śrīla Prabhupāda often stressed that, “A woman must always be protected, either by her father, by her husband, or by her elderly son.” (Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 9.14.38, purport) But Śrīla Prabhupāda also explained that such instruction mostly applies to an “ordinary woman”:

So to have good population, the women should be very chaste. . . . But if woman is not protected very strictly, it is very difficult . . . Of course, when woman comes to Kṛṣṇa consciousness, that position is different. We are speaking of ordinary woman . . . 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 . . . Arjuna is speaking of ordinary woman.

– Lecture on *Bhagavad-gītā* 1.40, London, 28 July 1973

Despite the valid, general recommendations that a woman be protected in all stages in life, Śrīla Prabhupāda also sanctioned that a woman, if capable, at some point “can live alone”:

Yes, after the husband retires from family life, 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

Besides, there is no contradiction or incompatibility between serving as a *dikṣā-guru* and being protected by the husband or the grow-up sons. In any case, having disciples is not against the principle of women’s protection; in fact it provides *added* protection. For comprehensiveness’ sake, we should also mention that Śrīla Prabhupāda’s ideas for protecting women weren’t stereotyped; for instance, he did consider the possibility of 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 January 1973

In any case, Śrīla Prabhupāda also stressed the relativity and impermanence of material protection; and that every woman should cultivate the sense that her real protector is Kṛṣṇa:

If one becomes Kṛṣṇa conscious, then he [she] doesn’t require husband. He [she] does not require. . . . She knows that “Kṛṣṇa 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 Kṛṣṇa. This is temporary, but because we have got this material body we require some.

– Room Conversation, Bombay, 7 January 1977

Furthermore, let’s consider that in Vedic culture protection is not meant only for women; *brāhmaṇas* and old men should be protected too. As Śrīla Prabhupāda said in a lecture:

According to Vedic politics, the children and *brāhmaṇa*, old men and woman . . . They require protection. . . . Just like old man like us, I am always taken care of. Similarly, a *brāhmaṇa* also should be taken care of,

first consideration. First protection, *brāhmaṇa*, saintly person.

– Lecture on *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 1.8.51, Los Angeles, 13 May 1973

If we were to accept the principle that those who “require protection” should not be *dīkṣā-gurus*, then all *brāhmaṇas* and old men should also not be *dīkṣā-gurus*.

“Cultured Indians Would Object to ISKCON’s Women *Dīkṣā-gurus*; Therefore Women Should Not Become *Dīkṣā-gurus*”

Yes, we did stress the importance of taking into account local cultural attitudes in our presentation of Kṛṣṇa consciousness; we did quote Śrīla Prabhupāda saying that, “The teacher (*ācārya*) has to consider time, candidate and country.” (*Cc. Madhya* 23.105, purport) How can we now disagree with this argument? One major problem with this argument is that it neglects the fact that a very large portion of Indians readily accept women as spiritual masters. India is already full of women gurus – often addressed as *guru-mātās* – with followers from all walks of life, including cultured, educated gentlemen. Even more importantly, taking into consideration the public’s concerns is different than pampering their prejudices. The leaders of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness should conduct their missionary activities according to the teachings of the scriptures and specifically according to the instructions of the Founder-*Ācārya*. ISKCON is meant to educate and enlighten humanity (Indians and non-Indians) on the principles of spiritual life. One of these principles is that whoever knows the science of Kṛṣṇa can become a spiritual master. In the words of Śrīla Prabhupāda:

Caitanya Mahaprabhu has said that anyone who knows the science of Krishna, that person should be accepted as Spiritual Master, regardless of

any material so-called qualifications; such as rich or poor, man or woman, or brahmana or sudra.

– Letter to Silavati, 14 June 1969

The preconception in the public that women cannot become *dīkṣā-gurus* is born of ignorance; and the primary function of Śrīla Prabhupāda’s movement – as enshrined in the first of the Seven Purposes of ISKCON – is “To systematically propagate spiritual knowledge to society at large.” Actually there have been cases in which “cultured Indians” had been voicing disagreement to a number of Śrīla Prabhupāda’s activities, such as giving brahminical initiation or *sannyāsa* to Western-born disciples; Śrīla Prabhupāda wasn’t deterred by such sentimental or racial bias and openly addressed their objections, for instance in the following passage from *Nectar of Instruction*:

There is an undercurrent of protest against our awarding the title *gosvāmī* to the American Vaiṣṇavas of the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement. Sometimes people flatly tell the American devotees that their *sannyāsa* or title of *gosvāmī* is not bona fide. However, according to the statements of Śrīla Rūpa Gosvāmī in this verse, an American *gosvāmī* and a *gosvāmī* in a family of *ācāryas* are nondifferent.

– *Nectar of Instruction*, Text Six, purport

Śrīla Prabhupāda wasn’t intimidated by opposition. His loyal followers, if faced with objections on women *dīkṣā-guru*, should tactfully but firmly explain the right understanding of the philosophy; as Śrīla Prabhupāda did:

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 Kṛṣṇa then he is to be accepted as guru.

– Letter to Malati, 25 December 1974

“Śrīla Prabhupāda didn’t Allow Women Pūjārī in India; Therefore Women Should Not Become Dikṣā-gurus”

Is it true that ISKCON ladies weren’t allowed to worship the Deities in India? Trying to find an answer, a leading Śrīla Prabhupāda’s disciple wrote:

I heard that Srila Prabhupada also supported the practice of only male pujaris offering public arotis in India (but admittedly I have heard this only anecdotally) . . . I have heard that after some time in India he gave or confirmed the guideline that it should be male pujaris on the altar at the temples during general public darshan times. I have a doubt about this. My guess is that he had Vaisnavis offering aroti at very public pandal programs, at least during the early days in India. But again, I have heard this used as an argument so I would like to see the factual basis.

– Emails dated 20 and 24 October 2012, PAMHO text 24227817 and 24246716

Hari Śauri dāsa, an eyewitness, clarified:

In Vrndavan in deference to local sentiment he instructed that only men should do the aratis and the dressing of the Deities. However women were allowed to do pujari work in the background. And when Aksayananda

expressed difficulty finding enough men to do the dressing Srila Prabhupada agreed that women could do it. . . . In other centers in India, notably Bombay, Delhi etc. women were doing all aspects of Deity worship.

– Email dated 24 October 2012, PAMHO text 24247931

The service of accepting disciples doesn’t need an open display – like offering *ārati* six times a day in front of hundreds and thousands of people. Some forty years ago – in particular circumstances, “in deference to local sentiment” and to prevent people from criticizing – Śrīla Prabhupāda recommended avoiding public worship by women; but this has little bearing on women serving as *dikṣā-gurus*. As instructing and initiating disciples can remain a largely private, personal exchange, there is no need for any restriction, at any cultural latitude.

“Women Should Remain Shy and Submissive; Being Assertive Preachers is Against Their Dharma; Therefore Women Should Not Become Dikṣā-gurus”

It’s true that both traditional Vedic culture and Śrīla Prabhupāda’s teachings highly regard the trait of shyness in women and, especially in connection with their husbands, the quality of submissiveness:

As far as the women class are concerned, they are accepted as a power of inspiration for men. As such, women are more powerful than men. Mighty Julius Caesar was controlled by a Cleopatra. Such powerful women are controlled by shyness. Therefore, shyness is important for women.

– Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam, 1.9.27, purport

However great a woman may be, she must place herself before her husband in this way; that is to say, she must be ready to carry out her husband's orders and please him in all circumstances . . . a woman must be trained to be submissive to the will of her husband.

– *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*, 9.3.10, purport

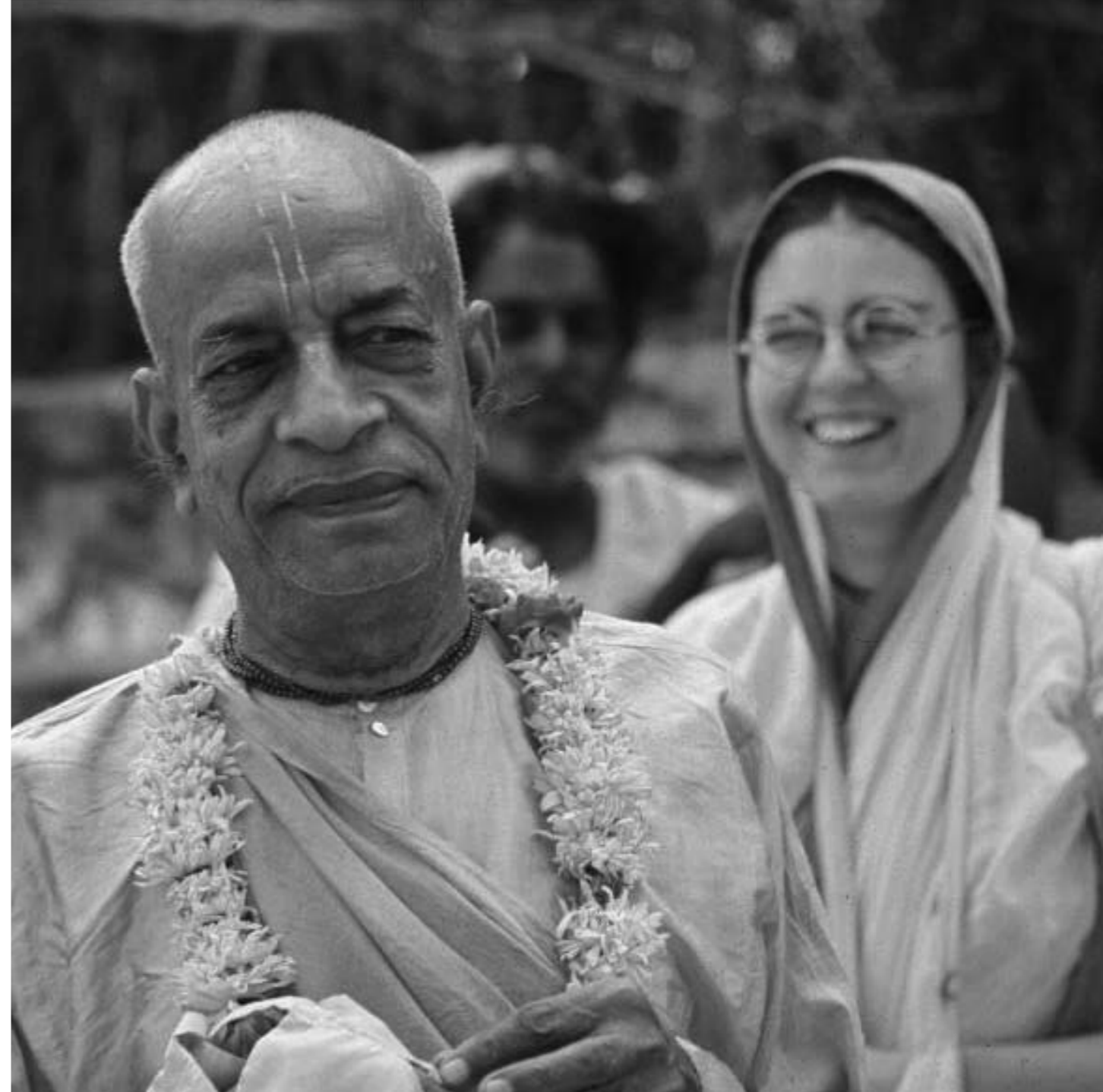
At the same time, Śrīla Prabhupāda wanted both men and women to preach “vigorously”:

I think each couple of our students may try to open a branch in England . . . Our Movement is a declaration of war against Maya, that you can understand very well, so we have to recruit many fighting soldiers – so do it vigorously.

– Letter to Lilavati, 3 May 1970

How to reconcile the need for shyness and for energetic outreach? How can women fulfill Śrīla Prabhupāda's directions to be chaste and submissive at home and among other devotees, while being forceful in spreading Kṛṣṇa consciousness? Fortunately, Śrīla Prabhupāda addressed – and resolved – also this apparent puzzle. Actually he even indicated that aggressively channeling their energy into preaching would help women develop their softer, feminine characteristics:

My Dear Daughters . . . Regarding the problem of how to be aggressive on Sankirtana and submissive in the temple, my request to you is that you should go on being aggressive on Sankirtana. I myself was aggressive in coming to your country. No one invited me. Even you boys and girls did



not invite me. But, I came and I preached aggressively, and therefore you are now my disciples. So now you well know you have to approach the men and women of your country, and it may appear that superficially that you have to disturb them. They are doing their business peacefully, and you come and disturb them, “Please take this Krishna book.”

Of course it is good that you are concerned about being chaste, shy, and submissive amongst your godbrothers. Canakya Pandit said that every man should see all other women as mother, and similarly a woman should see all men as son. So what is your difficulty? If you are completely aggressive on Sankirtana, there should be no material aggressiveness and pride remaining. You have to distinguish between devotees and non-devotees.

Aggression for the cause of Lord Caitanya Mahaprabhu is pure. If you become completely absorbed in such aggression to spread Sankirtana Movement, there will be no question of wanting to lord it over in the temple. Preaching purifies us of these material tendencies for sense gratification. It is simply a matter of time that you will see this. Do not worry. Krishna will help you.

– Letter to Jagaddhatri, Pasupati, Sailogata and Pamela, 30 July 1975

Just a couple of weeks before this letter, Śrīla Prabhupāda had spoken on the same topic in a conversation:

Devotee: Śrīla Prabhupāda, how does one become humble and remain humble?

Jayatīrtha: How to become humble and remain humble. Same question one devotee asked you in Chicago.

Prabhupāda: So you explain.

Jayatīrtha: He said you can become humble by becoming aggressive for Kṛṣṇa. [laughter] One girl was asking that “When we are doing saṅkīrtana, I must be very aggressive, but when I come to the temple, then I’m supposed to be very humble.” Prabhupāda’s answer was...

Prabhupāda: “A lamb at home, a lion in the chase” [laughter]. When you are chasing, you must be a lion [laughter]. But when you come home, you do not try to chase the devotees [laughter].

– Room Conversation, Philadelphia, 13 July 1975

Initiating Goddesses – Examples of Superhuman Feminine Dikṣā-gurus

Being initiated by women is neither new nor confined to interactions between humans. Even Lord Brahmā, the head of our *sampradāya*, at one point was initiated by a “woman,” a divine feminine personality. As he described in his *Brahma-saṁhitā* (5.23-24), it happened when Brahmā, coming out of the lotus springing from the navel of Lord Viṣṇu, “could see nothing but darkness in every direction.”

Then the goddess of learning Sarasvatī, the divine consort of the Supreme Lord, said thus to Brahmā who saw nothing but gloom in all directions, “O Brahmā, this *mantra*, viz., *klīm kṛṣṇāya govindāya gopī-jana-vallabhāya*

svāhā, will assuredly fulfill your heart's desire.”

Śrīla Prabhupāda elaborates in *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta* (Ādi-līlā 5.221, purport):

In his own planet, Lord Brahmā, with the inhabitants of that planet, worships the form of Lord Govinda, Kṛṣṇa, by the *mantra* of eighteen syllables, *klīm kṛṣṇāya govindāya gopī-jana-vallabhāya svāhā*. Those who are initiated by a bona fide spiritual master and who chant the Gāyatrī *mantra* three times a day know this *aṣṭādaśākṣara* (eighteen-syllable) *mantra*.

Let's note that this *mantra*, which all second-initiated devotees in ISKCON recite daily, was originally imparted to Brahmā by a “female *dīkṣā-guru*.” And of course we shouldn't forget that one of the four bona fide *sampradāyas* is headed by the consort of Lord Nārāyaṇa, Lakṣmīdevī. Śrīla Prabhupāda explains in *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* (6.3.20-21, purport):

There are four lines of disciplic succession: one from Lord Brahmā, one from Lord Śiva, one from Lakṣmī, the goddess of fortune, and one from the Kumāras. The disciplic succession . . . from the goddess of fortune, Lakṣmījī, is called the Śrī-sampradāya . . . One must take shelter of one of these four *sampradāyas* in order to understand the most confidential religious system. In the *Padma Purāṇa* it is said, *sampradāya-vihīnā ye mantrās te niṣphalā matāḥ*: if one does not follow the four recognized disciplic successions, his *mantra* or initiation is useless.

In his *Śrī Bṛhad Bhāgavatāmṛta*, Śrīla Sanātana Gosvāmī mentions another superhuman feminine *dīkṣā-guru*, Kāmākhya Devī (Durgā), who initiated a *brāhmaṇa* from the city of Prāgjyotiṣa, in the present state of Asom (Assam), in

Northeast India:

Every day he would faithfully worship Kāmākhya, the goddess of that place. And when she became satisfied he received from her in a dream the ten-syllable *mantra* for worshiping the lotus feet of Madana-gopāla. The goddess also gave him instructions on how to meditate upon the *mantra* and perform various details of practice.⁶

Obviously we are not trying to compare contemporary ISKCON ladies with the goddesses Lakṣmī, Sarasvatī or Kāmākhya. The point is that initiations by gurus in female forms have been taking place from the beginning of the universe.

Primary Examples of Women *Dīkṣā-gurus* in Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism

The paper *Female Dīkṣā-gurus in ISKCON*,⁷ by the Śāstric Advisory Council's (SAC) of the GBC, includes five “Historical Examples of Female Gauḍīya *Dīkṣā-gurus*”:

a) **Sītā Ṭhākuraṇī**—The wife of Advaita Prabhu. According to the *Prema-vilāsa* (vilāsa 24) of Nityānanda Dāsa, Sītā Ṭhākuraṇī gave *dīkṣā* (*kṛṣṇa-mantra*) to her two servants Nandinī and Jāṅgalī. The *vaikuṅṭha-svarūpas* of Nandinī and Jāṅgalī are the well-known gatekeepers Jaya and Vijaya (*Gaura-gaṇoddeśa-dīpikā* text 89). Their disciplic ship to Sītādevī, along with other interesting facts, is corroborated in the well-known and

6 *Śrī Bṛhad Bhāgavatāmṛta*, Volume Two, Chapter 1, Text 35-37; translated by Gopīparāṇadhana Dāsa

7 “Members participating in the authorship of this paper: H.H. Suhotra Svāmī, Gopīparāṇadhana Dāsa, Drutakarmā Dāsa, Mukunda Datta Dāsa, Pūrṇacandra Dāsa, Devāmṛta Dāsa.” Bold passages in the original.

respected compilation named *Gauḍīya-vaiṣṇava abhidhāna* and in the *Sītā-caritra* by Lokanātha Dāsa.

b) **Jāhnavā Ṭhākuraṇī** - The wife of Nityānanda Prabhu. Jāhnavā Ṭhākuraṇī became one of the greatest leaders of our tradition in its second generation. Vīrabhadra and Rāmacandra, the sons (biological and adopted respectively) of Nityānanda Prabhu, were two of the most famous among her initiated disciples.

“Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura writes in his *Anubhāṣya*, ‘Vīrabhadra Gosāṇi was the direct son of Śrīla Nityānanda Prabhu and a **disciple of Jāhnavā Devī**.’” (*Caitanya-caritāmṛta Ādi-līlā* 11.8 purport)

“Yadunandana Ācārya’s wife, Lakṣmī, was a very humble and submissive lady. She had two beautiful daughters named Śrīmatī and Nārāyaṇī. By the arrangement of Śrī Īśvarī (Jāhnavā Devī), these two girls became the fortunate wives of Vīracandra Prabhu. On the day of the wedding, Yadunandana took initiation from Vīracandra, and **Śrī Jāhnavā happily accepted Śrīmatī and Nārāyaṇī as her disciples**.” (*Bhakti-ratnākara*, ch. 13)

She is also confirmed as a *dikṣā-guru* both in the *Gauḍīya-vaiṣṇava abhidhāna* (pg. 1246-47) and in the *Prema-vilāsa* of Nityānanda Dāsa (*vilāsa*s 15 & 20).

c) **Hemalatā Ṭhākuraṇī** - The eldest daughter of Śrīnivāsa Ācārya. Hemalatā Ṭhākuraṇī, a contemporary of Jāhnavā, was one of the prominent leaders of the tradition at her time. Among her disciples, Yadunandana, the author of *Karṇānanda*, is particularly well-known (see *Karṇānanda* [ch.2 &3] and the

introduction [pg 12] to *Kṛṣṇa-karṇāmṛta* by Sambidānanda Dās Ph.D). She also had a wayward disciple named Rūpa Kavirāja. (see *Gauḍīya-vaiṣṇava abhidhāna* pg. 1422)

“Now the disciples of Sri Hemalata shall be described. Sri Suvala Chandra Thakura, and his nephew Sri Gokula Chakravarti were her disciples. Sri Radhavallava Thakura from Mandala village, Sri Vallavadasa of the Gosvami family, and Yadunandana Vaidya dasa of Malihati village were all disciples of Sri Isvari. Kanurama Chakravarti and his two servants Darpanayana and Candi, Ramacarana, Madhu Miswas, and Radha Kanta Vaidya were other disciples of Hemalata. Jagadisa Kaviraja and his follower, who was the brother of Radhavallabh Kaviraja were initiated by Hemalata.” (*Karṇānanda*, ch.2, last paragraph)

“One day my spiritual master, Sri Hemalata, revealed the glories of Ramacandra to me.” “I shall describe another episode which I heard from my guru, Sri Isvari Hemalata.” (*Karṇānanda*, ch.3)

d) **Gaurāṅga-priyā Devī** – The second wife and disciple of Śrīnivāsa Ācārya (*Gauḍīya-vaiṣṇava abhidhāna* pg. 1224) She was from a Cakravartī *brāhmaṇa* family, her father being Raghunātha Cakravartī, a resident of West Gopālapura. She initiated a number of disciples, one being Gurucarāṇa Dāsa, who wrote a book at her behest called *Premāmṛta* which is based on the *Prema-vilāsa*. (*Gauḍīya-vaiṣṇava abhidhāna* pg. 1203)

“Śrīnivāsa Ācārya’s first wife, Śrīmatī Īśvarī Ṭhākuraṇī, was a highly devotional lady. Gaurāṅga-priyā, his second wife, also possessed exalted

devotional qualities. In due course of time many persons became disciples of Śrīnivāsa Ācārya and his wives.” (*Karṇānanda, ch.2*)

e) **Gaṅgāmātā Gosvāminī** - A disciple of Haridāsa Paṇḍita Gosvāmī, the sevaite of Govindajī mentioned in *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta*. Among others, King Mukundadeva of Jagannātha Purī and a number of Lord Jagannātha’s sevaites received *dikṣā* from her. She was also an eloquent speaker and explained *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* to large audiences. Gaṅgamātā Gosvāminī’s case is further confirmation that a woman can be a *guru* in a bona fide Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava line. At least up to her point in the line, the line was bona fide because her *guru* is confirmed by Śrīla Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja Gosvāmī in the *Caitanya-caritāmṛta* (Ādi 8.60). Her acceptance of disciples is confirmed in *Gauḍīya-vaiṣṇava abhidhāna* (pgs. 1197-98) and by the present day *mahānta*, Balarāma Dās Gosvāmī, at the Gaṅgamātā Gosvāminī Matha in Purī.

We are not aware of anyone contesting the historical validity or the spiritual status of the above five personalities: Sītā Ṭhākuraṇī, Jāhnavā Ṭhākuraṇī, Hemalatā Ṭhākuraṇī, Gaurāṅga-priyā Devī and Gaṅgāmātā Gosvāminī. We have therefore identified them as primary examples of women *dikṣā-gurus* in Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism. They are sufficient to demonstrate the existence and the acceptance of women initiating gurus in our *sampradāya*. In addition, there have been dozens of other ladies serving as *dikṣā-gurus* in various Gauḍīya lineages. Because we don’t possess that much information on each and every one of them, we refer to them as secondary examples.

Secondary Examples of Women *Dikṣā-gurus* in Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism

The *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta* describes the devotees of Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu as *vṛkṣa-parivāra*, “the family of this transcendental tree of devotional service” or “the descendants of the tree” (Ādi-līlā 9.31, 47). The term *parivāra* (translated as entourage, dependants, family members or associates) indicates the various disciplic branches and sub-branches of the “Caitanya tree”: Nityānanda *parivāra*, Advaita *parivāra* and so on. What’s most relevant to our discussion is that in these *parivāras* we encounter dozens of lady *dikṣā-gurus*. For instance, in the succession from Jāhnavā Ṭhākuraṇī and Nārāyaṇī Devī to Prāṇa Gopāla Gosvāmī there are two men and nine ladies. The lineage descending from Jāhnavā Ṭhākuraṇī and Dhanañjaya Paṇḍita down to Kuṅjabihārī dās Bābājī has thirteen men and one lady. The succession from Lokanātha Gosvāmī and Narottama dāsa Ṭhākura to Jñānānanda Cakravartī Ṭhākura includes ten men and seven ladies. We find six men and six ladies in the lineage descending from Advaita Ācārya through his son Kṛṣṇa Miśra:

1. Śrī-Śrī Sītādvaita Prabhu (Advaita Ācārya)
2. Śrī Kṛṣṇa Miśra Gosvāmī
3. Śrī Subhadrā Gosvāminī
4. Śrī Yādavendu Gosvāmī
5. Śrī Mallikā Gosvāminī
6. Śrī Kunja Bihārī Gosvāmī
7. Śrī Haripriyā Gosvāminī
8. Śrī Rādhā-Mādhava Gosvāmī

9. Śrī Brahmamayī Gosvāminī
10. Śrī Śyāma Vinodinī Gosvāminī
11. Śrī Pratibhā Sundarī Gosvāminī
12. Śrī Nikunja Gopāla Gosvāmī

In the attempt to discredit all the above lady *dikṣā-gurus* (and to undermine and delegitimize the idea of women *dikṣā-gurus* in ISKCON), a devotee recommended dismissing all these lineages as bogus. The theory is that these are all hereditary, seminal disciplic successions in which, as one devotee put it, “out of necessity to continue the line of diksa where there was no male offspring, the daughter became the diksa guru to carry on the family line.”⁸ What to make of this idea? The first observation is that it’s simply an assumption with no basis in research or historical facts; it’s only a hypothesis created by the longing to see a world free from women *dikṣā-gurus*. Secondly, such a sweeping conjecture is being promoted without even knowing the *names* of all these ladies *dikṣā-gurus*; what to speak of the details of their family situations. The third consideration is that the idea that all these ladies were simply appointed because of the absence of male descendents doesn’t hold well under scrutiny. Let’s take a look, for instance, at the above disciplic succession from Advaita Ācārya. The *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta* (Ādi-līlā 12.18) describes His son Kṛṣṇa Miśra, the second member of this *parivāra*: “Kṛṣṇa Miśra was a son of Advaita Ācārya. Lord Caitanya Mahāprabhu always sat in his heart.” Śrīla Prabhupāda explains in the purport:

Of the six sons of Advaita Ācārya, three, Acyutānanda, Kṛṣṇa Miśra and Gopāla dāsa, lived faithfully in the service of Caitanya Mahāprabhu. Since

Acyutānanda did not accept a wife, he had no issue. The second son of Advaita Ācārya, Kṛṣṇa Miśra, had two sons, Raghunātha Cakravartī and Dola-govinda. The descendants of Raghunātha still live in Śāntipura, in the neighborhoods of Madana-gopāla-pāḍa, Gaṇakara, Mrjāpura and Kumārakhāli. Dola-govinda had three sons, namely Cānda, Kandarpa and Gopīnātha.

In other words, Kṛṣṇa Miśra had two sons, both of whom grew up and had children themselves. Why then should the lineage list a woman, Śrī Subhadrā Gosvāminī, as the third link? If the ladies in these *parivāras* were simply substitutes or emergency replacements for missing male descendants, why don’t we see one of Kṛṣṇa Miśra’s two sons as the third member of the lineage? Although it’s possible that in one or more of these lineages hereditary considerations played a role in the appointment of a woman as *dikṣā-guru*, there is no basis to conclude that it happened in all cases. As for ourselves, we readily admit that we can’t guarantee an extraordinarily exalted spiritual status for each and every lady *dikṣā-guru* in this section (most of them mentioned here only as a *number*). After all, can we guarantee an extraordinarily exalted spiritual status for every male *dikṣā-guru* operating today in ISKCON? In any case, the primary examples of women *dikṣā-gurus* are more than enough to prove that socially, culturally and theologically the principle of lady *dikṣā-gurus* had been accepted and implemented in Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism for centuries. We should also carefully note that family ties do not necessarily or automatically disqualify a *parivāra*; it’s the *misuse* of family ties for personal benefit, for artificially maintaining social and economic privileges, that it’s condemned; not the family connection in itself. We agree that birth in a Vaiṣṇava family doesn’t guarantee that one will become a bona fide guru. For

8 Email dated 28 December 2012

example, in two purports of Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta (Ādi-līlā 12.17, 27), Śrīla Prabhupāda described Advaita Ācārya's sons:

Commenting on verses 13 through 17, Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura gives an extensive description of the descendants of Advaita Ācārya. The *Caitanya-bhāgavata*, *Antya-khaṇḍa*, Chapter One, states that Acyutānanda was the eldest son of Advaita Ācārya. The Sanskrit book *Advaita-carita* states, "Advaita Ācārya Prabhu had three sons who were devotees of Lord Caitanya. Their names were Acyuta, Kṛṣṇa Miśra and Gopāla dāsa, and they were all born of the womb of His wife, Sītādevī. Advaita Ācārya also had three more sons, whose names were Balarāma, Svarūpa and Jagadīśa. Thus there were six sons of Advaita Ācārya." Among the six sons, three were strict followers of Lord Caitanya Mahāprabhu, and of these three, Acyutānanda was the eldest.

The Sanskrit book *Advaita-carita* states that Balarāma, Svarūpa and Jagadīśa were the fourth, fifth and sixth sons of Advaita Ācārya. Therefore Śrī Advaita Ācārya had six sons. Balarāma, Svarūpa and Jagadīśa, being *smārtas*, or *Māyāvādīs*, were rejected by Vaiṣṇava society.

Being born in the family of a great devotee – what to speak of being born as a son of the Supreme Lord in His form of Advaita Ācārya – certainly represents an incalculable good fortune; an extraordinary opportunity to make further advancement and to qualify as a spiritual master; however, it doesn't automatically ensure that one will become a bona fide guru – as the fourth, fifth and sixth sons of Advaita Ācārya demonstrate. Śrīla Prabhupāda often gave the following analogy:

Just like if I am son of a high-court judge, unless I am qualified to become a high-court judge I cannot say myself, "I am high-court judge." No. Simply by becoming the son of high-court judge, one does not become a high-court judge.

– Lecture on *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 1.1.5-6, London, 23 August 1971

Nevertheless, it's not that the son of a high-court judge *cannot* become a high-court judge himself. It's certainly not a disqualification to be born as sons, daughters, grandsons, granddaughters or as other descendants of personal associates of Lord Caitanya. Although such glorious birth doesn't guarantee or certify one's status as *dikṣā-guru*, it certainly offers extraordinary opportunities to imbibe the devotional culture and to get trained in scriptural knowledge. Should we be surprised that more gurus come from such families rather than from ordinary households? Should we consider Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura disqualified as a guru because he was the son of Śrīla Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura, another guru?

As far as the caste *gosvāmīs*, those who claim to be gurus by hereditary right – even without the necessary qualifications and the appropriate mood – Śrīla Prabhupāda often criticizes them, as in the following passage from *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta*:

There are many caste *gosvāmīs* who professionally create some disciples who do not care for them or their instructions. Such spiritual masters are satisfied simply to get some material benefits from their disciples. Such a relationship is condemned by Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura, who calls such spiritual masters and disciples a society of cheaters and cheated.

– *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, *Madhya-līlā* 24.330, purport

The above, though, doesn't justify lumping together and branding as heretics all the thousands of individuals who are kin to members of the various *parivāras* and who received – even as their legal name – the *Gosvāmī* designation. The wholesale dismissal of all the women *dikṣā-gurus* of these lineages simply because they might have had family connections with descendants of associates of Lord Caitanya is unwarranted. Imagining that whoever possesses a biological connection with a Vaiṣṇava must be rejected as a deviant *jāti-gosāi* (caste *gosvāmī*) appears, frankly speaking, absurd.

Today the vast majority of devotees in ISKCON are, sociologically-speaking, “first generation converts”; they are not born in families of practicing Vaiṣṇavas. In a few hundred years we will likely have ISKCON *dikṣā-gurus* born in families that have been serving in Śrīla Prabhupāda's movement for generations. Should we reject them all as bogus caste *gosvāmīs* just for being born in devotee families? Just as one is not automatically a guru because of being born in a Vaiṣṇava family; one doesn't automatically become a member of an *apasampradāya* because of being born in a Vaiṣṇava family. Until one can demonstrate, through rigorous scholarship and solid documentation, that the women *dikṣā-gurus* in these *parivāras* were fallen or unorthodox in their teachings, it's gratuitous (and possibly blasphemous) to dismiss *any* of them as unqualified or un-bona fide.

Someone argued that among these Vaiṣṇavīs some must have operated as *dikṣā-guru* mainly within their family circle; but we should recognize that even as recently as the nineteenth century, both in India and in Europe, women did not go to university, could have no profession, and basically lived their lives and did their duties within the family circle. It's significant that these ladies from previous

centuries acted as *dikṣā-gurus*, in whatever circle. It further brings into serious question the attempt to block women from initiating disciples in the twenty-first century, a time in which women teach in universities, become lawyers and Supreme Court judges, work as CEOs of multinational corporations and are elected as Prime Ministers and Presidents of countries.

The *Dikṣā* Lineage of Śrīla Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura

Another *parivāra* with women in it – one of particular interest for ISKCON – is the one from Jāhnavā Ṭhākuraṇī to Śrīla Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura, in which we find eight men and four ladies:

1. (Śrī Nityānanda Prabhu) Jāhnavā Ṭhākuraṇī
2. Rāmacandra Gosvāmī
3. Rājavallabha Gosvāmī
4. Kesavacandra Gosvāmī
5. Rudresvara Gosvāmī
6. Dayārāma Gosvāmī
7. Maheśvarī Gosvāminī
8. Guṇa-mañjarī Gosvāminī
9. Rāmamañī Gosvāminī
10. Yajñeśvara Gosvāmī
11. Vipina-vihārī Gosvāmī (1850-1919)
12. Śrīla Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura (1838-1914)

Personally, we have no issue with the above succession. If this lineage was good enough for Śrīla Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura (and there is no evidence of him rejecting



this lineage at any point), it's good enough for us. But it's not good enough for everyone. For instance, among those against the idea of women *dikṣā-gurus* in ISKCON, someone attempted to label this entire disciplic succession as a caste *gosvāmī apasampradāya*; which would conveniently *dispose* of all the lady *dikṣā-gurus* in it. However, we have not heard any explanation on *when* or *how* this *parivāra* supposedly became deviated. Was it from the time of Jāhnavā Ṭhākuraṅgī herself? Highly unlikely, and we have not heard anyone suggesting it. The attacks seem to focus on Śrīla Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura's *dikṣā-guru*, Vipina-vihārī Gosvāmī (often spelled as 'Bipin Bihārī'). We have heard all sorts of things as well as their contrary. For instance there are allegations that Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura "rejected" Vipina-vihārī and his lineage; but no one so far provided any evidence to prove it. After thoroughly studying the existing documentation, Śrīla Prabhupāda's disciple Bhaktarupa das concluded:⁹

In spite of all the things that Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati Thakur is reported to have said about Bipin Bihari Goswami, it should be marked that not a single piece of written information is available. And there are volumes and volumes of written information from Saraswati Thakur. Sometimes teams of stenographers were engaged to carefully preserve every word he spoke. Still, there is no criticism of Bipin Bihari Goswami anywhere there.

* Not only that, but there is not, to our knowledge, a single piece of written information from any DISCIPLE of Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati Thakur reporting that he criticized Bipin Bihari Goswami, or even themselves criticizing Bipin Bihari Goswami.

9 *Bhaktivinoda Thakur's Relationship With Bipin Bihari Goswami*, by Bhaktarupa das, June 15, 1999, VNN4106

So, even if there was something to be critical of, still the last two (or more) generations of vaiṣṇavas have scrupulously avoided putting anything in writing on this subject. . . . I am not making any claims about Bipin Bihari Goswami. I am simply advising caution before one concludes that he should be criticized. If someone wants to criticize him that is his business, but others should know that the statements are not substantiated. If any of these statements can be substantiated then I would very much like to see that evidence . . . Without such evidence we should follow the example of our guruṇas and remain silent on the issue.

As far as Śrīla Prabhupāda is concerned, within the thousands of lectures, private conversations or letters recorded in the Bhaktivedanta Vedabase (Folio), we couldn't find even a single word – either of praise or censure – on Vipina-vihārī Gosvāmī. Not a single mention. Adding to the confusion, the various oral traditions swirling around paint conflicting or even contradictory pictures; for instance, we find diametrically opposite accounts of Vipina-vihārī's position in the following dispute:

In 1911, a great controversy arose over the relative positions of brāhmaṇas and Vaiṣṇavas. Various caste gosvāmīs, members of different *smārta* groups, etc. raised a huge agitation, and so a great conference was organized in the Midnapore District of Bengal to settle the issues. Famous *paṇḍitas*, scholars and spiritual leaders from all over India were to attend.¹⁰

Some say that Vipina-vihārī was present at that assembly and sided with the

10 *A Ray of Vishnu*, by Rūpa-vilāsa dāsa, Chapter 6

brāhmaṇa community's opinion that *brāhmaṇa*-born Vaiṣṇavas were automatically superior to Vaiṣṇavas not born in *brāhmaṇa* families. However, Bengali scholar Dr. Kananbehari Goswami, in his book *Baghnapara Sampradāya O Vaiṣṇava Sāhitya* (The *Sampradāya* of Baghnapara and *Vaiṣṇava* Literature) states exactly the opposite: "He [Vipina-vihārī Gosvāmī] defeated the scriptural considerations of the *smārta paṇḍitas* and demonstrated the superiority of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava *dharma*."

Another controversy regards the reported disagreement between Vipina-vihārī and Śrīla Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura on the exact location of Lord Caitanya's birthplace. We hear that the divergence became quite intense; but:

[T]he fact remains that Bipin Bihari Goswami was appointed as one of the directors of the committee to oversee the worship of Sriman Mahaprabhu, newly established at the yogapitha in Mayapur by Bhaktivinoda Thakur. So perhaps Bipin Bihari Goswami had a change of mind somewhere along the way, which he certainly had a right to do.¹¹

Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura didn't include Vipina-vihārī in the *paramparā* (the list of spiritual masters published at the beginning of the *Bhagavad-gītā As It Is*); and someone could say that it shows that Vipina-vihārī was bogus. Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura did indeed choose to include Jagannātha dāsa Bābājī ("Ṭhākura Bhaktivinoda referred to him as Vaiṣṇava-sarvabhauma, the Commander-in-chief of the Vaiṣṇavas . . . He was a perfectly self-realized soul, and he was the beloved leader of the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas.¹²") But

11 *Bhaktivinoda Thakur's Relationship With Bipin Bihari Goswami*, by Bhaktarupa das, June 15, 1999, VNN4106

12 *Bābājī Mahārāja*, by Karṇāmṛta dāsa

why should the inclusion of Jagannātha dāsa Bābāji make Vipina-vihārī bogus? Haridāsa Ṭhākura, Gopāla Bhaṭṭa Gosvāmī, Śrīnivāsa Ācārya and Śyāmānanda Paṇḍita – to name a few – were also not included in the *paramparā*; does this make them *bogus*?

Even accepting – purely for argument’s sake – that there was something seriously wrong with Vipina-vihārī Gosvāmī, the question remains: How could his disqualifications filter *backwards* in time to the previous *dīkṣā-gurus* in his line (including the three ladies) and disqualify the whole *parivāra*? Even if someone could find something objectionable about him,¹³ that wouldn’t delegitimize his whole lineage. In any case, wouldn’t be proper to take a look at what Śrīla Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura himself had to say about Vipina-vihārī Gosvāmī, his *dīkṣā-guru*? In his book *Seventh Goswami*, Rūpa-vilāsa dāsa quoted:

The Ṭhākura has written at the end of *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatārka-marīci-mālā*:

*vipina-vihārī prabhu mama prabhu-vara
śrī-vaṁśī-vadanānanda-vaṁśā-śāśadhara*

“My exalted spiritual master, Vipina-vihārī Prabhu, is the brilliant moon in the family of Śrī Vaṁśī Vadanānanda.” At the end of the Ṭhākura’s commentary on *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta* he has also written:

¹³ For comprehensiveness’ sake, we should probably mention that, in his soon-to-be published autobiography, Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura did go on record with a small criticism; he objected to Vipina-vihārī Gosvāmī’s habit of chewing betel nuts, a mild stimulant that is also offered to the Deities (see, for instance SB 816.41, Cc. Madhya 4.80 and Cc. Madhya 24.334, purport). That’s all; nothing indicating any lack of authenticity of his disciplic succession or any lack of validity of his initiations.

*vipina-vihārī hari, tāra śakti avatāri
vipina-vihārī prabhu-vara
śrī-guru-gosvāmī-rūpe, dekhi more bhava-kūpe,
uddhārilo āpana kiṅkara*

“The eminent Vipina-vihārī Prabhu, who is the manifestation of the transcendental energy of Lord Hari, Who sports in the forests of Vraja, has descended in the form of the spiritual preceptor. Seeing me in the dark well of worldly existence, he has delivered this humble servant of his.”

The same source also explains that:

Vipina-vihārī Gosvāmī was a family descendant of Śrīla Vaṁśī Vadanānanda Ṭhākura, an associate of Lord Caitanya who was given the charge of caring for Lord Caitanya’s mother and wife after the Lord took *sannyāsa*. He was a disciplic descendant in a line coming from Jāhnava Devī, the wife of Lord Nityānanda.¹⁴

In his *Jaiva-dharma*, Śrīla Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura offers more details on the history of his *parivāra*:

Śrīla Vaṁśīvadanānanda Ṭhākura—thus named because he was the incarnation of Śrī Kṛṣṇa’s *vaṁśī*, flute—became an eminent personality of immense influence. . . . He was greatly favoured by Śrīmatī Viṣṇupriyā devī, the wife of Śrī Caitanya. After the disappearance of Śrīmatī Viṣṇupriyā devī,

¹⁴ *Seventh Goswami*, by Rūpa-vilāsa dāsa, Chapter 15

Vaiṣṇavanānanda transferred the Deities she had personally worshiped from Śrī Māyāpura to Kuliyā Pāhārpura [present-day Navadvīpa town], and he and his descendants continued to worship the Deities there. . . .

Vaiṣṇavanānanda and family later moved from Kuliyā Pāhārpura to Śrīpāṭ Bāghnāpārā [Bāghnāpādā or Baghnapara]—being fortunate enough to receive the blessings and association of Śrī Jāhnavā Mātā.¹⁵

Jāhnavā Ṭhākuraṇī adopted and initiated Vaiṣṇavanānanda’s grandson, lifelong celibate Rāmacandra Gosvāmī, also known as Rāmāi Gosāi. We hear that he traveled with her to Vṛndāvana and spent many years there. He then returned to Bengal with Kṛṣṇa-Balarāma Deities (Kānāi and Balāi) and established a temple in Baghnapara, some fifteen kilometers south of Navadvīpa-dhāma and less than ten kilometers west of Jāhnavā Ṭhākuraṇī’s birthplace in Ambikā Kalnā town. Baghnapara received its name from the miracle performed by Rāmacandra Gosvāmī, who, by chanting the holy names, pacified a man-eating tiger and made him roll on the ground in devotional ecstasy. Rāmāi Gosāi initiated his nephew, Rājavallabha Gosvāmī, who became the third link of the disciplic succession. Actually Śrīla Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura, listed as the twelfth member of the lineage, received his “Bhaktivinoda” title from the Baghnapara Gosvāmīs. In the certificate signed by Vipina-vihārī and twelve other Gosvāmīs, they wrote: “The Gosvāmīs of Baghnapara joyfully gave this honor to him in the month of Māgha in the 400th year after the birth of Caitanya Mahāprabhu.” Describing this event in his Bengali autobiography, *Sva-likhita Jīvanī* (pages 176-177), Śrīla Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura wrote:

15 *Jaiva-dharma*, by Śrīla Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura; translated by Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, Int. & Sarvabhāvana dāsa, Chapter 11

I responded to this honor and dedicated the following verses to the Gosvāmīs of my guru-pāṭa.

1. I offer salutations to Śrī Kṛṣṇa Caitanya Candra. May Balarāma and Kṛṣṇa, the jewels of Baghnapara, the beloved deities of Jāhnavā-devī and the bringers of fame to Śrī Rāmacandra Gosvāmī, be ever glorious.
2. I worship the village of Baghnapara, which purifies the land of Gauḍa. Its spiritual power is so great that it turned even a tiger into a devotee of Kṛṣṇa.
3. I also worship all the descendants of Śrī Vaiṣṇavanānanda Ṭhākura, my masters and instructors in the spiritual path.
4. Through just a small fragment of their blessings, the identification of this servant with his body has disappeared and henceforth he shall be known as Bhaktivinoda.
5. By their mercy, I have been graced with this title and so I prostrate myself at their lotus feet.

Signed at Śrī Rāmpur by Kedarnath Datta, now entitled Bhaktivinoda, the eternal servant of the descendants of Rāmacandra Gosvāmī and all the Vaiṣṇavas.

Would Śrīla Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura ever declare himself “the eternal servant” of a bogus *paramparā*? We seriously doubt it; but perhaps the most striking evidence

of the authenticity (and quality) of this *parivāra* is that Śrīla Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura considered all of its members to be *mañjarīs*, personal associates of Śrīmatī Rādhārāṇī. Śrīla Prabhupāda explains in *Teaching of Lord Caitanya*, Chapter 31:

The associates of Rādhārāṇī include Her personal associates, called *sakhīs*, and Her near assistants, called *mañjarīs* . . . Their affection for Kṛṣṇa and Rādhārāṇī is so pure that they are simply satisfied when Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa are together. Indeed, their transcendental pleasure is in seeing Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa united. The actual form of Rādhārāṇī is just like a creeper embracing the tree of Kṛṣṇa, and the damsels of Vraja, the associates of Rādhārāṇī, are just like the leaves and flowers of that creeper . . . as far as Rādhārāṇī and Her associates are concerned, they have no desire for personal sense gratification. They only want to satisfy Kṛṣṇa.

In his own handwriting, Śrīla Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura listed all the members of his *guru-paramparā* and specified their characteristics as *mañjarīs*; their names, their bodily complexions, their eternal age in the spiritual world, their service to the Divine Couple, etc. Declaring the whole line of Jāhnavā Ṭhākurāṇī as nothing more than an *apasampradāya* – just to discredit and dismiss the three women *dikṣā-gurus* in it – appears as an exercise in spiritual recklessness; a seriously unwarranted and imprudent decision.

Had Śrīla Prabhupāda Said...

So far we have been referring to what Śrīla Prabhupāda *did* say and write. For a moment let's envision a different scenario (putting aside all historical evidence to the contrary): What if Śrīla Prabhupāda did not want to see any woman *dikṣā-guru* in ISKCON? What if the Founder-Ācārya had been against the idea? In that case, what could he have said to prevent it from happening? He could have spoken or written any of the following words (**warning: These are not *real* quotations; Śrīla Prabhupāda never spoke or wrote any of them; these sentences are made-up as an illustration**):

“Being *dikṣā-guru* is exclusively meant for male devotees.”

“I don't want to see any woman initiating in ISKCON; only men can formally accept disciples.”

“Sunīti did not initiate Dhruva Mahārāja; therefore no woman should ever become *dikṣā-guru*.”

“Initiating disciples is against the *dharma* of women.”

“Women can preach Kṛṣṇa consciousness, but they should never initiate disciples.”

“I want all my male disciples to become *dikṣā-gurus*; women can become *śikṣā-gurus* but never *dikṣā-gurus*.”

“Only a living entity in a male body can be a *dikṣā-guru*.”



“I hope that all my disciples, men and women, will become spiritual masters; male disciples of course will be able to accept and initiate disciples; female disciples, even if possessing the title Bhaktivedanta, will not be allowed to accept disciples, but can become instructing spiritual masters.”

“Ladies can never become *dīkṣā-guru*.”

A few – or perhaps just one – of the above or similar statements would have been enough to settle the issue. If one or more of such sentences had been in Śrīla Prabhupāda’s books, lectures, conversations or letters, ISKCON leaders could have never considered the option of women *dīkṣā-gurus*. The existing GBC resolutions would never have been written nor approved; no controversy would have taken place and this writing would have never seen the light. Instead, Śrīla Prabhupāda never spoke any of the above; he never established any restriction based on gender. In the words of one of the most senior ISKCON *sannyāsīs*:

[T]here is absolutely no evidence that Prabhupada was establishing a bodily requirement for guru. Since elsewhere Prabhupada makes crystal clear that there is no such bodily requirement, we have no reason whatsoever to assume one.

– Email dated 11 October 2012, PAMHO text 24185384

“Women Are Inferior to Men; Therefore They Should Not Become *Dīkṣā-gurus*”

In spiritual matters superiority and inferiority depend on the level of Kṛṣṇa consciousness of the individual and not on bodily, external considerations. Śrīla Prabhupāda for instance explained that although the husband should generally

provide guidance to the wife, if the wife is more advanced and induces the husband to take up devotional service, the husband should acknowledge her as his spiritual guide:

The actual system is that the husband is Spiritual Master to his wife, but if the wife can bring her husband into practicing this process, then it is all right that the husband accepts wife as Spiritual Master.

– Letter to Silavati, 14 June 1969

In any case, Śrīla Prabhupāda explained in the *Bhagavad-gītā* (9.32. purport):

[I]n devotional service there is no distinction between the lower and higher classes of people. In the material conception of life there are such divisions, but for a person engaged in transcendental devotional service to the Lord there are not.

Śrīla Prabhupāda also warned against indiscriminate discrimination and denigrating remarks:

Now another thing, that girls should not be taken as inferior. You see? Sometimes... Of course, sometimes scripture we say that ‘Woman is the cause of bondage.’ So that should not be, I mean to say, aggravated [laughs]. That should not be aggravated, that ‘Woman is inferior,’ or something like that. So the girls who come, you should treat them nicely.

– Room Conversation, Seattle, 24 September 1968

“The Woman’s Body is Impure; Therefore Women Should Not Become *Dikṣā-gurus*”

Śrīla Prabhupāda, of course, wrote:

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 Kṛṣṇa then he is to be accepted as guru.

– Letter to Malati, 25 December 1974

Śrīla Prabhupāda dismissed the idea that the “outward designations” of “male and female bodies” constitute determining factors for being a guru; nonetheless, the “impure body argument” was presented as follows:

According to scriptures, for the performance of any devotional/religious ritual, the personality of the performer has to be pure on all three levels viz., physical, mental, and spiritual. Diksha or initiation is a ritual followed within the path of Bhagavata-Dharma. The female body is naturally considered to be impure because of spontaneous stages it undergoes i.e. monthly period (‘rajasvala-avastha’ as we know it in the scriptures) and breast-feeding etc. Now, how can such a body be eligible for the performance of any ritual like diksha.

– Email dated 29 October 2012, quoted in PAMHO text 24273052

First of all, let’s remember that Śrīla Prabhupāda considered women pure enough to touch the body of God in His form as *arcā-vigraha*:

All over the world, in Paris, New York, Australia etc., our men and women are worshipping the deity very nicely and I am very proud of their worship.

– Letter to Gurudasa, 1 July 1974

Regarding women worshipping the deity, in the Bhagavad-gita it is stated *striyo vaisyas tatha sudras te'pi yanti param gatim*. The idea is that everyone who is properly initiated and following the rules and regulations can worship the deity.

– Letter to Uttamasloka, 13 August 1974

The attempt to restrict women from the “performance of any ritual like diksha” because of bodily impurity appears artificial and contrived. We should also consider that the impurities mentioned above don’t manifest forever. Śrīla Prabhupāda wrote:

Women who have small children should not do Deity worship or cooking for the Deities until they have completely stopped nursing and the child no longer wears diapers.

– Letter to Malati, 8 June 1975

Regarding the worship of our Gaura Nitai by women pujaris, we worship Lord Caitanya in His householder life when He was with His wife, and not as a sannyasi. So, it is alright for women to do this service. But, besides this, service is spiritual and there can be no material designation. . . . According to the smarta vidhi, women cannot touch deity during menstrual period

but the goswami viddhi allows. But it is better not to do it. One thing is that the seva can never be stopped for any reason. This also for the cooking.

– Letter to Amsu, 13 August 1974

Furthermore, in general Śrīla Prabhupāda warned about focusing on the “bodily features” of a devotee:

Bhakti-yoga is the proper activity of the soul, and when one actually engages in unalloyed, uncontaminated devotional service, he is already liberated (*sa guṇān samatīyātān* [Bg. 14.26]). Kṛṣṇa’s devotee is not subjected to material condition, even though his bodily features may appear materially conditioned. One should therefore not see a pure devotee from a materialistic point of view. Unless one is actually a devotee, he cannot see another devotee perfectly. . . . If we consider the bodily defects of a Vaiṣṇava, we should understand that we are committing an offense at the lotus feet of the Vaiṣṇava. . . . One should therefore avoid observing a pure devotee externally, but should try to see the internal features and understand how he is engaged in the transcendental loving service of the Lord.

– *Nectar of Instruction*, Verse Six, purport

“In Determining if Women Can Become Dikṣā-guru or Not, We Should Not Consider What Śrīla Prabhupāda Said”

One might wonder how anyone in ISKCON could present such an argument; but it was indeed presented, expressed as follows:

An important point to keep in mind in all of this is that the sheer volume of Srila Prabhupada’s recorded teachings along with a burgeoning secondary literature of personal reminiscences of Srila Prabhupada allow anyone with the wherewithal and a small investment in technology to easily gather as many of Srila Prabhupada’s statements as he likes to support whatever cause strikes his fancy. . . . So, given the wide range of speculation possible by extensively quoting Srila Prabhupada to support any agenda, however questionable, this present controversy over what Srila Prabhupada intended his society to become will have to be decided by appealing to the tradition Srila Prabhupada himself represents. I do not believe another way is open to us.

– Email dated 15 November 2012, PAMHO text 24353847

In other words, the suggestion is that, in discussing if women can become *dikṣā-gurus*, we should dismiss all of “Śrīla Prabhupāda’s recorded teachings” and instead independently look for answers in the “tradition Śrīla Prabhupāda himself represents.” This devotee recommends that we jump over the Founder-*Ācārya* – ignoring all his written and spoken instructions – and try to ascertain the path forward for ISKCON by digging around whatever books, oral folklore or archeological relics we feel best embody the “tradition.” In other words, Śrīla Prabhupāda was incapable of communicating the message and values of the tradition he represented; he was unable to give clear directions to his followers.

We fully agree with the above devotee that, within Śrīla Prabhupāda’s teachings, we shouldn’t take only what agrees with our views and leave aside the rest. But, instead of discarding the entirety of Śrīla Prabhupāda’s words, we should look

at *everything* he said on a topic such as this, and see where his statements take us. This writing is an attempt to do just that, to honor all of Śrīla Prabhupāda’s instructions and take them as the primary authority for decisions within ISKCON.

Otherwise, this “let’s ignore what Śrīla Prabhupāda’s said argument” disregards not only Vaiṣṇava etiquette; it also defies the eternal injunctions of the *Upaniṣads*:

Tad vijñānārtham sa gurum eva abhigacchet [Munḍaka Upaniṣad 1.2.12]. Therefore *Vedas* say that one must approach a bona fide spiritual master, in order to be fully in knowledge. *Ācāryavān puruṣo veda* [Chāndogya Upaniṣad 6.14.2]. These are Vedic injunctions. One who has accepted a bona fide spiritual master, he knows everything. *Ācāryavān puruṣo veda*. *Veda* means in knowledge. . . . Therefore our principle is to follow the *ācārya*. In *Bhagavad-gītā* also it is said, *ācārya upāsanam*, one must worship *ācārya*, to go to the right knowledge. So that is our philosophy.

– Philosophy Discussions with Syāmasundara dāsa; “Johann Gottlieb Fichte”

*yasya deve parā bhaktir
yathā deve tathā gurau
tasyaite kathitā hy arthāḥ
prakāśante mahātmanah*

“Only unto those great souls who have implicit faith in both the Lord and the spiritual master are all the imports of Vedic knowledge automatically revealed.”

– *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* 6.23, quoted by Śrīla Prabhupāda in *Bhagavad-gītā* 6.47, purport

Additionally, we wonder what *tradition* this devotee had in mind when he wrote, “this present controversy . . . will have to be decided by appealing to the tradition Śrīla Prabhupāda himself represents.” There have been dozens of women *dikṣā-gurus* in the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition, from the sixteenth century onwards; does that settle the “controversy”?

“Women Dikṣā-gurus were Rare; Therefore Women Should Not Become Dikṣā-gurus”

We fail to see the logic of the statement; nonetheless, yes, women *dikṣā-gurus* have been relatively infrequent in the past, Śrīla Prabhupāda himself acknowledged this fact:

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

Prabhupāda: Yes. Jāhnavā devī was Nityānanda’s wife. She became. If she is able to go to the highest perfection of life, why it is not possible to become guru? But not so many.

– Interview with Professors O’Connell, Motilal and Shivaram, Toronto, 18 June 1976

It’s important to note that rarity doesn’t contradict the *principle* that women can become *dikṣā-guru*; it actually *confirms* it. As the above exchange with Prof. O’Connell continues, Śrīla Prabhupāda stresses that principle, emphasizing that the prerequisites are the same for both men and women; he also uses an analogy familiar to the professor:

Actually one who has attained the perfection, she can become guru. But man or woman, unless one has attained the perfection... *Yei kṛṣṇa-tattva-vettā sei guru haya*. The qualification of guru is that he must be fully cognizant of the science of Kṛṣṇa. Then he or she can become guru. *Yei kṛṣṇa-tattva-vettā, sei guru haya*. [break] In our material world, is it any prohibition that woman cannot become professor? If she is qualified, she can become professor. What is the wrong there? She must be qualified. That is the position. So similarly, if the woman understands Kṛṣṇa consciousness perfectly, she can become guru.

Another important consideration: Śrīla Prabhupāda’s observation that women *dikṣā-gurus* weren’t so many in the past doesn’t mean that there won’t be many in the future. There might be *multitudes* of women *dikṣā-gurus* in the future, or they might still remain relatively few. Perhaps ISKCON will have only one woman *dikṣā-guru* for every ten men *dikṣā-gurus*; or one every twenty; or one every hundred. Perhaps there will be just one every thousand. Frankly, we are not too concerned with statistics right now; we are talking about the *principle*, and we would rather leave the mathematical calculations to future generations. Rare or not rare, they were there; and there’s no reason to suggest that they should not be there anymore.

“The Process of Initiation in Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism Changed through the Centuries, and the Sacred Thread was Added; Therefore Women Should Not Become Dikṣā-gurus”

A certain devotee, although accepting the various Gauḍīya disciplic successions (and the lady *dikṣā-gurus* in them) as authentic, believes that the sacred thread

was introduced in Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism only in the early twentieth century, by Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura. Before that time, this devotee opines, all the Gauḍīya gurus, men and women, gave various *mantras* to their disciples, but not the Brahma-gāyatrī, which is especially connected with the sacred thread. He therefore finds it hard to conceive that contemporary ladies can give the sacred thread to their male disciples, while not wearing it themselves; apparently his “most significant problem” with women *dīkṣā-gurus* is the sacred thread. He wrote:

[T]here were innumerable female dikṣa-gurus (i.e. many Thakuranis and Goswaminis) found within the pancaratrīki-line (i.e. initiation line) of the various sections (in those days known as ‘parivaaras’) of Gaudiya Sampradaya within the past five centuries. . . . in those days, during the diksha ceremony performed within any of the multifarious authentic ‘parivaaras’ (like Nityananda Parivaara, Advaita Parivaara, Gadadhara Parivaara, Shyamananda Parivaara etc. etc), only the mantras mentioned in the booklet named as: “Gaura-govindarcana-smarana-paddhatih” (this booklet was composed by the disciple and grand-disciple of Vakreswara Pandit Goswami i.e. Sri Gopala Guru Goswami and Sri Dhyana-candra Goswami) were given to the diksha disciples by their respective pancaratrīka gurus (whether female or male gurus). Some of the mantras like 18 syllabled Gopala Mantra and the 24 and 1/2 syllabled Kama-gayatri mantra (which are also mentioned in Brahma-Samhita and Gopala-Tapani Upanishad) which were elucidated upon by Gopala Bhatta Goswami and Sanatana Goswami in their “Hari-bhakti-vilasah” and by Sri Visvanatha Cakravarti Thakura in his “Mantrartha-Dipika”, were also given during the diksha. But, the traditionally (traditionally within Sanatana Vedic Dharma

in broader terms) chanted Brahma-Gayatri Mantra (which is a Vedic Mantra and not a pancaratrīki mantra) was never given in our Gaudiya Sampradaya either during pre-Caitanya Mahaprabhu period or post-Caitanya Mahaprabhu period, because it was not considered significantly relevant to the cultivation of Bhagavata-Dharma (i.e. path of devotional service and esp. the conception of Raganuga Bhakti) despite Srila Jiva Goswamipada’s having written a special treatise as an exposition on that Brahma-Gayatri Mantra known as: “Gayatri-vyakhya-vivrittih” !!!!!!!!!!!!!!! Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati Thakura . . . annexed this “Brahma-Gayatri-Mantra” within the list of traditional Gaudiya Mantras. . . . But Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati Maharaja only allowed this Brahma-Gayatri Mantra to be given to his male disciples and not to any of his female disciple . . . Srila Prabhupada . . . started giving this Brahma-Gayatri Mantra to the female disciples and this is followed up till now in ISKCON . . . But Srila Prabhupada never gave the sacred-thread . . . to any of his female second-initiated disciples despite their being given the brahma-gayatri-mantra. The sacred thread is esp. associated with Brahma-gayatri mantra because only after Bhaktisiddhant Saraswati, this custom of sacred-thread started. Before him, when the Brahma-gayatri was not given, sacred thread was also not given in the sampradaya during gayatri initiation.

Now, the most significant problem which arises with the issue of allowing female gurus to give both initiations (i.e. harinama and gayatri/ brahminical) is that . . . [they] can never give a sacred thread to any of their male disciples.

– Email dated 28 October 2012, PAMHO text 24268285

For now, let's just note that: a) this devotee doesn't provide any proof for his opinion that ladies "can never give a sacred thread" to their male disciples; b) in *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta* Śrīla Prabhupāda states that the sacred thread has been in use for "three to four hundred years" in Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism:

Five hundred years ago, especially in Bengal, it was the system that persons who were born in the families of *brāhmaṇas* were accepted as *brāhmaṇas*, and all those who took birth in other families—even the higher castes, namely, the *kṣatriyas* and *vaiśyas*—were considered *sūdras*, non-*brāhmaṇas*. . . . Lord Caitanya Mahāprabhu, however, did not accept this artificial principle, which was introduced in society by self-interested men, and later the *kāyasthas*, *vaidyas* and *vaṇiks* all began to accept the sacred thread, despite objections from the so-called *brāhmaṇas* . . . There are many Vaiṣṇava families in Bengal whose members, although not actually born *brāhmaṇas*, act as *ācāryas* by initiating disciples and offering the sacred thread as enjoined in the Vaiṣṇava *tantras*. For example, in the families of Ṭhākura Raghunandana Ācārya, Ṭhākura Kṛṣṇadāsa, Navanī Hoḍa and Rasikānanda-deva (a disciple of Śyāmānanda Prabhu), the sacred thread ceremony is performed, as it is for the caste Gosvāmīs, and this system has continued for the past three to four hundred years.

– *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, Ādi-līlā 7.45, purport

The above purport doesn't authenticate the idea that the sacred thread was introduced in Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism only in the twentieth century. Nevertheless, in a later purport, Śrīla Prabhupāda did say:

Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura introduced the system of giving the sacred thread to a bona fide Vaiṣṇava.

– *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, Madhya-līlā 24.330, purport

Is Śrīla Prabhupāda contradicting himself? We believe both statements are accurate, within their specific context. When describing the introduction of the thread "three to four hundred years" ago, Śrīla Prabhupāda was apparently talking about Gauḍīya Vaisnavism in general. When saying that, "Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura introduced the system of giving the sacred thread," Śrīla Prabhupāda seems to be referring to the particular section of Bengali Vaisnavism connected with the *dikṣā* lineage and environment of Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura' father, Śrīla Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura. For instance, in all the photographs – taken at various stages of his life – portraying Śrīla Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura bare-chested, the sacred thread is visibly missing. Śrīla Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura, who was born as a *kāyastha*, apparently never received the sacred thread. The available iconography depicting Gaurakiśora dāsa Bābājī and Jagannātha dāsa Bābājī shows that they also weren't wearing any sacred thread; which is not surprising:

Traditionally, the followers of Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu, beginning with the Gosvāmīs of Vṛndāvana had accepted the *bābājī-veṣa* (dress). According to the tradition, one does not accept a *brāhmaṇa*'s thread (or gives it up if he has accepted one) and does not carry a *daṇḍa*. One wears only a short white wrapper and a top piece.

– *A Ray of Vishnu*, by Rūpa-vilāsa dāsa, Chapter 9

Why Did Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura Introduce the Sacred Thread?

Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas were apparently doing just fine without the Brahma-gāyatrī and the sacred thread; they had been happily reciting the Gopāla *mantra* and the Kāma-gāyatrī¹⁶ and chanting the Hare Kṛṣṇa *mahā-mantra*. Why introduce Brahma-gāyatrī and sacred thread? Śrīla Prabhupāda explained in a letter.

Actually one who takes to chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa mantra offenselessly immediately becomes situated transcendently and therefore he has no need of being initiated with sacred thread, but Guru Maharaj [Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura] introduced this sacred thread because a Vaiṣṇava was being mistaken as belonging to the material caste. To accept a Vaiṣṇava in material caste system is hellish consideration (nārakī buddhi). Therefore, to save the general populace from being offender to a Vaiṣṇava, He persistently introduced this sacred thread ceremony.

– Letter to Acyutānanda Swami, 28 November 1970¹⁷

So it was the “general populace” who had a problem, the dangerous “hellish consideration” of seeing Vaiṣṇavas “as belonging to the material caste.” It was “to save” them – those giving so much importance to the sacred thread and underestimating those not wearing it – that the “ceremony” was introduced; not because the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas really needed it. In *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, Śrīla Prabhupāda elaborated on the concept:

16 For more information on these *mantras*, see *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, *Ādi-līlā* 5.221 and *Madhya-līlā* 8.138-139 and 21.125

17 As quoted in *A Ray of Vishnu*, by Rūpa-vilāsa dāsa, Chapter 14



Sometimes a Vaiṣṇava who is a *bhajanānandī* does not take the *sāvitra-saṁskāra* (sacred thread initiation), but this does not mean that this system should be used for preaching work. There are two kinds of Vaiṣṇavas—*bhajanānandī* and *goṣṭhy-ānandī*. A *bhajanānandī* is not interested in preaching work, but a *goṣṭhy-ānandī* is interested in spreading Kṛṣṇa consciousness to benefit the people and increase the number of Vaiṣṇavas. A Vaiṣṇava is understood to be above the position of a *brāhmaṇa*. As a preacher, he should be recognized as a *brāhmaṇa*; otherwise there may be a misunderstanding of his position as a Vaiṣṇava . . . As soon as one is trained as a pure Vaiṣṇava, he must be accepted as a bona fide *brāhmaṇa*.

– Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, *Madhya-līlā* 8.128, purport

Otherwise sometimes Śrīla Prabhupāda put the importance of the sacred thread ceremony into perspective. On 19 August 1968 he wrote to Śrīla Tamāla Kṛṣṇa Goswami:

The chanting Hare Krishna is our main business, that is real initiation. And as you are all following my instruction, in that matter, the initiator is already there. Now the next initiation will be performed as a ceremony officially, of course that ceremony has value because the name, Holy Name, will be delivered to the student from the disciplic succession, it has got value, but in spite of that, as you are going on chanting, please go on with this business sincerely and Krishna willing, I may be coming to you very soon.

To another disciple Śrīla Prabhupāda wrote:

So far Gayatri Mantra is concerned, of course it is not such an important thing. The main thing is to chant Hare Krishna but you can consult with the GBC. Jayatirtha and get his recommendation. The Hare Krishna mantra is sufficient for becoming Krishna Conscious.

– Letter to Bahurupa, 22 November 1974

In his book *Servant of the Servant*, Śrīla Tamāla Kṛṣṇa Goswami told the following anecdote:

Śrīla Prabhupāda held *brāhmaṇa* initiations on two consecutive evenings. . . . At the fire sacrifice Prabhupāda chanted the Gāyatrī individually to each *brāhmaṇa*, but he also gave the *mantra* in writing to help his Western disciples, who were unfamiliar with the Sanskrit language. Morning, noon, and night the new initiates could be seen silently murmuring the *mantra*, which they read from their typed sheets of paper.

To correctly pronounce the Vedic hymns was not easy. Jayānanda in particular was having difficulty with the pronunciation, and when he requested an appointment to see Śrīla Prabhupāda, I took the opportunity to go along with him. Jayānanda explained his problem. Śrīla Prabhupāda asked him to chant the *mantras* and said that he would correct any mistakes in the pronunciation. But before Jayānanda had completed even the first *mantra*, Prabhupāda leaned back in his seat and started laughing. “It is hopeless. You boys will never be able to speak in Sanskrit. But it does not matter, because your feelings are genuine and Kṛṣṇa is accepting. Go on doing it; never mind.” And Prabhupāda laughed again, not even bothering to correct Jayānanda’s awful pronunciation.

We dwelt on the reasons and circumstances of the introduction of the Brahma-gāyatrī and the sacred thread in Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism to highlight that these two elements have not been considered indispensable for spiritual perfection among the followers of Śrīla Rūpa Gosvāmī. Later in this writing – in dedicated sections and also in Appendix One – we shall address the topic of the sacred thread in more depth. For now let’s recognize that, although in the last five hundred years various *ācāryas* might have been developing and adjusting the process of initiation according to the circumstances of their environment, the fact remains that women have been serving as initiating gurus within Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism throughout the centuries. To argue that all Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavis should be forever banned from being *dikṣā-gurus* because Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura introduced the sacred thread ceremony appears unjustified. Why should the giving of knowledge, of *mantras* and even of the sacred thread itself depend on wearing or not wearing the sacred thread? Should all those who had not been wearing it – including Jagannātha dāsa Bābājī, Gaurakiśora dāsa Bābājī, Śrīla Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura and even Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu¹⁸ – be considered unfit to become *dikṣā-gurus* and give second initiation in ISKCON?

“The SAC Paper Wasn’t 100% Perfect; Therefore Women Should Not Become *Dikṣā-gurus*”

A little background: In 2001, the GBC passed resolution number 609, entitled “Brahminical Advisory Council” (BAC), stating that “The GBC could benefit from the support and advice of devotees who are particularly knowledgeable in scripture” and that, “The GBC decision-making process and resolutions could be

¹⁸ Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura wrote: “Śrī Gaurasundara gave up His *śikhā* and *brāhmaṇa* thread according to the prescriptions of *ekadaṇḍa-sannyāsa*.” Śrī Caitanya-*bhāgavata*, *Madhya-khaṇḍa*, 28.129, purport. See also Śrī Caitanya-*caritāmṛta*, *Madhya-līlā* 3.6, purport.

reinforced by more comprehensive sastric evidence.” That year the GBC formed a subcommittee to produce an outline of the BAC’s “Functions and duties . . . qualifications and job description of members,” etc. Such outline, the resolution concluded, “will be voted on by the GBC at its next annual meeting (2002).” In 2002 the GBC passed resolution number 604, entitled “Sastric Advisory Council” establishing the SAC and defining its role: “The SAC is a permanent, pro-active body of senior, trusted and proven brahmanas that offers input to the GBC Body according to scripture, philosophy and realization. Subordinate to the GBC Body, the SAC is advisory *only*. The conclusions and advice of the SAC are in no way binding on the GBC Body.”

One of the first products of the SAC was the paper *Female Dikṣā-gurus in ISKCON*. The SAC explained in the introduction: “On the 17th of September 2003, the Sastric Advisory Council (SAC) received a request from the Executive Committee (EC) of the GBC requesting it to research the philosophical topic of possible future female *dikṣā-gurus* in ISKCON . . . to ensure that all sides of the topic were properly represented, SAC accepted a temporary member representing Vaiṣṇavas raised in Bhārata where one might question the propriety of female devotees as *gurus* due to cultural background. . . . SAC members decided to proceed by trying to gather evidence in the following categories: (1) statements by Śrīla Prabhupāda (2) statements by other Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava *ācāryas* (3) statements by other Vaiṣṇava *ācāryas* (4) statements from Vaiṣṇava *smṛtis* and (5) historical examples.” The discussions, which began in May 2004, fructified into a 16-page paper co-authored by “H.H. Suhotra Svāmī, Gopiparāṇadhana Dāsa, Drutakarmā Dāsa, Mukunda Datta Dāsa, Pūrṇacandra Dāsa, Devāmṛta Dāsa.” (By the way, we have no indication that any of these devotees harbored feministic propensities.) In

the section entitled “Weighing the Evidence and Concluding” the Śāstric Advisory Council wrote:

Weighing the philosophical evidence, the SAC team concludes that female devotees, if qualified, should be allowed to give initiation in ISKCON.

It seems unsupportable on the basis of *guru*, *sādhu* and *śāstra* to have a policy that asserts that there can never be female-*gurus* in ISKCON.

In 2005 The GBC passed resolution 425, entitled “Female Diksa Guru”:

The GBC accepts the basic philosophical conclusion presented in the SAC’s Female Diksa Guru Paper, i.e. that a mature, qualified, female devotee may accept the role of an initiating spiritual master.

Let’s note that the GBC approved and adopted the “philosophical conclusion” of the paper; the GBC never certified every sentence, every word of the paper as final and infallible. The GBC didn’t say that every suggestion in the paper would be fully embraced and enshrined in ISKCON Law. For instance, at the end of the paper, the SAC offered “a few humble suggestions,” recommending a few “simple measures to safeguard and support future female *gurus*”; but these measures haven’t become mandatory requirements or official GBC resolutions. Notwithstanding, a recent critique of the SAC paper¹⁹ mentions ten times the expression “relative prerequisites,” a list of ideas that “take social concerns into account.” These “relative prerequisites” never became official standards or conditions; what is the use of attacking these suggestions? We can all pursue the projects and crusades of our choice; nonetheless we doubt the utility of nitpicking a paper written eight years before, trying to take apart this or that phrase, this or

19 A Critique of the SAC FDG paper (file “SAC paper critique_Draft_Jan_2_2013.docx”)

that expression, especially considering that only the “philosophical conclusion” was accepted. Even if these devotees succeed at discrediting marginal aspects of the SAC paper, the conclusion would still hold true, being the verdict of Gauḍiya Vaisnavism throughout its history. As a participant in the current debate wrote:

One thing I wish to make perfectly clear: The points I shall be making don’t aim at defending the SAC paper but at defending and promoting the validity of present ISKCON Law in connection with the principle that woman can become diksa-gurus.

In other words, even if the SAC paper is found somewhat inadequate in some of its passages, it doesn’t follow that its conclusion (and the present ISKCON Law on women *gurus*) is also inadequate.

– Email dated 7 October 2012, PAMHO text 24161777

The validity of the *principle* of women *dikṣā-gurus* doesn’t depend on the SAC paper. There were women serving as initiating spiritual masters long before the SAC paper was written and, we assume, there will be in the distant future, when the SAC paper shall be all but forgotten. As for ourselves, we consider the SAC paper a balanced, reasonable and fair treatment of the subject; a precious reference. Although freely available to the public,²⁰ the paper’s intended audience was the GBC, a group of experienced and learned leaders; the paper wasn’t conceived as a weapon for street-fighting in the back-alleys of the internet. The style is *sattvic*, not confrontational; the statements are cautious, not drastic. Due to the particular needs of the audience, to the relative calm of the time in which it was written, and to the caliber of the writers, the SAC paper ponders the topic

20 The paper is downloadable from www.dandavats.com

of women *dīkṣā-gurus* with politeness and detachment. Its tone is gracious and dignified. In contrast, at the *Eye of the Storm* we can count on one or two hooligans itching for a fight and willing to dirty their hands in the turbulent backwaters of socio-theological dispute. In that sense – and in that sense alone – we might be better equipped than the saintly, brahminical scholars of the Śāstric Advisory Council. In addition, of course, we enjoy the luxury of knowing the dozens of arguments and counter-arguments tossed back and forth over the last eight years, *after* the publication of the SAC paper. In short: we consider the SAC paper on female *dīkṣā-gurus* a fine paper (and anyone can read it and independently assess its quality); even demonstrating that one or two sentences could have been written in a better way won't change its conclusion.

“Women Should Show to Be Transcendentally Situated Before They Can Become *Dīkṣā-gurus*”

This argument has been presented as:

The . . . hope was that the GBC body would modify the existing law to state that only Vaisnavis transcendentally situated should accept the role of disk [sic] guru.

– Email dated 7 October 2012, PAMHO text 24160574

The suggestion provoked an immediate downpour of questions:

1) Who would be making the determination of who is or isn't “transcendentally situated”?

2) What would the qualifications of the determining factor, whether a board, a council, a person, consist of? Would they not have to be transcendentally situated as well (kind of like, it takes one to know one)?

3) Would this requirement carry over to male candidates? Or, is it not considered important to allow less qualified (non-transcendental) males to accept the service of a guru? Or, is there a pre supposition that simply being born of a male body is a natural qualification to be a guru? Please clarify this according to your vision(s).

4) If the answer to the above is “yes, it is intended to be applied for both male and female candidates,” even though it is not stated, then my question would be, would this new determination be applied retroactively towards the existing guru's? If so, what happens if someone is determined not to be transcendentally situated? How would that be handled?

– Email dated 7 October 2012, PAMHO text 24163406

So far the only definitive answer provided by the proponents of this argument has been:

The requirement does not carry to male devotees.

– Email dated 8 October 2012, PAMHO text 24164390

So, the proponents of this argument believe that *only women* should face the burden of proof and show themselves to be “transcendentally situated.” Objections to the whole idea kept pouring in. A *sannyāsī* wrote:

Regarding transcendence, a very clear definition is given in Bhagavad-gita 14.26:

“One who serves me with undeviating bhakti-yoga, fully transcends these modes and becomes fit for spiritual existence.”

Note that ‘transcends’ here is a very literal translation of samatitya.

This simple definition is what Prabhupada constantly preached, and it is what our present guru-vetting procedure looks at most closely. Has a guru candidate demonstrated over time an ability to engage in undeviating bhakti-yoga, following Prabhupada’s principles and teachings and working cooperatively within ISKCON?

If we now introduce ‘bhava’ as the test, and if we consider that bhava is the stage just before prema in Rupa Goswami’s hierarchy of devotional states, beginning with ‘adau sraddha’, then as another devotee asked here, ‘who will evaluate the ‘bhava’ of our candidates?

Actually this . . . proposes an extremely dangerous abandoning of objective, hence scientific, criteria that Prabhupada used, and tries to substitute more subjective principles, such as ‘who is ecstatic?’ ‘Who is in bhava?’

In fact we can objectively verify to a great extent that a candidate follows our principles, teaches properly, cooperates with ISKCON etc. How will we objectively measure depth of ecstasy, realization of rasa etc. The very notion is so distant from Prabhupada, and so dangerous, that I wonder at its being introduced here.

Bhagavad-gita 14.26, taken literally in accordance with Prabhupada’s emphatic teaching, grounds our present criteria for gurus. The proposed change takes us far from our Founder-Acarya.

– Email dated 8 October 2012, PAMHO text 24164764

Someone else commented:

[Y]ou referred about a “hope” that “the GBC body would modify the existing law to state that only Vaisnavis transcendently situated should accept the role of disk [sic] guru.”

I find this “hope” highly implausible and perplexing. That hope sounds much more like the official opening of a “witch-hunting season” than a reasonable suggestion.

How would a woman demonstrate to be “transcendentally situated”?

What is the practical proposal? That she walks into fire (Sita-wise) without being touched by the flames?

And who is going to officialize and testify to that “transcendental situation”? Probably the members of such a committee should also demonstrate to be “transcendentally situated” to be able to determine if someone is also “transcendentally situated” (and so on ad infinitum).

I am eager to hear, from its proponents, about the practical application of this “hope.”

– Email dated 7 October 2012, PAMHO text 24161777

As per today, the proponents of this argument have not provided any definition of what it means to be “transcendentally situated” or how to tangibly measure it. The idea still appears perplexing, unreasonable and unfair.²¹

“Śrīla Prabhupāda Did Not Appoint Women Dīkṣā-gurus in 1977; Therefore Women Should Not Become Dīkṣā-gurus”

First of all, the current consensus is that – technically speaking – Śrīla Prabhupāda did not appoint *any dīkṣā-guru* in 1977. Of course, in 1977 Śrīla Prabhupāda did specifically empower eleven of his top leaders to perform initiations on his behalf, but the new initiates were still Śrīla Prabhupāda’s disciples. Certainly such arrangement did indicate that these eleven would later continue initiating their own disciples (which they did, with the sanction of the GBC in 1978). Therefore we take this argument to mean, “There was no woman among the first eleven *dīkṣā-gurus*; therefore we should not have women *dīkṣā-gurus*, neither now nor in the future.” Taking the argument literally, and bringing it to its logical conclusion, would disqualify all sorts of categories of devotees from becoming *dīkṣā-guru*. As a senior *sannyāsī* – actually one of those first eleven *dīkṣā-gurus* – put it:

Prabhupada also did not appoint black gurus, Latino gurus, Chinese gurus, etc etc etc, yet no one thinks these groups are categorically disqualified. We

²¹ In passing, and as a lowly footnote, let’s remark that the mood of this argument is practically identical to one by the ritvik proponents: “Yes, one *can* be a guru, but the guru should be *exceptionally qualified* and there is nobody around who is *that* good – besides Śrīla Prabhupāda.” In this case we have, “Yes, women *can* be *dīkṣā-gurus*, but they have to demonstrate to be transcendental; they have to show to be just a tiny notch below full *Kṛṣṇa-premā!*” Raising the bar to arbitrary and stratospheric heights achieves – in both cases – the exclusion of practically everyone. The principle is accepted *in theory* but the practical implementation becomes virtually impossible.

have two distinct quotes from Prabhupada affirming that Vaishnavis can be gurus. So women too are not categorically disqualified. And if we have qualified Vaishnavis in ISKCON, our duty is to facilitate their service and not suppress it.

– Email dated 11 October 2012, PAMHO text 24184498

Let’s also consider ISKCON’s social climate in the 1970’s. The same *sannyāsī*, an eye-witness of those events, wrote:

It is an extremely well-known piece of ISKCON history that the proliferation of young *sannyasis*, and the spread of a militaristic sankirtan culture, in the 70’s, led to a heavy suppression and at times humiliation of ISKCON Vaishnavis. ISKCON’s attitude toward women in the late 60’s and very early 70’s was far more liberal, mature, and appreciative. When I joined, the women were Gopis, then they became Cows and Witches. In 1977, there hardly could have been women in leading positions.

– Email dated 10 October 2012, PAMHO text 24180160

Additionally in 1977, the year of his disappearance, Śrīla Prabhupāda had apparently bigger worries than promoting initiations by women; he said:

There have been so many fallen down. First of all there will be no *sannyāsī* anymore. I have got very bad experience. And at least, we are not going to create new *sannyāsīs*.

– Room Conversation, Bombay, 7 January 1977



Even some of his top leaders gave him headaches. Should we expect that while Śrīla Prabhupāda had to deal with such symptoms of immaturity and instability, and while approaching his departure, inaugurating the first women *dīkṣā-gurus* would be among his top priorities? Let's also recognize that in 1977 almost all women in ISKCON were: a) newly married; b) looking for a husband; c) engaged as mothers of small children; d) recovering from a recent divorce; e) adjusting to their new status as widows (ex-wives of *sannyāsīs*). Such conditions aren't the most conducive to begin initiating disciples. Add that most women had not yet taken major leadership roles, and the picture that emerges is quite different than today, some thirty-five years later. Today ISKCON has ladies who have been loyal members and strict *bhakti-yogīs* for forty years or more; their children have grown up, got married and became parents themselves, freeing them from immediate domestic obligations. Some of these ladies have been functioning as *śikṣā-gurus* for years and there are aspiring disciples waiting for initiation. It's a different scene. The same senior *sannyāsī* offered further historical and philosophical insights (emails dated 11 October 2012, PAMHO texts 24181530, 24184498, 24185384 and 24186269):

The point: increasingly in the 70's leadership positions were forcibly limited to men, whether advanced or not. Women were held back, whether advanced or not. In today's more mature ISKCON, numbers of Vaishnavis are responsibly rising to leadership positions on a level playing field. At the end of his manifest lila, Prabhupada's concern was the survival of his mission. He looked around and selected those preachers who had most influence in the mission and made them gurus. In every case, he selected as the first 11 those who were powerfully leading various regions of the

world. Unfortunately, many of these were not prepared. No women were among these numbers. Prabhupada also did not select a single male disciple as guru who was simply a humble, learned brahmana, but not a strong leader.

Prabhupada was not acting to promote female leadership, he was trying to save the world, and working with very strong-minded male disciples who emerged as powerful leaders, and were not infinitely malleable. . . . Prabhupada dealt with the situation as it was, and that was the situation. . . . Being an expert judge of time and place is a strength in Prabhupada, not a weakness. Prabhupada fought for the truth, and also often adjusted to the reality on the ground. All great leaders do both. . . . Prabhupada was also an expert judge of time, place, and circumstances, and in the circumstances of 1977, he did what was best. Prabhupada taught many things that, as he well knew, would manifest later in time . . . in 1977 when Prabhupada was preparing to leave this world and was deeply concerned about the fate of his mission, I do not believe that in those difficult circumstances he was thinking about promoting Vaishnavi Gurus, but desisted due to anticipated resistance. . . .

My point was simply that he chose those devotees who had most influence as preachers. And ISKCON ethos at that time did not allow women to be in that position. Yes, there were saintly Vaishnavis at that time, but please note that Prabhupada did not choose any male devotees who were simply saintly Vaishnavas but not influential leaders . . . I would add to that a well-known sociological phenomenon in the history of religions: It is very typical in the first generation of a new religious

movement that all authority is vested in the Founder-Leader, and then gradually in succeeding generations, a more permanent social structure emerges.

So just as Prabhupada embodied all spiritual and ultimate administrative authority in one person, his first generation leaders also tended to embody regional spiritual and administrative leadership. Purely spiritual leadership, separate from any administrative authority, had little relevance in the earlier days of ISKCON. Example: of the first 11 gurus after Prabhupada, ten were GBCs. The eleventh . . . was quickly made a GBC, since it was thought that a guru should be a GBC as well. ISKCON has evolved beyond that thinking.

ISKCON is growing and maturing as Prabhupada wanted and there is now far more recognition than before that a devotee can be a spiritual leader without necessarily having a zone, or other administrative position. The earlier conception, that to be a spiritual leader also means that one should be an administrative leader, makes the role of women in 1977 especially relevant to our discussion. . . . The point is not whether Prabhupada was pro-actively promoting women gurus. He obviously was not. The point is whether the concept, the principle of a Vaishnavi guru was acceptable to him, and the letters we have clearly shows it was acceptable. Now that we have Vaishnavis who show all the qualifications, but are not men, there is no objective principle on which to deny them a service for which they are qualified. That is the point. . . . To pretend that 2012 is 1977 is a fantasy.

“No Woman is Included in the Disciplic Succession Printed at the Beginning of the *Bhagavad-gītā*; Therefore Women Should Not Become *Dikṣā-gurus*”

In that list there are also no Americans, Africans, Andorrans, Andalusians, Austrians or Australians; should they also be banned from becoming *dikṣā-guru*? First of all, most of that list (twenty-eight out of thirty-two entries) highlights designated *sampradāya* links within the last 800 years. The list doesn't include *all* initiating spiritual masters in the Brahmā-sampradāya from the beginning of the universe, some hundred-fifty trillion years ago (150,000,000,000,000 years). We can safely assume that within that period there have been more women *dikṣā-gurus* than the dozens mentioned in this writing, all of whom were from the last five-hundred years (or within 0.0000000003 percent of the total time); and that's only in connection with *our* Brahmā. There are innumerable Brahmās in innumerable universes. As a ballpark figure, a rough calculation, we estimate that there have been innumerable women *dikṣā-guru* in the past and there shall be innumerable in the future. We hope ISKCON shall play its part by contributing a substantial number.

“Women Initiating Men Would Create Unwanted Mingling; Therefore Women *Dikṣā-gurus* Should Initiate Only Women”

The idea is that it would be compromising for a woman *dikṣā-guru* to have too much contact with male disciples. Of course “too much” is, by definition, “too much.” Restricting the contact of the genders to appropriate interactions is one of the fundamental notions of civilized life. It's wise to stress the importance of avoiding unsafe situations; in fact Śrīla Prabhupāda often brought up the need for caution:

So, according to strict Vedic principle, except one's own wife, nobody sit down in a private place with woman, even she happens to be a mother, even she happens to be a daughter, even she happens to be a sister. So much restriction is there. *Mātrā svasrā duhitrā vā nāviviktāsano bhavet* [SB 9.19.17].

– Lecture on *Bhagavad-gītā* 3.17-20, New York, 27 May 1966

However, Śrīla Prabhupāda also criticized obsessive fear and immature, paranoid attitudes:

Devotee (9): I meant to say . . . 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 *pañḍit*. *Pañḍitaḥ sama-darśinaḥ* [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. . . . One should train himself that *matravāt para-dareṣu*, all women, “my mother.” . . . And if the woman treats man as son, then it is all right. It is safe.

– Morning Walk, Nairobi, 2 November 1975

If someone wants to take the “no mingling argument” to its logical conclusion, then restrictions should be extended to men as well. Why singling ladies out? In ISKCON *sannyāsīs*, *vānaprasthas*, *gṛhasthas* and even *brahmacārīs* have been initiating women, but nobody is suggesting stopping the practice. The argument therefore encourages a double standard. The argument can be presented as:

1. Men and women shouldn't mix.
2. Women *dikṣā-gurus* initiating men allows mixing.
3. Women *dikṣā-gurus* should not initiate men.

But if the above is true, the other version (which nobody is proposing) should also be true:

1. Men and women shouldn't mix.
2. Men *dikṣā-gurus* initiating women allows mixing.
3. Men *dikṣā-gurus* should not initiate women.

Arguing against *any* initiation between gurus and disciples of different genders would at least have some coherence. It would still be unjustified, against *śāstra* and against the example of Śrīla Prabhupāda, but at least it would be consistent. Actually this argument, although *appearing* traditionalistic, goes against the tradition: In *Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism* both men and women *dikṣā-gurus* have been giving initiation to both male and female disciples.

“Women Can Become *Śikṣā-gurus* but Not *Dikṣā-gurus*”

The first problem with this argument: It disregards that there is no difference between *śikṣā-guru* and *dikṣā-guru*:

The initiating and instructing spiritual masters are equal and identical manifestations of Kṛṣṇa.

– Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Ādi-līlā 1.34, purport

There is no difference between the shelter-giving Supreme Lord and the initiating and instructing spiritual masters. If one foolishly discriminates between them, he commits an offense in the discharge of devotional service.

– Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Ādi-līlā 1.47, purport

Generally a spiritual master who constantly instructs a disciple in spiritual science becomes his initiating spiritual master later on.

– Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Ādi-līlā 1.35, purport

So there is no reason (and in fact none is provided) to think that a woman who instructs her students cannot also initiate them. The argument feeds on the mistaken assumption that there is something fundamentally different between instructing and initiating spiritual masters. Additionally, the idea that women can become *śikṣā-gurus* but not *dikṣā-gurus* echoes – in form and substance – an argument already refuted by Śrīla Prabhupāda:

Sometimes a caste *guru* says that *ye kṛṣṇa-tattva-vettā, sei guru haya* means that one who is not a *brāhmaṇa* may become a *śikṣā-guru* or a *vartma-pradarśaka-guru* but not an initiator *guru*. According to such caste *gurus*, birth and family ties are considered foremost. However, the hereditary consideration is not acceptable to Vaiṣṇavas. The word *guru* is equally applicable to the *vartma-pradarśaka-guru*, *śikṣā-guru* and *dikṣā-guru*. Unless we accept the principle enunciated by Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu, this Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement cannot spread all over the world.

– Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Madhya-līlā 8.128, purport

Apparently both caste *gurus* and those who say that women can become *śikṣā-gurus* but not *dikṣā-gurus* share a common misconception: Physical birth – either as a *brāhmaṇa* or as a male – is a crucial requisite for initiating disciples. In both cases the argument is based on bodily considerations, a mindset which the followers of Lord Caitanya have been battling for centuries:

It is stated in the *Hari-bhakti-vilāsa* that one should not accept initiation from a person who is not in the brahminical order if there is a fit person in the brahminical order present. This instruction is meant for those who are overly dependent on the mundane social order and is suitable for those who want to remain in mundane life. If one understands the truth of Kṛṣṇa consciousness and seriously desires to attain transcendental knowledge for the perfection of life, he can accept a spiritual master from any social status.

– Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Madhya-līlā 8.128, purport

“The Only Legitimate Role for Women is Inside the House; They Should Not Do Anything Outside (What to Speak of Becoming *Dikṣā-gurus*!)”

This is another example of misrepresenting Śrīla Prabhupāda’s *complete* instructions. Those expressing this argument may be referring to the following or similar quotes:

A woman’s real business is to look after household affairs, keep everything neat and clean, and if there is sufficient milk supply available, she should always be engaged in churning butter, making yogurt, curd, so many nice varieties, simply from milk. The woman should be cleaning, sewing, like that.

– Letter to Chaya, 16 February 1972

We should not forget that Chāyā devī dāsī was a teacher (and therefore already active beyond the range of the chores listed above). It’s also important to notice that in the same letter Śrīla Prabhupāda also told her to ensure that the boys and the girls learn a variety of engagements:

All the children should learn to read and write very nicely . . . Their higher education they will get from our books, and other things they will get from experience, like preaching, SKP [*Saṅkīrtan* Party], etc. Alongside the regular classes in reading and writing, the other routine programs they should also participate in, like arati, kirtana, preaching, Sankirtana, like that.

The same day Śrīla Prabhupāda also wrote to Chāyā devī dāsī’s GBC, Satsvarūpa

dāsa Goswāmī, again stressing his wish to see boys and girls involved in outside engagements alongside their formal education:

I am very very pleased that you have been able to secure that place for our Gurukula school and temple. I am enclosing one letter to Chaya dasi in this respect, to clear up a few points, namely, that we should concentrate on training these children up in Krishna Consciousness, not so much by formal, academic education—a little reading, writing, mathematics, that’s all—but more by giving them facility to follow the examples of the older devotees in the regular KC program, namely, rising early, arati, chanting, reading, street Sankirtana, preaching, distributing literature—like that. . . . if they are satisfied in this way, they will all grow up to be first-class preachers and devotees.

– Letter to Satsvarupa, 16 February 1972

It seems to us that quoting *only* the “household affairs,” the “churning butter, making yogurt . . . cleaning, sewing” and forgetting about “street Sankirtana, preaching, distributing literature . . . grow up to be first-class preachers” gives an incomplete picture of what Śrīla Prabhupāda envisioned for the girls’ future. Again, it’s a question of honoring the Founder-Ācārya’s teachings in their entirety without biased favoritisms. And when we explore what Śrīla Prabhupāda intended as proper activities for his grown-up lady disciples, a variegated picture emerges. For instance:

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 October 1973

And book distribution was not the only engagement Śrīla Prabhupāda envisioned for his ladies disciples:

If you can organize a regular press for printing all our magazines and books and engage all our boys and girls in the press work that will be nice proposal . . . A full fledged press means we must have two typographic machines at least and engage some of the girls for composition and the boys may be engaged in printing and machine manipulating. That will be a great success.

– Letter to Rayarama, 24 February 1968

Another instance of Śrīla Prabhupāda approving of non-domestic engagements for ladies – this time in the academic field – is found in a discussion in Los Angeles, on 22 June 1975. There Śrīla Prabhupāda unambiguously affirmed that his Vaiṣṇavī disciples could study in the university and become professors (a career previously not available to women in Europe or India):

Jayatīrtha: This is the preliminary outline for the college course that Dr.

Judah is going to be helping us with in Berkeley. This describes the basic purposes of the college and describes some of the courses that we'll be offering. . . .

Bahulāśva: This is a union of various theological schools. So now in Berkeley we have this very nice building, and we can become a member of this Graduate Theological Union . . . then our devotees . . . can get a degree recognized by the state of California so they can teach in universities all over the whole country.

Prabhupāda: That I want. Do it. We want to give degrees, at least B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. . . .

Dharmādhyakṣa: Śrīla Prabhupāda, there are some questions about exactly how to do this college . . . should this college have men and woman or just men?

Prabhupāda: No, why? Everyone. We have no such discrimination.

The Founder-Ācārya did not approve of the idea that Vaiṣṇavīs can *only* be active between the four walls of their home. Furthermore, he didn't believe that Vaiṣṇavīs interacting with the world must necessarily degrade themselves. Churning butter and making yogurt is great; if it was an engagement good enough for mother Yaśodā and the *gopīs*, what to speak of the rest of womenfolk? At the same time, different activities can be on the same level, if done as a service for Kṛṣṇa. Śrīla Prabhupāda paved the way for his women followers to choose from a variety of duties, from milking the cows to arguing with scholars:

The way of discussion with Dr. Staal requires a little bit of knowledge . . . the boys and girls in our Kṛṣṇa 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 Kṛṣṇa Consciousness movement.

– Letter to Kṛṣṇa Devi, 17 February 1970

“A Woman *Dikṣā-guru* Might Feel Compelled to Act According to the Whims of the Less Advanced Relatives Maintaining Her; Therefore Women Should Not Become *Dikṣā-gurus*”

The extended version of this argument was expressed as follows (bold in the original):

[B]eing dependent on relatives who are less spiritually elevated will be the normal circumstance for a female diksha-guru. It is not difficult to imagine a circumstance in which a female diksha-guru feels compelled to act against either her own best spiritual interests or against those of her disciples on account of some whim of a relative who is maintaining her.

– Document entitled “iskcon_india_on_fdg_-_draft_D2”²²

Noticeably, the authors base their argument on something that will allegedly

22 Untitled paper, formally sent as an attached document to the “GBC Discussions” PAMHO email conference on 7 October 2012, PAMHO text 24160574

happen in the future; they foresee that “being dependent on relatives who are less spiritually elevated will be the normal circumstance for a female dikṣa-guru.” But, is it reasonable to specifically predict just one of a number of possible situations? How can anyone be so sure of the socio-economic conditions of future women *dikṣā-gurus*? We would rather expect that women *dikṣā-gurus* would be maintained by their disciples, which Śrīla Prabhupāda explains is customary for Vaiṣṇava teachers (including male gurus):

Since the Vedic society is divided into four classes of men—the *brāhmaṇas*, *kṣatriyas*, *vaiśyas* and *sūdras*—their means of livelihood are also mentioned in the scriptures. The *brāhmaṇas* should live by spreading knowledge and should therefore take contributions from their disciples.

– *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*, 4.21.50, purport

To us, this would appear to be the likely source of support for women *dikṣā-guru*. Or the lady could still be dependent on her husband; or her grown-up children could provide for all her needs; or she could be financially self-sufficient due to some inheritance or some family properties; due to her own savings from business or investments, because of her post as a university professor or because of being an accomplished author... The possibilities are so many that we fail to see why the woman *dikṣā-guru* should necessarily depend on materialistic people and be “compelled to act against either her own best spiritual interests or against those of her disciples on account of some whim of a relative.” What kind of whim? Will they force her to eat meat? The passage tries to evoke a sense of risk, of impending spiritual compromise; but it doesn’t say what those dangers might be. We don’t get any explanation of why the woman *dikṣā-guru* should become dependent on

materialistic relatives and we don’t receive any detail of the kind of foibles such relatives would force on her.

Amazingly, to substantiate their point the authors of the paper give the example of Bhīṣmadeva and Droṇācārya, who, by all accounts, were men, not women:

Indeed, dependence is one of the most caustic liabilities a spiritual preceptor can have. “Bhisma and Drona,” writes Śrīla Prabhupāda, “were obliged to take the side of Duryodhana because of his financial assistance. . . .” As shown here, dependence impaired the moral and spiritual judgment of two of the most highly elevated personalities . . . That was the lesson of Bhismadeva and Dronacharya, who were dependent for their maintenance on Duryodhana.

– Document entitled “iskcon_india_on_fdg_-_draft_D2”

How can these *male* examples be used to insist that *women* will compromise? Wouldn’t it be more reasonable to just say that spiritual preceptors – either men or women – should be careful to not become too dependent on materialistic people? Why single out women? Why envision a pessimistic imaginary situation and consider it “the normal circumstance for a female dikṣa-guru”?

There are at least two more major problems with the argument: First, the whole construct hinges on imagination “It is not difficult to imagine a circumstance in which a female dikṣa-guru...” If we start accepting imagination as evidence, then we should conclude that *nobody* – man or woman – should ever become *dikṣā-guru*; because, “It is not difficult to imagine a circumstance in which a *dikṣā-guru* – male or female – can have a problem or face a challenge.”

Second major glitch: Insinuating that women *dikṣā-gurus* would be particularly prone to the influence of misguided relatives might constitute a serious insult to the many Vaiṣṇavīs who demonstrated unflinching loyalty to Śrīla Prabhupāda throughout decades of dedicated devotional service. When faced with the option of following less-advanced, deviant or degraded husbands, sons or other relatives, they have shown – often at great personal sacrifice – dazzling examples of fidelity to the service of Śrīla Prabhupāda. Precluding them from becoming *dikṣā-guru* on the basis of imaginary socio-economic predictions would inflict upon them a great injustice.

“Women Could Become *Dikṣā-gurus*, But They Should Initiate Only Outside India”

There are several issues with this idea. First of all, India is *the* place where Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavīs have been initiating for hundreds of years. To specifically exclude India would appear bizarre, unjustified and unjustifiable. Lady followers of Lord Caitanya have been operating as *dikṣā-gurus* in orthodox Indian society from the sixteenth century; what makes them *unbearable* in the twenty-first century?

Second, one might say that Indians might reject the idea of women gurus, but let’s consider:

- a. There are more than one billion two-hundred million (1,200,000,000) Indians. It’s only natural that there would be different opinions among them. Will it be ever possible to please each and every one of them?
- b. As mentioned before, there are already plenty of women gurus in India

(some with large followings) and the general public is already familiar and comfortable with the notion. Regardless of what philosophies these ladies promote, the point is that, culturally speaking, the phenomenon of women gurus is common in India.

- c. Let’s remember that a *dikṣā-guru* – especially in ISKCON – can only initiate when *requested* by the prospective disciple. If “Indian culture” were uniformly and universally against the idea of women *dikṣā-guru*, no Indian would ever ask for initiation. Legislation would be unnecessary.
- d. On the other hand, if there were Indians sincerely inclined to take initiation from a woman, why negate them the possibility?

Third, if ISKCON started to curb initiation by women *dikṣā-gurus* in certain countries on the basis of (real or imaginary) cultural considerations, it would breach the principle that initiation should not be confined by mundane, external considerations:

Śrī Jīva Gosvāmī advises that one not accept a spiritual master in terms of hereditary or customary social and ecclesiastical conventions. One should simply try to find a genuinely qualified spiritual master for actual advancement in spiritual understanding.

– Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Ādi-līlā 1.35, purport

Fourth, limiting the choice of *dikṣā-gurus* to Indians (or anyone else) would be not only unfair, but also difficult to enforce: What if an Indian citizen takes initiation from a woman *dikṣā-guru* in a country where it’s allowed? Would he be ostracized



when he goes back to India? Would his initiation be considered invalid? Would the setting of limitations encourage border-crossing trips to take initiation from the guru of one's choice?

Fifth, besides everything else, introducing constraints according to geo-political boundaries would create an organizational nightmare. Should negotiations take place for every single country in the world? Should women *dīkṣā-gurus* be restricted only in India or also in Nepal and Bangladesh? What about Sri Lanka? And in Malaysia would women be allowed to initiate devotees of Indian descent or only those of Chinese ancestry? Perhaps the whole Islamic world, with their generally conservative views on women, should also become off-limits to initiations by Vaiṣṇavīs? What about the various areas of the United States of America? Should we allow women to initiate only in states considered progressive, like California, but not in more traditionalist ones like Alabama? Should we let every national council or temple president decide whether to veto initiations by women? And how often could they change their mind? Would they have to vote on it every year? Can new officers discard previous accords and establish new rules? How would our movement look to insiders and outsiders as well? Will all this confining and restricting of our most senior ladies improve our self-worth, our reputation?

Although maybe well intentioned, the whole idea of limiting *dīkṣā* by geography appears wrong and impractical. If an Indian wants to take initiation from a Vaiṣṇavī, let it be. If another Indian doesn't want, so be it. What's the problem?

“Extensive Travel is Against the *Dharma* of Women; Therefore Women Should Not Become *Dikṣā-gurus*”

First of all, it's not obligatory for a *dikṣā-guru* – man or woman – to travel extensively. One can perform the service without much travel or without moving at all from one's city or community. Visualize, for instance, a lady – let's call her Kṛṣṇa Bhakti devī dāsī – living in Hungary, in the twenty-second century. She has been living and serving in the New Vrajadhāma community for forty-three years, which she joined when she was nineteen. She had been an exemplary wife and mother. She has been teaching children and young adults for thirty years and everyone loves her *Bhāgavatam* lectures. Her expertise in explaining the philosophy, her pastoral skills and her saintly character have inspired many. She became well known in ISKCON Hungary although she never leaves the farm and the service of Śrī Śrī Rādhā-Śyāmasundara; devotees in various cities regularly visit her, they consider her their *śikṣā-guru* and they want to take initiation from her. She can do her service of instructing and initiating disciples without traveling at all.

Second; even accepting the idea that women should not travel extensively, especially alone, it would be a matter of simple adjustments – such as traveling with an assistant (an arrangement from which *sannyāsīs* and other male traveling preachers could also substantially benefit) or making sure that there is always someone picking them up at the airport. It's really not a big deal.

Third; in ISKCON we are blessed with senior Vaiṣṇavīs who do travel extensively – mostly from temple to temple and from a devotee community to another (basically from a protected environment to the next) – and everything indicates that they are

doing just fine. And let's remember that Śrīla Prabhupāda said:

There are three kinds of evidences accepted by the learned scholars in Vedic culture. One evidence is *pratyakṣa*. *Pratyakṣa* means direct perception. Just like I am seeing you, you are seeing me. I am present, you are present. This is direct perception.

– Lecture on *Bhagavad-gītā* 2.8-12, Los Angeles, 27 November 1968

Let's not make the mistake of discounting direct observation; if we see women preachers traveling far and wide while maintaining their spiritual health and performing impactful devotional service, we should not dismiss our direct perception as a hallucination. We might have to explain what we are seeing and consider the reasons of the unexpected phenomenon; which brings us to the next point.

Fourth; proponents of this argument sometimes quote the *Manu-saṁhitā*, which apparently says that women shouldn't travel far away without the husband; but let's acknowledge that long-distance travel in the times of the *Manu-saṁhitā* and today are two very different things. For example, three-hundred years ago a trip by bullock cart from Kolkata (Calcutta) to Mayapur could take four-five days or more:

Bhagavān: How far can a bullock cart travel in one day?

Prabhupāda: At least ten miles, very easily, very easily. And maximum he can travel fifteen miles, twenty miles.

– Morning Walk, Rome, 27 May 1974

In the days of yore long distance travel would often involve passing through treacherous forests possibly infested by bandits and ferocious beasts, crossing turbulent seas on precarious boats, trudging on foot for weeks and searching for a suitable shelter every night (advanced booking wasn't always practical). The *Manu-saṁhitā*'s advice that a woman should not undertake such trips alone, with no sufficient protection, is perfectly wise and sound. However, let's recognize that today one can travel to Mayapur from, say, London, Johannesburg or Tokyo in less than a day, moving through well-lit airports; journeying by fast and relatively comfortable means of transport, hardly having to walk or traverse unknown provinces. While traveling one can remain in touch with friends and relatives by phone or through the internet... Technology has transformed the experience of "traveling far away," redefining and decreasing its duration, duress, and dangers.

“A Woman Should Not Be Given Freedom; Therefore Women Should Not Become *Dikṣā-gurus*”

The promoters of this argument attempt to back it up by quoting Śrīla Prabhupāda's purport to *Bhagavad-gītā* 16.7:

[I]n the *Manu-saṁhitā* it is clearly stated that a woman should not be given freedom. . . . The demons have now neglected such injunctions, and they think that women should be given as much freedom as men. . . . But modern education has artificially devised a puffed-up concept of womanly life.

We should not make the mistake of mixing demons and devotees and conclude that women *dikṣā-gurus* are manifestations of such a “puffed-up concept of

womanly life.” The proponents of this argument seem unwilling to acknowledge that being a *dikṣā-guru* is another expression of the surrender of the disciple to the spiritual master; another expression of willingly sacrificing one's freedom to dedicate fully to devotional service. They apparently forget that the request comes directly from His Divine Grace – not from some demoniac source:

You, all my disciples, everyone should become spiritual master. . . . Remain always a servant of your spiritual master and present the thing as you have heard. You'll be spiritual master. . . . So I hope that all of you, men, women, boys and girls, become spiritual master.

– Śrī Vyāsa-pūjā Lecture, London, 22 August 1973

The idea of women *dikṣā-gurus* in ISKCON comes from the Founder-*Ācārya*; we should not confuse his vision with the demoniac attitudes of the *asuras*. We should also remember that in ISKCON the initiating spiritual masters, men or women, don't enjoy an unrestricted “freedom” to do as they like. The International Society for Krishna Consciousness has laws that require gurus to follow certain high standards of behavior; gurus who contravened such norms have been suspended, removed or disciplined in other ways. In fact a *dikṣā-guru* comes under more scrutiny than those who don't take up this service. In addition the *dikṣā-guru*, man or woman, is first of all a disciple; and a true disciple is *always* under the control of his or her spiritual master:

A disciple means who voluntarily agrees to be disciplined by the spiritual master. When one becomes disciple, he cannot disobey the order of the spiritual master. *Śiṣya*. *Śiṣya*, this word, comes from the root *śās-dhātu*,

means “I accept your ruling.”

– Lecture on *Bhagavad-gītā* 2.11, Mexico City, 11 February 1975

Rūpa Gosvāmī says in his *Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu* that discipline means, one who observes discipline, he is called disciple. Everyone knows it. Disciple means one who observes discipline.

– Lecture on *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 1.16.25, Hawaii, 21 January 1974

“Everyone knows it” but apparently the proponents of this argument evade the fact and confuse the demonic idea of “freedom” with the obedient offering of service by a disciple – which includes preaching, teaching, and, eventually, initiating disciples. Additionally, in connection with freedom, protection and independence, Śrīla Prabhupāda included even himself (as “old man”) in the category of those who “should be taken care,” alongside women, children and *brāhmaṇas*:

All these children, their mother is always attentive. . . . The child must be taken care of. That is good. Similarly, woman also. Just like old man like us, I am always taken care of. Similarly, a *brāhmaṇa* also should be taken care of.

– Lecture on *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 1.8.51, Los Angeles, 13 May 1973

If persons that should be “taken care of” include *brāhmaṇas*, saintly persons and even elderly *ācāryas*, we should not embellish and inflate the need for protection of women. And, after all, what is exactly this idea of “giving freedom”? Who is giving freedom to whom? Who among us is in the position to give or withdraw

freedom from these Vaiṣṇavis? What makes us think that they will be “given freedom” only at the moment of becoming *dikṣā-guru*? In the past some of the husbands of these ladies (supposedly their protectors), ran away with younger women or simply blooped. Often these ladies’ sons didn’t fare much better as guardians and custodians... Who has been offering them protection and who is entitled to give or take freedom from them – even legally speaking? Where are those Vedic males that these ladies could have been fully dependent on? Where have such dependable men been, tucked away in the pages of the *Manu-saṁhitā*? In fact these ladies have persevered in Kṛṣṇa consciousness despite all the odds, remaining fixed at the lotus feet of Śrīla Prabhupāda despite receiving, in some cases, very little protection from men. Do we really think that these women will go berserk and leave devotional service as soon as they start initiating disciples?

Śrīla Prabhupāda and Shyama Ma

We offer the following section as a narrative interlude in the middle of so many arguments and counter-arguments. However, the story is relevant to our theme because it shows Śrīla Prabhupāda personally interacting with a woman guru. In the absence of comments by Śrīla Prabhupāda on the episode, we refrain from inferring any specific conclusion. We offer it as a pertinent historical anecdote. The excerpts are from the book by Vaiyāsaki dāsa, *Rādhā-Dāmodara Vilāsa*. The place was Los Angeles; the date Sunday, 2nd March 1969; the event the Gaura-pūrṇimā celebration and initiation ceremony.

As Prabhupāda is about to light the sacrificial fire, a Gujarati lady, Shyama Ma,

who had met the devotees in London, comes into the temple clad in a saffron sari. Accompanied by her followers, older Hindu ladies and gentlemen, she offers respect to Prabhupāda as if he was her spiritual master, touching his feet several times. She carries small Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa Deities with her, and Prabhupāda agrees to have her place Them on the altar.

She is a guru herself, and her disciples roll out a rug for her at the back of the temple. She takes her seat, surrounded by her small group, and listens attentively as Prabhupāda continues with the *yajña*. After the ceremony, Prabhupāda goes up on the stage to sit on his *vyāsāsana* to the side of the altar. Picking up his kartāls, he begins a kirtan and the devotees rise to dance. . . . As Prabhupāda leads a lively kirtan from the *vyāsāsana*, he suddenly motions to Viṣṇujana to take over the chanting. As Viṣṇujana takes over the lead, Prabhupāda stands up and starts dancing the Swami step along with the devotees. Men and women dance on either side of the temple room, facing one another. They form a long aisle up the center of the temple room as they dance from side-to-side in the kirtan.

Shyama Ma and her followers also get up to dance. One of her disciples opens a bag and hands her a small *dholak* drum. The devotees are surprised to see Shyama Ma expertly playing along on her drum. Although Viṣṇujana is leading the kirtan, he tries to pick up her beat.

Prabhupāda begins dancing to the beat of Shyama Ma, but instead of sedately doing the side-to-side Swami step that everyone is familiar with, he actively begins moving back and forth. Seeing Prabhupāda dance with great gusto in this unusual way, everyone becomes excited.

Shyama Ma is also dancing in the kirtan along with her followers, and the devotees step aside to make way for her to move towards the front. She is playing the *dholak* and floating around like a butterfly, taking small little steps. Although she is an older lady, she enthusiastically dances around with her sari draped over her head, playing away on her drum.

All the female devotees beam in pleasure. She is a Vaishnavi, and she can play the drum more expertly than Viṣṇujana! She is dancing and playing and Śrīla Prabhupāda is obviously approving it, because he is up there on the stage dancing along.

Just then Śrīla Prabhupāda does something no one has ever seen before. . . . All of a sudden, Śrīla Prabhupāda leaps from the stage! He is in amongst the devotees jumping up and down and chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa. Shyama Ma picks up the beat on her *dholak*, and Viṣṇujana follows along on his *mṛdaṅga*. She also dances along as Prabhupāda continues jumping and dancing.

Now Prabhupāda starts jumping all around the temple room. In his ecstasy he introduces the practice of circumambulating inside the temple room during kirtan When the kirtan ends, Prabhupāda turns to Shyama Ma and says, “Now you lead.” So she begins to lead the next kirtan. Now the ladies are really ecstatic. Everyone is in total euphoria as she leads the most melodious kirtan that goes on and on, building up, as she and Śrīla Prabhupāda dance all over the temple. It is the most exciting Lord Caitanya festival ever. . . . The news of Prabhupāda’s exhilarated dancing, along with the drumming of Shyama Ma, quickly spreads from temple to temple through the ISKCON grapevine.

“Śrīla Prabhupāda Never Made any Woman Temple President; Therefore Women Should Not Become Dikṣā-gurus”

Besides the meager logic of the argument, Śrīla Prabhupāda did accept that women could become temple presidents. There might not have been any lady officially appointed as temple president during Śrīla Prabhupāda’s manifested pastimes, but Śrīla Prabhupāda did approve the *principle*:

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

Prabhupāda: Yes, why not?

– Room Conversation, Chicago, 5 July 1975

The idea that Śrīla Prabhupāda wasn’t expecting ISKCON women to take leadership roles appears unsubstantiated by the historical record. Śrīla Prabhupāda, for instance, wrote:

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

During an exchange in New York, on 9 April 1969, Śrīla Prabhupāda addressed the topic of women taking leadership in missionary activities:

Many devotees, new and old, crowded into Prabhupāda’s apartment at

26 Second Avenue. . . . Brahmānanda showed Prabhupāda a globe with markers representing ISKCON centers. “Now there is one in North Carolina,” Brahmānanda said. “Then it becomes fifteen?” Prabhupāda 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?” Rukmiṇī asked. “There is no harm,” Prabhupāda 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. In the absence of Lord Nityānanda, His wife, Jāhnavī devī, was preaching. First you must understand the philosophy. You must be prepared to answer questions. Kṛṣṇa will give you intelligence. Just like I was not prepared to answer all these questions, but Kṛṣṇa gives intelligence.”

– Śrīla Prabhupāda-līlāmṛta, Chapter Twenty-nine

“Women Cannot Become Brāhmaṇas; Therefore They Should Not Become Dikṣā-gurus”

Actually, in Śrīla Prabhupāda’s words:

[B]y the mercy of Lord Caitanya, every one comes to the stage of brahminical standard. Only to observe these four principles and chant Hare Kṛṣṇa, you are at once more than *brāhmaṇa*, Vaiṣṇava. Vaiṣṇava position is more than *brāhmaṇa*.

– Lecture on Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 2.1.2-5, Montreal, 23 October 1968

In a lively conversation during a morning walk in Nairobi, Kenya, Śrīla

Prabhupāda addressed a connected question; interestingly Śrīla Prabhupāda started with a short, “*varṇāśrama*” (socially based) reply, but then broadened the understanding of his audience with a philosophical perspective:

Indian man (6): 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*.

Indian man (6): 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 November 1975

Within the more formal, official and solemn setting of his books, in his Bhaktivedanta purports Śrīla Prabhupāda provided a more elaborate and technical explanation:

If one actually wants to serve Kṛṣṇa, it doesn’t matter whether one is a *śūdra*, *vaiśya* or even a woman. If one is sincerely eager to chant the Hare Kṛṣṇa *mantra* or *dīkṣā-mantra*, one is qualified to be initiated according to the *pāñcarātri*ka process. However, according to Vedic principles, only a *brāhmaṇa* who is fully engaged in his occupational duties can be initiated. *Śūdras* and women are not admitted to a *vaidika* initiation. Unless one is fit according to the estimation of the spiritual master, one cannot accept a *mantra* from the *pāñcarātri*ka-*vidhi* or the *vaidika-vidhi*. When one is fit to accept the *mantra*, one is initiated by the *pāñcarātri*ka-*vidhi* or the *vaidika-vidhi*. In any case, the result is the same. . . . As far as *dīkṣā* is concerned, one should consult *Madhya-līlā* 15.108. On the whole, when a person is initiated according to the *pāñcarātri*ka-*vidhi*, he has already attained the position of a *brāhmaṇa*. This is enjoined in the *Hari-bhakti-vilāsa* (2.12):

*yathā kāñcanatām yāti kāṁsyaṁ rasa-vidhānataḥ
tathā dīkṣā-vidhānena dvijatvaṁ jāyate nṛṇām*

“As bell metal can be turned into gold when treated with mercury, a disciple initiated by a bona fide guru immediately attains the position of a *brāhmaṇa*.”

– Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, *Madhya-līlā* 24.331, purport

Below is another passage from Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta where Śrīla Prabhupāda further illuminated the subject:

There is a difference between the *smārta* process and the *gosvāmī* process.

According to the *smārta* process, one cannot be accepted as a *brāhmaṇa* unless he is born in a *brāhmaṇa* family. According to the *gospvāmī* process, the *Hari-bhakti-vilāsa* and the *Nārada-pañcarātra*, anyone can be a *brāhmaṇa* if he is properly initiated by a bona fide spiritual master. This is also the verdict of Śukadeva Gosvāmī in *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* (2.4.18):

*kirāta-hūṇāndhra-pulinda-pulkaśā
ābhīra-śumbhā yavanāḥ khasādayaḥ
ye 'nye ca pāpā yad-apāśrayāśrayāḥ
śudhyanti tasmai prabhaviṣṇave namaḥ*

“Kirātas, Hūṇas, Āndhras, Pulindas, Pulkaśas, Ābhīras, Śumbhas, Yavanas and members of the Khasa races, and even others who are addicted to sinful acts, can be purified by taking shelter of the devotees of the Lord, due to His being the supreme power. I beg to offer my respectful obeisances unto Him.”

– *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, *Madhya-līlā*, 23.105, purport

And, of course, if Śrīla Prabhupāda did not consider his women disciples to be *brāhmaṇas*, how could he engage them in Deity worship? Śrīla Prabhupāda made this point in a conversation:

It is not the monopoly of India that *brāhmaṇas* are born there. No. No, you are all *brāhmaṇas*. Otherwise how can I allow you to worship Deity?

– Morning Walk, Los Angeles, 8 December 1973

“Although Śrīla Prabhupāda Gave the Brahma-gāyatrī to Women, They Are Not Eligible to Chant It”

What shall we say to this? Śrīla Prabhupāda gave this *mantra* to women but they shouldn't chant it? Perhaps Śrīla Prabhupāda made a mistake that we should now fix by forbidding women to chant the Brahma-gāyatrī? Or is it the mistake of those women, who think themselves eligible to chant it that *just* because Śrīla Prabhupāda gave them the *mantra* and instructed them to recite it three times a day? Or – more likely – it's just the mistake of the devotee who brought up the argument? He wrote:

[D]evotee feminists take the fact of Srila Prabhupad's having given women the brahma-gayatri as evidence that they are eligible to chant it.

– Email dated 15 October 2012, PAMHO text 24199877

His conclusion: Anyone thinking that ladies are eligible to chant the *mantra* Śrīla Prabhupāda gave them to chant is a feminist... In any case, feminists, anti-feminists and non-feminists alike, can take notice that Śrīla Prabhupāda did identify his lady disciples as “*brāhmaṇas*” and did instruct them to chant the *Gāyatrī mantras*:

I have also accepted the brahmanas who you have recommended: Sukalina Devi Dasi, Vedapriya Devi Dasi, and Aravinda Dasa. . . . In any case there are enclosed three mantra sheets, one for each of them. Now teach them to be good brahmanas by keeping clean internally by always chanting Hare Krsna and externally by always bathing.

– Letter to Kuladri, 28 April 1977



In a lecture, Śrīla Prabhupāda explained the process of becoming a *brāhmaṇa*:

Garbhādhāna ceremony means when the father goes to beget a child, there is a ceremony. . . . So at the present moment this ceremony is not observed. Even in rigid families they have already given up. And the *śāstra* injunction is, as soon as one gives up this ceremony, *garbhādhāna* ceremony, he at once falls down to the classification of a *śūdra* . . . Everyone is born *śūdra*. Then? *Saṁskārād bhaved dvijaḥ*. *Dvijaḥ* means this *saṁskāra* . . . By gradual process of cultivation of knowledge, of behavior, of rules and regulations, one becomes a *dvijaḥ*. *Dvijaḥ* means twice-born. . . . So this process of Kṛṣṇa consciousness is a manufacturing process of *brāhmaṇa*, Vaiṣṇava. Vaiṣṇava means surpassing the brahminical stage. . . . A Vaiṣṇava means he is already a *brāhmaṇa*.

– Brāhmaṇa Initiation Lecture, Boston, 6 May 1968

A few months after this lecture, some ISKCON women received brahminical initiation; here is some personal recollection from one of those ladies, Mālatī devī dāsī:

I was part of the second gayatri initiation which was held in Montreal, August, 1968 and we, myself, Yamuna, Janaki and Saradiya personally received the mantra, along with his personal instructions how to chant on our fingers . . . Regarding whether or not SP accepted women as brahmins (it seems there is some doubt), I had a small interaction that indicated that he certainly did so. It was almost insignificant yet the point was made: When we were first in India, many people would offer us gifts. I had a

small child (the only one with a child in India at the time) and tried not to accumulate too much since I had to be able to carry the child in one hand and a suitcase in the other. In SP's presence, I was offered a piece of new cloth, which I politely refused due to feeling it was not required and would add weight to my situation. SP literally jumped up from his seated position and came towards us, speaking two things, almost simultaneously. To the man he said, "She does not know," and to me he said, "When gives to a brahmin, you must accept." And, certainly, in India, he would present the women who were second initiated as Brahmins.

– Email dated 16 October 2012, PAMHO text 24207998

In the *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* Śrīla Prabhupāda states that anyone can qualify as a "bona fide twice-born" through the *saṁskāras* given by the empowered servants of Lord Caitanya:

One birth is calculated during the seed-giving *saṁskāra*, and the second birth is calculated at the time of spiritual initiation. One who has been able to undergo such important *saṁskāras* can be called a bona fide twice-born. . . . Only the post-graduate spiritual student can enter into the spiritual or devotional service of the Lord. It is a great science, and the great professor is the Lord Himself in the form of Lord Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu. And persons who are empowered by Him can initiate others in the transcendental loving service of the Lord.

– *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 1.4.25, purport

Who can doubt that Śrīla Prabhupāda is among the "persons who are empowered"

by Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu to produce "bona fide twice-born"? Śrīla Prabhupāda wrote: "Śrīla Vṛndāvana dāsa Ṭhākura has sung that the devotees of Lord Caitanya are so powerful that each one of them can deliver a universe." (*Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 4.24.58, purport) They can deliver a universe; will they not be able to create twice-born among both men and women? In a letter to a lady disciple Śrīla Prabhupāda said that he was making her a twice-born *dvija*. In that letter (dated 7 October 1974), he also instructed her to "always think of Krishna," indicating that besides the rituals and procedures the real purifying factor is "the fire of Krishna consciousness" and the real qualification is "love":

My Dear Vajresvari devi dasi:

Please accept my blessings. . . . I have noted in your letter that you want to serve me. I only want that all you my disciples always think of Krishna and never forget Him for a moment. In this way you can conquer Krishna. He becomes so attracted by pure devotion that He gives Himself to His devotee. And if you get Krishna, then what you want more?

How to think of Krishna that I have given, following the devotional practices and chanting 16 rounds minimum. We have also established worship of the Deity in our temple so that all day long one will automatically think of Krishna, He is so kind. So now Kirtanananda Maharaja has recommended you for twice born initiation. *Dvija*: (*dvi* means twice and *ja* means birth. Now you finish your old birth with the fire of Krishna consciousness. Worship Krishna with love. That is the qualification for Deity worship. If you love Krishna, you will worship Him very nicely.

Did Śrīla Prabhupāda Make a Compromise?

If unable to reconcile our preconceptions with the decision of the Founder-Ācārya to give the Brahma-gāyatrī to women, we might be tempted to interpret his choice as a compromise with feminism. We might suppose that Śrīla Prabhupāda was subtly coerced by his female disciples and was driven to give them the Brahma-gāyatrī. For instance, two devotees wrote:

Śrīla Prabhupāda gave women the brahma-gayatri mantra not for any sastric reason but for social reasons. Women who are too attached to the Western idea of equal rights need to feel some measure of equality with men. Śrīla Prabhupāda therefore made a compromise with his female disciples so they would not leave ISKCON.

– *A Critique of the SAC FDG paper* (file “SAC paper critique_Draft_Jan_2_2013.docx”)

Accepting the above account would lead us to conclude that:

- Śrīla Prabhupāda used to modify traditional standards without “any sastric reason.”
- Śrīla Prabhupāda gave the Brahma-gāyatrī to women “for social reasons” (Under what authority do the writers claim to read Śrīla Prabhupāda’s mind and discern his inner motivations?).
- Young western feminists could easily push Śrīla Prabhupāda around and make him fulfill their wishes.
- Giving them the Brahma-gāyatrī was a “compromise” (not an expression of

Śrīla Prabhupāda’s loyalty to the vision and mood of his Guru Mahārāja or an inspired act of spiritual genius).

- Those female disciples’ dedication to their guru was so shaky; their devotion to Kṛṣṇa so fragile, that they would have left ISKCON if they weren’t given the Brahma-gāyatrī (Didn’t they abandon everything to follow Śrīla Prabhupāda? Weren’t they performing severe austerities to serve him?).
- These women cared so much about the Brahma-gāyatrī (a *mantra* they hardly ever heard about) that they would have left ISKCON had they not received it. Nevertheless, they weren’t very interested in other male prerogatives as the sacred thread or the *sannyāsa-daṇḍa*. These feminists didn’t covet becoming Temple Presidents or GBCs, and they weren’t too affected by all the purports describing them as “less intelligent”; they simply wanted the Brahma-gāyatrī and the Brahma-gāyatrī only (a peculiar form of feminism indeed!).

If Śrīla Prabhupāda were such an easy prey to female persuasion; if he was so accommodating to mundane cravings for equality; why didn’t he allow women to wear the sacred thread or to take *sannyāsa*? Why didn’t he change his books to satisfy the feminists? Why did he “compromise” *only* in the case of the Brahma-gāyatrī? This concept of a “compromising Śrīla Prabhupāda” appears speculative, conjectural. We can’t claim to understand Śrīla Prabhupāda’s inner motives and considerations, but we can read what he wrote and the transcriptions of what he said. For instance:

My Guru Mahārāja never compromised in His preaching, nor will I, nor

should any of my students.

– Letter to Giriraja, 3 January 1972

We are facing so many difficulties. We don't care for it. We never compromise. All my students, they will never compromise. Why shall I compromise? If I am confident that I am speaking the truth, why shall I make compromise? Those who are not confident of his position, they will make compromise. One who does not know where he stands, he will make compromise. And if I know where I am standing, why shall I make compromise? Let others do whatever he likes.

– Press Interview, Bombay, 31 December 1976

We don't make any compromise. What we believe, we are preaching that. People are accepting. So you believe or not believe; it doesn't matter for us.

– Morning Walk, Bombay, 13 November 1975

We don't make any flattery to satisfy the whims of the ordinary... We speak from *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*, we speak from *Bhagavad-gītā*, and present them as it is, without any adulteration. This is our position. If you like, then you make progress. If you don't like, that is your option. But we cannot make any compromise. We must present the *śāstra* as it is.

– Lecture on *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 1.2.19, Calcutta, 27 September 1974

Those saying that Śrīla Prabhupāda “made a compromise” with feminism and “gave women the brahma-gayatri mantra not for any sastric reason” so that his “his

female disciples . . . would not leave ISKCON” are apparently not talking about His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda, Founder-*Ācārya* of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness; and certainly they are not talking about his surrendered lady disciples, women who sacrificed so much to serve him.

“Women Can Chant the Brahma-gāyatrī and Can Initiate Others into Chanting It; But They Can't Give The Sacred Thread to Their Male Disciples; Therefore Women Should Not Become *Dīkṣā-gurus*”

Obviously this idea (women can't hand threads to disciples) is only an assumption, unsubstantiated by any scriptural evidence. This argument also shows that opponents of the notion of women *dīkṣā-gurus* sometimes disagree among themselves. For some – as in the previous argument – women should not be eligible to chant the Brahma-gāyatrī mantra despite Śrīla Prabhupāda's prescription that they do. Others do accept that women can receive, recite *and* transmit *all* of the Gāyatrī *mantras*, including the Brahma-gāyatrī. Notwithstanding their differences on the *mantra*, both seem to conclude that the *thread* is the essential thing, the real deal-breaker. Despite the fact that “wearing or holding the *upavīta* thread is not integral to chanting Gāyatrī *mantras*,” (*Pañcarātra-Pradīpa* - ISKCON GBC Press, Chapter 1) a devotee wrote:

becoming a brahmana, either by the vedic system of upanayana samskara or by the pancharatika vidhi, means the sacred thread.

– Email dated 21 November 2012, PAMHO text 24384880

Before raising the “thread argument,” another devotee submitted an intriguing historical account:

Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati Thakura, making exceptionally revolutionary alterations to some of the traditionally practiced rituals within the sampradaya, annexed this “Brahma-Gayatri-Mantra” within the list of traditional Gaudiya Mantras. This was an unprecedented change made by him in the matter of dikṣa [sic] in our sampradaya . . . But Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati Maharaja only allowed this Brahma-Gayatri Mantra to be given to his male disciples and not to any of his female disciple (even now this tradition is being followed in all various branches of Gaudiya Math institutions), because this mantra was a strictly Vedic Mantra and not a pancaratrīki mantra and so could not be chanted by women . . . Now, Srila Prabhupada, exceptionally using his divine powers of an empowered acharya . . . even altered this tradition started by his Guru Maharaja and started giving this Brahma-Gayatri Mantra to the female disciples and this is followed up till now in ISKCON. What SP revised, is outside the scope of argumentation because the actions of perfect personalities are also perfect.

But Srila Prabhupada never gave the sacred-thread (this sacred thread is usually and conventionally associated with the brahma-gayatri mantra) to any of his female second-initiated disciples despite their being given the brahma-gayatri-mantra. . . . Now, the most significant problem which arises with the issue of allowing female gurus to give both initiations (i.e. harinama and gayatri/brahminical) is that scripturally and traditionally speaking, they i.e. female dikṣā-gurus – can never give a sacred thread to any of their male disciples.

They will only be able to successfully initiate their female disciples into the second initiation and not their male disciples . . . female gurus can not give sacred-thread to their male disciples because if they themselves don’t have a sacred thread then how can they bestow on their disciples?

– Email dated October 29, 2012, quoted in PAMHO text 24273052

Although this devotee accepts that women can “successfully initiate” (other women) with all the *mantras* given by Śrīla Prabhupāda, he postulates that women *dikṣā-gurus* can’t give the thread to their male disciples. He claims that “scripturally and traditionally speaking, they i.e. female dikṣā-gurus – can never give a sacred thread to any of their male disciples” but doesn’t cite any scriptural or traditional evidence. He only offers a rhetorical question, “they themselves don’t have a sacred thread then how can they bestow on their disciples?”²³ But he doesn’t explain why a woman *dikṣā-guru* should be unable to hand a few strands of cotton to her male disciples. Can’t she even *touch* a brahmin thread? What is the evidence for that? Śrīla Prabhupāda wrote, in *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta (Madhya-līlā, 23.105, purport)*:

The essence of devotional service must be taken into consideration, and not the outward paraphernalia.

Aren’t we getting stuck with the “outward paraphernalia” while forgetting the essence? Śrīla Prabhupāda often mocked the idea that the thread is everything:

Vipratve sūtram eva hi [Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 12.2.3]: “And one will be

²³ To his credit, in the same communication this devotee admits: “These views are personal views of the composer.”

considered a *brāhmaṇa* simply by this thread.” These are all written there. A two-cent-worth thread, you get it..., “Oh, you have got thread. Oh, you are a *brāhmaṇa*.” That’s all. This is going on in India. Two-paisa-worth *brāhmaṇa*. He has all the qualification of less than a *caṇḍāla*, but, because he has got this nonsense thread, he’s considered a *brāhmaṇa*.

– Lecture on *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, *Madhya-līlā* 20.337-353, New York, 25 December 1966

Of course, Śrīla Prabhupāda was referring to unqualified *brāhmaṇas* and his derisive statements about the “nonsense thread” weren’t aimed at sacred threads given within authorized brahminical initiation ceremonies. However, we frankly see no problem in a lady *dikṣā-guru* handing a thread even if she doesn’t wear one. We are unable to visualize negative consequences accruing from that. Actually the hundreds of ISKCON ladies engaged in dressing the Deities already offer the sacred thread, *upavīta*, to Kṛṣṇa:

Offer Kṛṣṇa an *upavīta*, water for sipping, and *ūrdhva-puṇḍra tilaka* before putting on His upper cloth, chanting, respectively:

idam upavītam and the *kṛṣṇa-mūla-mantra*;
idam ācamanīyam and the *kṛṣṇa-mūla-mantra*;
idam tilakam and the *kṛṣṇa-mūla-mantra*. . . .

Chant *idam upavītam* and the Deity *mūla-mantra* while showing the *upavīta-mudrā*; then offer a sacred thread to the Lord.

– *Pañcarātra-Pradīpa*, ISKCON GBC Press, Chapter 4, *Standard Procedures for Deity Worship and Supplement 2 - Elaborate Deity Worship*

If ladies can daily offer the sacred thread to the Lord Himself why can’t they offer it to their disciples? And this *arcana* practice is not a new, “ISKCON thing”; in the *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*, for instance, we see Aditi asking her husband, Kaśyapa Muni: “O *brāhmaṇa*, tell me the regulative principles by which I may worship the supreme master of the world so that the Lord will be pleased with me.” (SB 8.16.22) Kaśyapa Muni gives her an elaborate process and, when listing the ingredients of the worship, he specifically instructs her to offer the Lord a sacred thread, “one should bathe the Lord with milk and dress Him with proper garments, a sacred thread [*upavīta*], and ornaments.” (SB 8.16.39) Nothing in the text or in Śrīla Prabhupāda’s purport indicates any restriction for ladies handling or handing a sacred thread. For the devotee quoted above the sacred thread is the “most significant problem” in the whole topic of women *dikṣā-gurus*; but his argument, quite literally, is hanging by a thread.

“No, no, no! Women Cannot Give the Sacred Thread to Their Male Disciples; Therefore Women Cannot Become *Dikṣā-gurus*”

For some reason we keep hearing the “sacred thread argument”; two Prabhus, for instance, expressed their belief as follows:

Since only a male can confer as well as wear the sacred thread, a female thus cannot be a diksha guru in the system of initiation envisioned and practiced by Srila Prabhupada.

– *A Critique of the SAC FDG paper* (file “SAC paper critique_Draft_Jan_2_2013.docx”)

Attempting to gather some support for their bold but unsubstantiated assertion, they cited the following Sanskrit verse, which Śrīla Prabhupāda quoted in his

purport to Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Ādi-līlā 15.108:

The regulative principles of dikṣā are explained in the Hari-bhakti-vilāsa (2.3–4) and the Bhakti-sandarbhā (283). As stated:

*dvijānām anupetānām svakarmādhyayanādiṣu
yathādhikāro nāstīha syāc copanayanād anu
tathātrādīkṣitānām tu mantra-devārcanādiṣu
nādhikāro 'sty ataḥ kuryād ātmānam śiva-saṁstutam*

“Even though born in a brāhmaṇa family, one cannot engage in Vedic rituals without being initiated and having a sacred thread. Although born in a brāhmaṇa family, one becomes a brāhmaṇa only after initiation and the sacred thread ceremony. Unless one is initiated as a brāhmaṇa, one cannot worship the holy name properly.”

The purport doesn't even mention women, and therefore the quote is largely taken out of context. But, more importantly, the use of the above verse for dismissing women dikṣā-gurus has already been addressed. A senior sannyāsī wrote:

Such distortions of Vaishnava dharma should be exposed for what they are. They constitute nothing more than the kind of bigotry found in adaiva varnashrama, and this led by persons born outside of the entire varnashrama system! . . . [Here the sannyāsī quotes the Sanskrit and the translation reproduced above from the purport of Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta Ādi-līlā 15.108] The above translation is Srīla Prabhupada's. He cites these

two verses . . . to support the idea that despite the fact that harinama is independent of initiation in terms of its capacity to reveal itself, initiation is nonetheless mandatory for those engaged in nama dharma. . . . Thus in his translation he is merely saying that one must receive Vaishnava initiation in order to worship Krishna (who is nondifferent from his name) properly. And although these verses speak of arcana, or ritualistic Deity worship, when studied in context, Srīla Prabhupada has used them to refer to chanting harinama to further emphasize the point that Vaishnava initiation is essential. . . . A literal translation of the verses is telling:

“Brahmins who have not undergone the sacred thread ritual are not eligible to engage in the prescribed Brahminical duties, such as study of the Vedas. They become eligible only after being invested with the power to do so through undergoing this ritual. Similarly, those (aspiring Vaishnavas) not yet initiated are not eligible to chant mantras and worship the Deity. Therefore, one should make oneself fortunate by accepting (Vaishnava) initiation.”

Srī Jīva Goswami explains that in context these verses tell us that just as Brahmins cannot perform Vedic rituals (which Vaishnavas are not interested in) without undergoing the upanayana ritual, similarly Vaishnavas cannot engage in Deity worship (which, unlike Vedic rituals, is a principal limb of the body of bhakti) without receiving Vaishnava initiation, nor can they chant the initiation mantras before receiving them through the initiation ritual. The verses do not say that Vaishnavas must receive the sacred thread, as some have grossly misunderstood. With this

misunderstanding, such persons think they have found support for their premise that women Vaishnava initiates cannot serve as Vaishnava gurus. They think that Vaishnava initiation in the full sense is dependent on receiving the sacred thread, and because women do not receive it, they are not even fully initiated themselves, what to speak of being qualified to bestow it upon would-be male disciples. . . . Any initiated Gaudiya Vaishnava, regardless of race or gender, is perfectly equipped to pursue Krishna prema, and as much as any male members are qualified to initiate disciples, so too are any women members.

– “Varnashrama, Bhakti, and Vaisnavi Gurus,” Email dated 26 December 2012

The Sacred Thread; “Symbolic Representation” or Essential Medium?

It seems that we are witnessing an exaggerated focus on the sacred thread as an *object*. After all, isn’t the thread simply an *indication* of a status, like a badge or a lapel pin? Certainly by itself the thread doesn’t confer the brahminical qualifications; it only serves, in Śrīla Prabhupāda’s words, as a “symptom,” a “sign,” a “certificate” of the training one received (which is fully available in ISKCON to both men and women). Here are few examples of Śrīla Prabhupāda’s describing the sacred thread as a “symbolic representation” (emphasis ours):

Perhaps you have seen a sacred thread. . . . That sacred thread is the **sign** that this person has his spiritual master, has a spiritual master. Just like . . . according to Hindu system, they have got some **sign** so that people can understand . . . They put on a red, I mean to say, painting here so that others know that “This girl is married” . . . And a widow’s dress... There are

so many. There are **symptoms**. So similarly, this thread, sacred thread, is a **sign** that this person has accepted somebody as his spiritual master. He has got his... **Just like this red mark symbolizes that “This girl has her husband,” similarly, this sacred thread is the symbol that “This man has got his spiritual master.”**

Lecture on *Bhagavad-gītā* 2.7-11, New York, 2 March 1966

The sacred thread is the **symbol**. It is offered by the *ācārya*. It is the **certificate** that “This boy has been trained up as a *brāhmaṇa*.”

– Lecture on *Bhagavad-gītā* 4.15, Bombay, 4 April 1974

Obviously the training is the real thing; the *certificate* can take different forms; for male *brāhmaṇas* it takes the shape of a few strands of cotton, but the training is available to both genders.

So this sacred thread is the **symbol** that one has accepted a spiritual master and he knows Vedic knowledge. That is the **symbol** of sacred thread.

– Lecture on *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 1.2.27, Vṛndāvana, 7 November 1972

In ISKCON obviously both men and women have access to “Vedic knowledge” and to accepting a spiritual master. The external outfits might vary but the essence remains the same.

The sacred thread is offered to a person who knows Kṛṣṇa. Otherwise it is not awarded. This is a **symbolic representation**. This man has got sacred thread, that means he knows Kṛṣṇa, Brahman, Supreme Brahman.

– Lecture on *Bhagavad-gītā* 2.46-62, Los Angeles, 16 December 1968

Clearly, a woman can also know Kṛṣṇa.

So this sacred thread means **recognition**. . . . Just like one understands a man (is) learned by the degrees M.A., B.A., or Ph.D., similarly, when there is sacred thread, it is understood that he has undergone the purificatory process . . . This is called *upanayana*, *upanayana*, in Sanskrit. *Upanayana*: bringing him more near. The initiation is the beginning of purification, and offering the sacred thread means bringing him more nearer. Therefore the principle is those who are ordinarily initiated, they should not touch the Deity. Only those who are in sacred thread, they should touch.

– Initiation Lecture, Boston, 26 December 1969

“Only those who are in sacred thread” should touch the Deity. Although they didn’t wear a thread, Śrīla Prabhupāda certainly allowed his second initiated women disciples to touch, dress and serve the Deity in every way. Who could conclude that they weren’t counted among “those who are in sacred thread”? The thread is a *symbol*, not the real thing. Extending the analogy Śrīla Prabhupāda gives here: Whoever has a “M.A., B.A., or Ph.D” remains a qualified “M.A., B.A., or Ph.D” even if he doesn’t carry the certificates on himself.

Shouldn’t we start our discussion from the stated desire of the Founder-Ācārya to see his lady followers become *dikṣā-gurus* and then work out the details of the implementation? We certainly don’t accept the idea of putting the sacred thread – the cotton object – on a very high pedestal, venerating it as the indispensable prerequisite for becoming *dikṣā-guru*. “No sacred thread? Sorry; come back next

life with a male body and a sacred thread; then we can talk about you accepting disciples.” Such an attitude misses the real meaning, the quintessence of *dikṣā*. Quoting Śrīla Jīva Gosvāmī, Śrīla Prabhupāda defined *dikṣā* in *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta*:

Śrīla Jīva Gosvāmī explains *dikṣā* in his *Bhakti-sandarbha* (283):

*divyaṁ jñānaṁ yato dadyāt kuryāt pāpasya saṅkṣayam
tasmāt dikṣeti sā proktā deśikais tattva-kovidaiḥ*

“*Dikṣā* is the process by which one can awaken his transcendental knowledge and vanquish all reactions caused by sinful activity. A person expert in the study of the revealed scriptures knows this process as *dikṣā*.”

– *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, Ādi-līlā 15.108, purport

Taking the sacred thread as the deal-maker or deal-breaker misses the point entirely. Such unwarranted stress on the sacred thread hijacks the discussion towards a trivial concern. Should we hold hostage all potential initiations by women because of a few filaments of cotton? We don’t encounter such totemic treatment of the *object* sacred thread anywhere in Śrīla Prabhupāda’s teachings or in the whole Gauḍīya tradition; where does it come from? We are tempted to interpret such extraordinary emphasis on the sacred thread as a depletion of arguments (the sacred thread used as a fig leaf). Such semi-deification of a few strands of cotton borders on fetishism. The thread is sacred when used for sacred *purposes*; how sacred can this thread be if used to hinder the program, the desire

of the Founder-Ācārya to see his Vaiṣṇavī followers become *dikṣā-gurus*? Besides, the textual legacy indicates that women had been wearing the sacred thread in the past; showing that there is nothing intrinsically, constitutionally or eternally incompatible between women and sacred threads. The *Hārīta-smṛti*, considered much older than the current edition of the *Manu-smṛti*, states:

There are two types of ladies – the *brahmavādinī*, who doesn't desire to marry, and the *sadyo-vadhū*, who wishes to marry. For the *brahmavādinī* there is provision for receiving the sacred thread, conducting the fire sacrifice, studying the Vedas, and begging alms at her own home. The *sadyovadhū* at the time of marriage should only be invested with the sacred thread and then married.²⁴

After researching the matter and respectfully hearing from various sources, we are compelled to conclude that it's perfectly valid for a woman *dikṣā-guru* – who is herself initiated with all the Gāyatrīs – to initiate others and dispense a sacred thread to her male disciples, even if she doesn't wear one herself.

The Woman to Whom Śrīla Prabhupāda Told to Perform the Second Initiation Ceremony

The letter Śrīla Prabhupāda wrote to his disciples Vaikuṅṭhanātha and Śārādīyā on 4 April 1971 offers a particularly relevant historical reference. First Śrīla Prabhupāda praises their work in the Caribbean:

I am so glad and proud of you that you two young boy and girl have gone

²⁴ As quoted in the *Viramitrodaya, Samskāra Prakāśa* of Mahāmahopādhyāya Paṇḍita Mitra Miśra, Vidya Vilas Press, Benares, 1919; cited in the paper *Some Evidence Regarding Education and Guruship for Vaishnavis*, by Bhaktarupa Das and Madhavananda Das, January 2013

to Trinidad to preach the mission of Lord Caitanya and you have impressed the public so nicely by your preaching work. May Lord Caitanya bless you and bestow his benediction upon you always.

After more comments and directions related to their missionary activities, Śrīla Prabhupāda addresses the topic of Vaikuṅṭhanātha's second initiation; which Śārādīyā had already received:

Even though you have had no gayatri mantra, still you are more than brahmana. I am enclosing herewith your sacred thread, duly chanted on by me. Gayatri mantra is as follows:

Śrīla Prabhupāda encloses the Sanskrit words and then instructs him:

Ask your wife to chant this mantra and you hear it and if possible hold a fire ceremony as you have seen during your marriage and get this sacred thread on your body. Saradia, or any twice-initiated devotee, may perform the ceremony.

What can we learn from the above? A few points:

1. Women can transmit the Gāyatrī *mantra* at an initiation (“Ask your wife to chant this mantra and you hear it”).
2. It appears that the Founder-Ācārya didn't make a big fuss about the procedure for offering the thread; he just said: “get this sacred thread on your body.”
3. Certainly Śrīla Prabhupāda did not say: “Śārādīyā CANNOT hand you the



sacred thread! Only a second initiated male can.”

4. The fire ceremony was optional (“if possible”).
5. Women can perform the ceremony involving the sacred thread.

Not surprisingly, not everyone takes this historical event as an educational, instructive episode, as an instance of Śrīla Prabhupāda exemplary application of Vaiṣṇava *dharma*. A devotee, for instance, interpreted it as a violation of *śāstric* standards due to atypical and extraordinarily compulsive circumstances:

The case of “Saradiya and Vaikunthanatha” is an exceptional compelling situation where SP had to unwillingly break certain rules of the scriptures.²⁵

The allegation that Śrīla Prabhupāda broke “certain rules of the scriptures” is unproven; the claim appears based not on facts but on what the devotee would have *preferred* to see Śrīla Prabhupāda doing; that is, denying Śārādiyā any connection with the fire sacrifice and the sacred thread, and declaring her, being a woman, unfit and unqualified. Asserting that Śrīla Prabhupāda had been forced by the circumstances (“SP had to unwillingly break certain rules”) appears unjustified; upon a close inspection, nothing in the whole letter indicates any emergency demanding Vaikuṅṭhanātha’s second initiation. In fact just the opposite; in the letter Śrīla Prabhupāda wrote:

Now you have gone to Guyana. Dr. Balwant Singh has written me how well you are being received there also. So take advantage and immediately open a center. . . . So concentrate your efforts in that way and when things are

25 “Further analysis of H.G. Madhavanandadas Adhikari Prabhu’s (GGS) & H.G. Bhaktarupadas Adhikari Prabhu’s (ACBSP) latest feminist paper to ISKCON India Bureau - Part 2”

ready I shall send you Deities.

If there were no Deities; where was the hurry, the urgent need for more second initiated devotees? In addition, Śrīla Prabhupāda indicated that he was contemplating visiting Guyana (“And when the situation is favorable, I shall go there also”); what prevented Śrīla Prabhupāda from performing the ceremony in person during his visit? At the end of the letter Śrīla Prabhupāda added: “P.S. Please hand over the enclosed letter to Dr. Singh.” In that letter Śrīla Prabhupāda wrote:

I thank you very much for inviting me to go there . . . when the temple is established, I shall go there as soon as possible.

If there were no Deities – and therefore no pressing need for *brāhmaṇa*-initiated *pujaris* – and if Śrīla Prabhupāda was planning to visit once the temple was open, where was the rush to immediately initiate Vaikuṅṭhanātha? Where was the uncontrollable, unmanageable pressure forcing Śrīla Prabhupāda to (allegedly) disobey the *śāstra*? Should we conclude that imagining an “exceptional compelling situation” to explain away Śārādīyā’s empowerment was simply another attempt to deny women the role Śrīla Prabhupāda intended for them?

“Śrīla Prabhupāda Never Gave *Sannyāsa* to Women; Therefore They Should Not Become *Dīkṣā-gurus*”

The subject is women *dīkṣā-gurus*, not women *sannyāsīs*; nonetheless, the point has come up again and again, which shows that for someone it’s an issue:

Maharaj, the point we are trying to make is simple enough. Prabhupada never initiated a women into the sannyas ashram.

– Email dated 9 October 2012, PAMHO text 24173812

Prabhupada did not . . . approve of sannyas to/for even a single woman.

– Email dated 30 November 2012, PAMHO text 24424611

Mataji, in your continued questioning you have not answered why women are NOT given sannyas

– Email dated 23 October 2012, PAMHO text 24242433

We fail to see the relevance of these observations; therefore we suggest they simply represent examples of the logical fallacy known as “guilty by association.” An association fallacy asserts that qualities of one thing are inherently qualities of another, merely by an irrelevant association. In this case, the fallacy takes two forms:

- a. “*Sannyāsa* for women is bogus; being *dīkṣā-guru* must also be bogus.”
- b. “Śrīla Prabhupāda was against women taking *sannyāsa*; he must have been also against women becoming *dīkṣā-guru*.”

The above arguments, of course, lack any rationality; nonetheless we have witnessed a determination to push them forward in a variety of ways, for instance:

Prabhupada very well could have made women sannyasis, and thus they would have automatically become diksha gurus, just like the men.

– Email dated 10 October 2012, PAMHO text 24180300

Neither men nor women need to take *sannyāsa* to become *dikṣā-guru*. We should also note that in ISKCON *sannyāsīs* don't "automatically become dikṣa-gurus." We fully agree that only men can take *sannyāsa*:

Devotee (7): Oh, it's not possible for a woman to become a *sannyāsī*.

Prabhupāda: No.

– Morning Walk, Nairobi, 2 November 1975

But becoming a *dikṣā-guru* is open to both men and women:

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

Prabhupāda: Yes. . . . The qualification of guru is that he must be fully cognizant of the science of Kṛṣṇa. Then he or she can become guru.

– Interview with Professors O'Connell, Motilal and Shivaram, Toronto, 18 June 1976

So, yes, Śrīla Prabhupāda did not approve of *sannyāsa* for women; at the same time he did say that his dedicated disciples, men and women, were factually "all *sannyāsīs*":

Vaiṣṇava *sannyāsī* means anyone who gives up everything and devotes simply his time for pushing on Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement . . . So this *sannyāsī* can be accepted even in *grhastha* life, even in householder life. Because in one sense, all these boys and girls who are working for Kṛṣṇa, they have no other desire. They are all *sannyāsīs* because they have

no desire to achieve any result out of their work. . . . They are engaged in preaching work because they want to satisfy Kṛṣṇa . . . Therefore *anāśritaḥ karma-phalam kāryam karoti*. They are all *sannyāsīs*.

– Lecture on *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 1.8.18-19, Bombay, 9 April 1971

"A Woman *Dikṣā-guru* cannot Give *Sannyāsa* to Her Disciples; Therefore Women Should Not Become *Dikṣā-gurus*"

If a woman *dikṣā-guru* wishes to encourage a disciple to enter the *sannyāsa-āśrama*, she can simply direct him to approach a *sannyāsa-guru*. That's all. Where is the problem? The argument ignores the fact that also male *dikṣā-gurus* cannot give *sannyāsa* to their disciples unless they themselves are *sannyāsīs*. If we were to accept this argument, only *sannyāsīs* could become *dikṣā-gurus*.

"Women *Dikṣā-gurus* Would Be Bad Examples for Other Women"

Why bad examples? They would actually offer glorious examples of disciples fulfilling Śrīla Prabhupāda's desire:

Anyone following the order of Lord Caitanya under the guidance of His bona fide representative, can become a spiritual master and I wish that in my absence all my disciples become the bona fide spiritual master to spread Krishna Consciousness throughout the whole world.

– Letter to Madhusudana, 2 Nov 1967

The idea of this argument is that young women in the *grhastha-āśrama* may feel inspired to imitate the women *dikṣā-guru*, thus neglecting their duties as wives and

mothers. Obviously this would be similar to saying that men who take *sannyāsa* are giving a bad example to young, married men who might feel inspired to neglect their duties as husbands and fathers. Nobody should artificially imitate devotees in different stages of life; and nobody should accuse senior preachers of being bad examples because of initiating souls into Vaiṣṇavism.

“What if a Woman *Dīkṣā-guru* Ends Up with a Widowed Son and a Crippled Grandchild? Therefore Women Should Not Become *Dīkṣā-guru*”

This objection has really been expressed:

For example, there is a lady that . . . has a grown up son . . . let us say , that five years down the line , he has a child with a wife and the wife dies in childbirth. Not only does the wife die in childbirth , but the baby born of that union is a crippled child confined to a wheel chair for life. Is our Diksha grandmotherly Guru going to proceed on with her ISKCON duties or is she going to bow out to help her son who is now in desperate need of her help??? And let us say , she proceeds on with her ISKCON duties , and ignores her grown up son with the crippled child , what kind of example is that???? Or worse still , she uses her ISKCON position , and the money and power it accrues to her , to help her son. Maybe she asks a couple of disciples to see to her crippled grandchild needs. My question is , what kind of devotional service would that be???

– Email dated 4 December 2012, PAMHO text 24444836

We are unsure if to admire the powers of visualization of this devotee or if to deplore his pessimism. The chain of calamities he envisions is almost breathtaking:

The daughter-in-law of the lady *dīkṣā-guru* dies in childbirth; the child survives but is crippled for life; the lady’s son “is now in desperate need of her help” (we are not exactly sure why he can’t make his own arrangements, such as remarrying; perhaps he has become dysfunctional due to the double shock of losing his wife and discovering the handicap of his child? But let’s not dwell on these details). Besides the slim chances of such concatenation of misfortunes actually happening, the argument is an example of the fallacy known as “false dilemma” – in this case a *very colorful* but still *false* dilemma. The artificial proposition suggests that the lady *either* “ignores her grown up son” *or* “bow out” of her guru’s duty. But why can’t this lady fulfill both her duties as a mother and as a guru? What prevents her from finding a balanced solution and honor both her obligations? And what’s wrong with offering some financial help in a family emergency? In addition, can’t a male guru encounter family-related adversities? What if it was a male guru to face a similar crisis? Wouldn’t he have to solve the same practical and ethical issues? Why single out women – again and again – with situations that could happen to anyone? This has been one of the most puzzling arguments so far; but at least it has shown the extent to which the opponents of women *dīkṣā-guru* are willing to go to find justifications to block ladies from initiating.

“Something Could Go Wrong; Therefore Women Should Not Become *Dīkṣā-gurus*”

Granted, so far nobody has presented this argument in *exactly* this form, but the essence and spirit accurately reflects a constellation of forebodings that boil down to this: “Something, somewhere – in some form or another – could go wrong. We should prevent such trouble by banning women from initiating.” Ominous

scenarios are liberally and deliberately broadcasted, generating nervousness and aversion to the idea that women could initiate. Let's take, for instance, the following passage:

Nowadays . . . as we walk the streets of Vr̥ndavana, we see huge, loud, garish posters plastered on the sides of buildings advertising loose-haired, imposing, scary-looking female so-called gurus. . . . Now I'm not implying that there are any matajis in our ISKCON who, if appointed as diksha gurus, would succumb to the temptation to wear their hair loose while sporting long, flowing orange robes and posing for photo ops. Allowing their faces to be blown up into larger-than-life-size to be forced upon every passer-by in the Holy Dhama is surely not likely to be tolerated by any proposed female diksha guru . . . They would surely present themselves more tastefully if chosen for the job.

– Article “The Real Female Guru,” dated 4 December 2012

So, what is the problem? The author dislikes such billboards but recognizes that ISKCON ladies “would surely present themselves more tastefully”; then why mention the billboards at all? But it's too late, the damage is done; by presenting both images side-by-side the impression of “scary-looking” self-promoters is, by association, imposed on every woman *dikṣā-guru*. This creates discomfort and suspicion in people's minds; “Hmm... Will our ISKCON lady *dikṣā-gurus* start wearing flashy robes and let their hair loose? Will they plaster their own blown-up portraits all over Vr̥ndavana, Māyāpur and Purī? We should stop them!” These imaginary apprehensions paint a humiliating picture of our senior, most advanced ladies. But the article continues:

I recoil in apprehension at the thought of the can of worms that a generation of ISKCON gurudevīs could open up . . . What if in some future decade, some attractive young woman decides . . . [to] take on the service of diksha guru? One can just imagine what might happen if such a young gurudevi finds herself approached by a male disciple who is desperately trying to remain celibate but is having emotional difficulties due to overpowering sex drive.

The wise men in our Movement who are practicing celibacy know what would happen.

In all probability, the article seems to indicate, they would end up in bed. Anyone above twelve can easily imagine the outcome; no need to check with “The wise men in our Movement who are practicing celibacy.” The closeness among genders portrayed above is inappropriate, but let's analyze the whole fictional setting more closely: Why should the “gurudevi” be an “attractive young woman”? Isn't the service of initiating disciples more suitable for senior devotees, who have gained wisdom and experience through many years of service? Why did she end up being alone with a male disciple? How can this young woman just decide to “take on the service of diksha guru”? Did anyone check her qualifications? Did anyone approve her? How does it work; one fine day she just starts handing *japa* beads and giving names to people? What kind of aspiring disciples would choose this young woman as their *dikṣā-guru*? How young is this young woman? Thirty-six? Twenty-nine? Sixteen? Under scrutiny the whole situation is implausible; but despite being far-fetched, the description is effective in creating concern, in inspiring alarm about women initiating. In these fantasy depictions women *dikṣā-gurus* end up looking a

lot like prostitutes. Let's also consider that we can easily change the genders of the protagonists:

I recoil in apprehension at the thought of the can of worms that a generation of ISKCON gurudevas could open up . . . What if in some future decade, some attractive young man decides . . . [to] take on the service of diksha guru? One can just imagine what might happen if such a young gurudeva finds himself approached by a female disciple who is desperately trying to remain celibate but is having emotional difficulties due to overpowering sex drive.

The wise men in our Movement who are practicing celibacy know what would happen.

They could still end up in bed.

If a butter pot and fire are kept together, the butter within the pot will certainly melt. Woman is compared to fire, and man is compared to a butter pot.

– Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 7.12.9, purport

Irresponsible intermingling of the genders should be prevented. This is a universal law of spiritual life. Why single out the “gurudevis,” especially in view of ISKCON’s rich history of male fall-downs? The author says, “I recoil in apprehension at the thought of the can of worms that a generation of ISKCON gurudevis could open up.” We hope to relieve her apprehension by assuring her that opening cans of worms is not the exclusive prerogative of “gurudevis.” Many

“gurudevas” have shown great skills in the art of opening cans of worms. In fact, we are aware of what *could happen* to women *dikṣā-gurus* because we have seen what *did happen* with men *dikṣā-gurus*. Danger is a common denominator for transcendentalists; Śrīla Prabhupāda said, “Devotional service is more or less a declaration of war against the illusory energy.” (*Bhagavad-gītā* 9.30, purport) and there could be casualties, among both genders. If we stop women from initiating because there *could be* trouble, we should stop men also.

Absorbing ourselves only in how things could go wrong is depressing, paralyzing and disempowering. A person in goodness is aware of the dangers and treads cautiously, but is able to see also the bright side, to grasp and cherish the marvelous possibilities that could manifest if we allow the Founder-Ācārya’s vision to unfold:

I want that all of my spiritual sons and daughters will inherit this title of Bhaktivedanta . . . 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 January 1969

Will there be glitches, hiccups, setbacks? It’s possible. But, should we let fear paralyze and prevent us from realizing what Śrīla Prabhupāda called “his program”?

The author of the article, a woman, continues by delineating what she considers proper occupations for ladies:

I am further convinced that our Srila Prabhupada wanted us western women to learn how to behave like those “chaste, high class women in brahmana and devotee families” . . . Women used to be satisfied remaining out of the spotlight . . . They were content to remain hidden . . . Engagements that are compatible with the psycho-physical nature of women are many. Some of the services ladies can render are: teaching girls how to cook, sew, spin, weave, clean, decorate, care for babies and small children, perform deity seva, sing, dance and play musical instruments and serve a husband.

There does seem to be an inherent contradiction here. Do “Engagements that are compatible with the psycho-physical nature of women” include posting internet articles openly challenging the Governing Body Commission and publicly criticizing their resolutions? The author recommends that women “remain hidden,” “out of the spotlight,” but through the internet she tells the entire world what to do and what to think.

We can meditate on the principle of following our *dharma* according to our nature; as Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna in the *Bhagavad-gītā* (3.33): “Even a man of knowledge acts according to his own nature.” If a woman’s nature is compatible with offering personal and philosophical guidance; with teaching Vaiṣṇava theology and clearing the doubts of her students; with performing devotional service in an exemplary way and with instructing others on how to advance, why prevent her from being a spiritual master? Who gains from that?

“A Woman Willing to Become *Dīkṣā-guru* Must Have Bad Motivations; Therefore Women Should Not Become *Dīkṣā-gurus*”

This objection – distilled from a cluster of similar statements – attempts to provide the all-encompassing *Catch 22* that disqualifies all women and prevents all dialogue: “Women *could*, in theory, become *dīkṣā-gurus*; but if they try they *must* be ill-motivated; they *must* be nurturing impure ambitions.” It’s not an argument; it’s an axiom leading to nothing more than unclear thinking. One devotee expressed this “principle” as follows:

We would very much appreciate Jahnava and Gangamata Goswaminis as our preceptors. But who is so completely surrendered?

Right now, certain devotees want the prestige of being another Gangamata but do not want to follow her example in austerity. They are inappropriately independent, which is to say that they follow what Srila Prabhupada calls in his Gita commentary “the puffed up concept of womanly life”.

– Email dated 10 October 2012, PAMHO text 24179321

Men, of course, don’t need to be Rūpa and Raghunātha Gosvāmīs to become *dīkṣā-gurus*; but women *must* be “Jahnava and Gangamata Goswaminis.” If they happen to be less advanced:

1. They “want the prestige of being another Gangamata”
2. They are “inappropriately independent.” (Exactly from whom it’s not clear.)

3. They are “puffed up.”

Not surprisingly, their chastity comes also under scrutiny; someone else wrote:

My comment is about privacy, or more to the point, the lack of privacy, that is visited upon you when you become a completely totally absolutely servile public figure like a Guru. You might as well stand naked on a stage, because that would afford you more privacy than being a guru in ISKCON . . . When your name is put forward in the public forum to become a Guru with in our ISKCON institution, then you (by fiat) open yourself up to the whole wide world for inspection, consideration, and evaluation . . . My question is one of chastity. Why would any advance chaste lady want to put herself through the microscopic (sensuous) gaze of the public that follows you when you become an initiating Guru in ISKCON?

– Email dated 4 December 2012, PAMHO text 24444836

Apparently, according to this devotee, these women should be considered unchaste; otherwise they wouldn't accept undergoing an evaluation. It sounds as if this devotee imagines a process of assessment involving humiliating physical examinations. Actually the procedure described in ISKCON Law for evaluating a prospective guru – either man or woman – doesn't involve any infringement of privacy, but simply the analysis – by senior devotees – of the devotional history and characteristics of the candidate. Nobody, literally or figuratively, is asked to “stand naked on a stage.” Of course, if there is doubt about some past episode, it will be discussed, but isn't this a standard procedure for taking *any* responsibility in ISKCON? Isn't it normal, in every organization, to take a look at

the *curriculum vitae* of candidates for responsible roles? The background of GBC candidates or prospective *sannyāsīs* is also routinely discussed; what's so unusual or inappropriate about a woman going through a similar process? This devotee suspiciously questions why would a “chaste lady want to put herself through the microscopic (sensuous) gaze of the public”? He concludes that it's because of a lack of chastity; but could it be that's she is not afraid of the “gaze of the public” because she has nothing to hide?

Another devotee described the women willing to serve as *dikṣā-gurus* as follows:

These women in the Marxist Kitty Party . . . spit on stri-dharma and family life . . . these “Marxist Kitties” create enmity between men and women . . . these women think of themselves on the level of the dvija-patnis who wanted to give Kṛṣṇa food. But how many of them can even cook something to offer to Kṛṣṇa? . . . they are NOT Kṛṣṇa conscious . . . they have failed as women . . . they . . . rebel against Kṛṣṇa . . . they are actually not fit to preach what to speak of be a guru . . . they want to be loved, cherished and worshiped . . . They have no bliss in their hearts only bitterness and frustration . . . They will not fit into Lord Kṛṣṇa's world.

– Email dated 17 November 2012, PAMHO text 24361844

We hesitated to publish such comments, which appear particularly toxic, but chose to reproduce them because they provide an accurate snapshot of the type of ostracism and character assassination faced by prospective women *dikṣā-gurus*. In this case the allegations include:

1. These women are Marxists (apparently they promote a communist agenda)

2. They “spit on stri-dharma and family life” (we have no evidence of this; they must be doing it very surreptitiously)
3. They “are actually not fit to preach” (should we conclude that the devotees who feel inspired by their preaching are just deluded?)
4. They think themselves on the level of the *dvija-patnīs* (at least they don’t think themselves on the level of the *gopīs*, which probably would be considered worse)
5. Not only are they “NOT Kṛṣṇa conscious,” they also “rebel against Kṛṣṇa” (what to speak of being qualified as *dīkṣā-gurus*, these women are basically non-devotees)
6. These women “will not fit into Lord Kṛṣṇa’s world” (which sounds like a curse)
7. In their hearts there is “only bitterness and frustration” (absolutely nothing else?)
8. They want to be “worshiped” (offering *guru-pūjā* is one of the duties of the disciple; but, for the guru, it’s often one of the least attractive aspects of the service)
9. To top it all, “how many of them can even cook something to offer to Kṛṣṇa?” (Besides everything else, they are also bad cooks)

One wonders how these potential women *dīkṣā-gurus* managed to remain in ISKCON for so long – even giving the impression of being dedicated devotees.

One also wonders how they could attract a loyal following of *śikṣā*-disciples. We employed a touch of irony to defuse the vibes of these accusations, but two senior *sannyāsīs* (themselves *dīkṣā-gurus*) reacted to one of the texts quoted above as follows:

- (1) Do you know these women you refer too? These are very strong insults.
- (2) [Name withheld] is getting quite offensive. It will destroy his spiritual life.

– Emails dated 2 and 3 November 2012, PAMHO text 24292830 and 24295845

We wish that all controversies and tensions be solved by a detached, rigorous analysis of Śrīla Prabhupāda’s teachings on the subject. We choose to refrain from judging the motivations of prospective *dīkṣā-gurus* (male or female) and the motivations of those attacking their motivations. If there are impurities in anyone’s heart, let them be purified. We wish to remind everyone, of any “camp” or persuasion, of the prayer and blessings offered by Prahlāda Mahārāja in *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 5.18.9:

May there be good fortune throughout the universe, and may all envious persons be pacified. May all living entities become calm by practicing *bhakti-yoga*, for by accepting devotional service they will think of each other’s welfare. Therefore let us all engage in the service of the supreme transcendence, Lord Śrī Kṛṣṇa, and always remain absorbed in thought of Him.

An Attempt to Overturn the ISKCON Law Authorizing Women *Dīkṣā-gurus*; a Formal GBC Proposal is Submitted

As the arguments presented so far show, certain devotees have an intense desire to prevent women from becoming *dīkṣā-gurus*. Today, however, the GBC resolutions still stand, confirming that “a mature, qualified, female devotee may accept the role of an initiating spiritual master.” (Resolution 425, 2005 and resolution 305, 2009) We weren’t too surprised to discover that, on 19 November 2012, a proposal to erase those resolutions was formally submitted to the GBC:

PROPOSAL NAME: Rescinding GBC resolutions 425 of 2005 and resolution 305 of 2009.

In short, the proposal aims at nullifying those resolutions. The submitters request the GBC to retract them by adopting the following statement:

PRESENTATION OF RESOLUTION:

Resolved, that the GBC body hereby rescinds GBC resolutions 425 of 2005 and resolution 305 of 2009.

Let’s take a look at some of the reasoning put forward in the proposal. Most arguments have already been addressed in this writing; therefore we will mostly focus on novel aspects. The submitters wrote:

Whereas, one need not have a formal position of either shiksha or diksha guru to preach Krishna Consciousness or to do enthusiastic service, nor does the principle of offering respect and protection to women imply that

they be offered such formal positions of spiritual authority

Two points on the above: First, yes, in general we can agree that one can “do enthusiastic service” without any “formal positions”; however certain services – like running a temple or initiating disciples – require assuming “formal positions” as Temple President or *dīkṣā-guru*. These services are certainly needed within the International Society for Krishna Consciousness and there is no indication that Śrīla Prabhupāda wished to restrict women from any of them. In fact just the opposite; the Founder-*Ācārya* clearly indicated that such services are open to both genders. Specifically in regard to initiating disciples, Śrīla Prabhupāda wrote:

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 January 1969

Three weeks later Śrīla Prabhupāda wrote to Hamsaduta’s wife, Himavati, who apparently wished to confirm the import of the above letter. Did Śrīla Prabhupāda *really* speak about both men and women?

Regarding your questions about the examinations to be given, the girls will also be able to take these. In Krishna Consciousness there is no distinction between girls and boys. The girls also may become preachers if they are able.

– Letter to Himavati, 24 January 1969



One can certainly preach without “formal positions,” but when that preaching fructifies into a formal guru-disciple relation and into initiation, it’s natural – and it’s needed – to formalize the role of the preacher. Second, the submitters of the proposal state that:

[N]or does the principle of offering respect and protection to women imply that they be offered such formal positions of spiritual authority

Once we assimilate the principle that a woman can also preach, we understand that the subsequent steps unfold as a natural sequence: Some people are inspired by her preaching, some start seeing her as *śikṣā-guru*, some wish to take initiation from her. Those so-called “formal positions of spiritual authority” manifest from the potency of the individual preacher, man or woman; such positions are not bureaucratically “offered.” Certainly the GBC did not set up “quotas” of initiations that must be obligatorily performed by ladies. The power to attract the mind and heart of the candidates can’t be granted by institutional decree, as the submitters seem to imply. Why create artificial impediments – based on gender – to guru-disciple relationships in ISKCON? Śrīla Prabhupāda wrote in *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* (7.5.12, purport):

Everyone should be allowed to render service to the Lord to the best of his ability, and everyone should appreciate the service of others. Such are the activities of Vaiṣṇava.

If the Lord chooses to empower a Vaiṣṇavī, why should we try to obstruct that stream of spiritual energy? What the proposal describes as “formal positions of spiritual authority” are actually personal, private connections between individuals,

developed between someone who freely chooses a spiritual master and the senior devotee who freely chooses to accept that disciple. Let's also remember that such relationships don't impart to the *dikṣā-guru* any administrative jurisdiction or managerial control. And if in the process the *dikṣā-guru* – male or female – gains some appreciation or popularity, what's wrong with it? Shouldn't our more successful preachers be recognized for their service?

The Mysterious, All-encompassing (but Imaginary) “Rule”

The submitters go on:

Whereas, in the Gaudiya Vaishnava line, there are a few “rare” exceptional examples of female diksha gurus, (all of whom were “liberated souls”) and that by institutionalizing the appointment of female diksha gurus, it thus becomes a rule, and not an “exception” to the rule

First, the argument is an example of the logical fallacy known as “begging the question,” in which one tries to demonstrate a conclusion (women *dikṣā-guru* were exceptions to the rule) by a premise that assumes that conclusion (that there was ever a “rule” against women *dikṣā-gurus*).

Second, let's share a few words on the (unproven) assertion that all the women *dikṣā-gurus* of the past were “liberated souls.” Since the spiritual status of the *dikṣā-guru* is central to *guru-tattva* in general and to women *dikṣā-guru* in particular, let's take a look at what Śrīla Prabhupāda wrote on the subject:

This Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement directly receives instructions from the Supreme Personality of Godhead via persons who are strictly following

His instructions. Although a follower may not be a liberated person, if he follows the supreme, liberated Personality of Godhead, his actions are naturally liberated from the contamination of the material nature. Lord Caitanya therefore says: “By My order you may become a spiritual master.” One can immediately become a spiritual master by having full faith in the transcendental words of the Supreme Personality of Godhead and by following His instructions.

– *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 4.18.5, purport

Noticeably, the above specifically applies to ISKCON. Śrīla Prabhupāda also wrote, even more succinctly:

The conditioned soul becomes liberated simply by following the instructions of the bona fide spiritual master.

– *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 4.28.65, purport

This is very relevant to the practical application of *guru-tattva*. Being a guru depends on “strictly following the disciplic succession” – a path obviously open to women:

The statements of Thakura Bhaktivinoda are as good as scriptures because he is liberated person. Generally the spiritual master comes from the group of such eternal associates of the Lord; but anyone who follows the principles of such ever liberated persons is as good as one in the above mentioned group. . . . A person who is liberated acharya and guru cannot commit any mistake, but there are persons who are less qualified or not

liberated, but still can act as guru and acharya by strictly following the disciplic succession.

– Letter to Janardana, 26 April 1968

The submitters go on:

Whereas, instituting fundamental and monumental changes in well established Vaishnava tradition and adjusting the rules of dharma shastra, are the prerogatives of empowered acharyas;

First of all, the “well established Vaishnava tradition” in the Gauḍīya-Vaiṣṇava-sampradāya is that women *can* become *dīkṣā-gurus* (not that they *cannot*).

Second, the submitters mention some unspecified “rules of dharma shastra” without saying what those rules are supposed to be or to which text they belong (what kind of evidence is that?).

Third, even accepting – purely for argument’s sake – that tradition and *śāstra* were against women *dīkṣā-gurus*, the submitters admit that “empowered acharyas” can make changes; whether by changing or by not changing anything, Śrīla Prabhupāda did establish the principle that women in ISKCON could initiate disciples.

Fourth, although portrayed as “instituting fundamental and monumental changes,” the existing GBC resolutions simply acknowledge that, “a mature, qualified, female devotee may accept the role of an initiating spiritual master.” No “changes” are being instituted, neither minuscule nor “monumental.”

More reasoning from the submitters:

Whereas empowered acharyas such as Srila Prabhupada and Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati Thakur did make path breaking adjustments to tradition, but they did not, in practice or in their teachings, provide for female diksha gurus;

Śrīla Prabhupāda’s teachings (which are most relevant for ISKCON) *certainly* repeatedly “provide for female diksha gurus.” As already quoted:

I want that all of my spiritual sons and daughters will inherit this title of Bhaktivedanta . . . Those possessing the title of Bhaktivedanta will be allowed to initiate disciples. Maybe by 1975, all of my disciples will be allowed to initiate.

– Letter Hamsaduta, 3 January 1969

It is not that woman cannot be *ācārya*.

– Room Conversation, San Diego, 29 June 1972

The idea that Śrīla Prabhupāda did not “provide for female diksha gurus” is historically inaccurate. Now, moving through the proposal, we come to the last part. The standard format of proposals to the GBC includes an appendix, known as “Explanation,” having three questions:

(1) What prompts you to submit this proposal?

(2) Why this proposal is important for the success of ISKCON?

(3) What would be the implications of implementing this proposal?

Let's see what the submitters answered:

(1) What prompts you to submit this proposal?

A majority of the ISKCON India leadership -- including myself -- feel that instituting female diksha gurus within ISKCON would be in contravention of Prabhupada's clear instruction in this regard in his SB Purport in 4.12.32.

First, the reference to "A majority of the ISKCON India leadership" is inflated and possibly misleading: The only formal expression of support for this proposal came from a *minority* of leaders. There has been no systematic surveying on the topic among the leadership of ISKCON India and therefore we see no factual basis for the claim of the submitters. Besides, with proper tutoring the "majority of the ISKCON India leadership" can come to acknowledge the validity of the present ISKCON legislation. It's just a matter of education; of dispelling the various misconceptions and misinformation clouding the issue. In addition, right now, a few days before this writing goes for printing, we are witnessing an exchange of papers on this subject – papers with different conclusions – among Indian leaders.

Second, when we look to the purport to *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 4.12.32, we don't find any instruction by Śrīla Prabhupāda forbidding women from initiating disciples. We only find that Sunīti did not initiate his son, Dhruva Mahārāja. We have already addressed this topic; to briefly reiterate:

- a. The editing produced a different emphasis than the original words of Srila Prabhupada.

- b. The initiation mentioned in the passage above belongs to a different method, one in which women could not even *take* initiation – what to speak of *giving* it: "Sūdras and women are not admitted to a vaidika initiation." (*Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Madhya-līlā* 24.331, purport) The situation of Sunīti in regard to with initiating or not initiating is therefore largely irrelevant to ISKCON, which implements a different system of initiation, the *pāñcarātri*ka (a system that doesn't bar women).
- c. Śrīla Prabhupāda *never* presented – neither in that purport nor anywhere else - the particular situation of Sunīti as a universal principle applicable to all women of all ages.
- d. Presenting the Sunīti and Dhruva anecdote as a "clear instruction" for ISKCON is a serious misrepresentation of Śrīla Prabhupāda's teachings and a serious breach of the basic norms of textual exegesis. Using Sunīti to ban women *dikṣā-gurus* in ISKCON is a grave distortion of the facts, a misreading imposing a meaning that is just not there. Śrīla Prabhupāda wrote (*italics in the original*):

Personal realization does not mean that one should, out of vanity, attempt to show one's own learning by trying to surpass the previous *ācārya*. He must have full confidence in the previous *ācārya*, and at the same time he must realize the subject matter so nicely that he can present the matter for the particular circumstances in a suitable manner. *The original purpose of the text must be maintained*. No obscure meaning should be screwed out of it.

– *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 1.4.1, purport

The submitters continue:

Prabhupada did write that there were “rare exceptional” [sic] female gurus in the remote past in our sampradaya. Confering [sic] formal status on “rare expectations” [sic] will change the status of “rare” to “ordinary”.

We could not find any reference in the Bhaktivedanta Vedabase (Folio) of Śrīla Prabhupāda ever using the expressions “rare exceptional” or “rare exceptions,” neither in connection with women *dikṣā-gurus* nor with any other topic. Writing these words between quotation marks may give the impression that the submitters are actually citing some true evidence, but such evidence simply doesn’t exist. As we have already shown (and as we’ll show again below), Śrīla Prabhupāda did mention that there were women *dikṣā-gurus* in the past, “But, not so many.” Such observation simply recognizes a principle: There have been women *dikṣā-gurus* and therefore there can be more in the future (a few or many; we don’t know yet). The subject is philosophy, not mathematics. The submitters go on:

Exceptions to rule must be truly exceptional if not then they do extreme injustice to the rule.

Since shastras have not clearly provided for female diksha gurus, its best to err on the side of caution and not try to create something that didn’t really exist in the past in any vedic or vaishnava sampradaya, the formal recognition of female diksha gurus.

Again this mysterious “rule” resurfaces. This is a typical example of the logical fallacy known as “flag waving”: “We should follow the rule!” But we are not told anything about this enigmatic “rule.” What “rule” are they talking about? What

does this “rule” supposedly say? To whom does this “rule” supposedly apply? Does this “rule” even exist? And, if it exists, who established it and where is it recorded? The whole thesis for blocking women from initiating is based on an imaginary “rule.” Additionally, the submitters had previously acknowledged instances of bona fide women *dikṣā-gurus*; but now they say that it’s “something that didn’t really exist in the past.” This is indeed puzzling.

As far as *śāstric* evidence, let’s hear directly from Śrīla Prabhupāda – the Founder-*Ācārya*, a genuine teacher of the scriptures and an authentic representative of the *sampradāya* – on the principle of women *dikṣā-gurus*. Śrīla Prabhupāda never presented the instances of the past as exceptions to a “rule”:

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

Prabhupāda: Yes. Jāhnavā devī was – Nityānanda’s wife. She became. If she is able to go to the highest perfection of life, why it is not possible to become guru? But, not so many. Actually one who has attained the perfection, she can become guru. But man or woman, unless one has attained the perfection.... *Yei kṛṣṇa-tattva-vettā sei guru haya*. [*Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Madhya-līlā* 8.128] The qualification of guru is that he must be fully cognizant of the science of Kṛṣṇa. Then he or she can become guru. *Yei kṛṣṇa-tattva-vettā, sei guru haya*. [break] In our material world, is it any prohibition that woman cannot become professor? If she is qualified, she can become professor. What is the wrong there? She must be qualified. That is the position. So similarly, if the woman understands Kṛṣṇa consciousness perfectly, she can become guru.

– Interview with Professors O’Connell, Motilal and Shivaram, Toronto, 18 June 1976

As *sāstric* evidence Śrīla Prabhupāda presents the words of Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu in *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Madhya-līlā* 8.128: “Whether one is a *brāhmaṇa*, a *sannyāsī* or a *śūdra*—regardless of what he is—he can become a spiritual master if he knows the science of Kṛṣṇa.” If that’s enough for Śrīla Prabhupāda, it should be enough for his followers.

The Ride of the Sahajiyā Valkyries

Second question in the explanation of the proposal:

(2) Why this proposal is important for the success of ISKCON?

So that ISKCON may not degrade itself into a *sahajiyā* sect by opening the floodgates for large numbers of female diksha gurus, who would neither reflect that in Gaudiya Vaishnava history FDG is “very rare”, nor “not many”, as the SAC paper itself observed.

It’s not clear why having “large numbers of female diksha gurus” would degrade ISKCON “into a *sahajiyā* sect.” The submitters warn us that it would be so, but offer no explanation of why it should happen. But let’s analyze – in the light of the words of the Founder-Ācārya – the meaning of “*sahajiyā*”:

Sahajiyā means persons who take things very easily, according to his sense perception, manufactured. They are called *sahajiyās*. But these Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava, the devotees following the footprints of Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu, they are not *sahajiyās*; they are devotee of the Adhokṣaja. Beyond the sense perception, still, they are devotee. This is the secret of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava.

– Lecture on *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 1.15.33, Los Angeles, 11 December 1973

It’s not clear why women *dikṣā-gurus* “following the footprints of Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu” would turn ISKCON into a deviant sect. The connection, if any, remains obscure. Let’s therefore look at another definition of *sahajiyā* (this one perhaps will shed some light on the perils envisioned by the submitters?):

The *sahajiyā* means the blissful dealings, transcendental, spiritual dealings of *gopīs* and Kṛṣṇa, they take it as material. Therefore they are condemned.

– Lecture on *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 7.9.1, Māyāpur, 10 February 1977

Do the submitters predict that women *dikṣā-gurus* would take the pastimes of Kṛṣṇa and the *gopīs* as material and broadcast such views far and wide, contaminating the whole of ISKCON? Is there any indication of this tendency among our senior ISKCON ladies? Without any evidence that ISKCON Vaiṣṇavīs tend to consider Kṛṣṇa’s *līlās* as mundane, the fear appears unjustified. Maybe the following quote will clarify what the submitters have in mind?

Prākṛta-sahajiyā means taking things very easily. They thought that Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa is just like a boy and girl’s lusty affairs. And in this way they took it that sex life as religion.

– Lecture on Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura’s Appearance Day, Los Angeles, 7 February 1969

Are the submitters suggesting that ISKCON women *dikṣā-gurus* shall take “sex life as religion”? Or perhaps the submitters’ predictions involve yet another detail of *sahajiyā* depravation?

[F]or the common man the rectum and the genital are taken very seriously as the centers of all activity. Even in such a sacred place as Vṛndāvana, India, unintelligent men pass off this rectal and genital business as spiritual activity. Such people are called *sahajiyā*.

– *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 4.29.14, purport

Do the submitters anticipate that ISKCON women *dikṣā-gurus* will publicize “rectal and genital business as spiritual activity”? Do they really foresee that our senior Vaiṣṇavīs will trigger such widespread moral and theological downfall? Do they really believe that women *dikṣā-gurus* will bring such darkness to Śrīla Prabhupāda’s Society? Frankly, it’s hard to lend any credence to the prophecy that having women *dikṣā-guru* would degrade ISKCON “into a sahajiya sect.” Such allegation is actually quite serious and such words have possibly already crossed into the realm of *vaiṣṇava-aparādha*, offenses to devotees.

Furthermore the dreaded “opening the floodgates for large numbers of female diksha gurus” has, technically, already taken place in 2005, with the resolution affirming the principle. Till today – almost eight years later – not a single woman has become a *dikṣā-guru*. That’s not even a trickle; what to speak of a flood. In addition, who says that having many women *dikṣā-guru* would be a bad thing? Śrīla Prabhupāda repeatedly expressed that he wanted *all* his disciples to become spiritual masters:

My dear sons and daughters . . . You’ll have to become spiritual master.
You, all my disciples, everyone should become spiritual master.

– Śrī Vyāsa-pūjā Lecture, London, 22 August 1973



I wish that in my absence all my disciples become the bona fide spiritual master to spread Krishna Consciousness throughout the whole world.

– Letter to Madhusudana, 2 November 1967

We would rather worry about not having *enough* spiritual masters. Certainly the world can use many, many more spiritual masters, men and women, spreading spiritual knowledge and formally connecting sincere candidates to the *sampradāya* through initiation. In any case, the submitters continue explaining why their proposal “is important for the success of ISKCON”:

Also we know from history that the caste goswamis elevated their female members to guru to perpetuate their family’s caste goswami status and protect their wealth, properties and social status.

What has this to do with ISKCON? Is anyone attempting to introduce the hereditary system in which children of *dikṣā-gurus* automatically become *dikṣā-gurus*? Is anyone in ISKCON promoting this model, or is it just another hurriedly constructed objection to generate panic and discomfort about the idea of women *dikṣā-gurus*? Is this one more attempt to lump our ISKCON ladies together with all sorts of deviant sects? How can a reasonable person not protest such a tactic? The Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava *ācāryas* already settled the question of women *dikṣā-guru* in the sixteenth century: They have accepted that qualified women can initiate disciples. We are not aware of any *ācārya* arguing against the principle. The submitters may be very good devotees, but on this topic they are *at least* 500 years behind.

Seeing Mirages in the Desert; Imagining Instructions in the Sunīti and Dhruva Story

Third and last standard question of formal GBC proposals and the submitters’ answer:

(3) What would be the implications of implementing this proposal?

To protect the traditions of our sampradaya, the ideology of daivi varnashram, and for the sake of strict adherence to the direct instructions of Srila Prabhupada in SB 4.12.32.

We have already shown that there are no “direct instructions” in “SB 4.12.32” concerning ISKCON women *dikṣā-gurus*. Besides being affected by a faulty editing that changed its emphasis, that purport simply informs us that Sunīti – the daughter-in-law of Svāyambhuva Manu, living in a Satya-yuga of almost two-billion years ago, in a culture with a different system of initiation (in which women were not even initiated) – did not initiate her son, Dhruva Mahārāja. Searching that purport for “direct instructions” on women *dikṣā-guru* in ISKCON is like looking for water in the desert: We won’t find any water but might become victims of a mirage. The submitters see something in that purport that it’s simply not there; they see a prohibition for ISKCON women to initiate; but that’s only an illusion, a projection. There is no such prohibition anywhere in Śrīla Prabhupāda’s books, lectures, conversations or letters. The obsessive referral to “SB 4.12.32” – mentioned three times in this proposal alone – may simply result in confusing devotees and in setting apart “SB 4.12.32” as the most misquoted purport in contemporary Vaiṣṇavism.

As far as protecting “the traditions of our sampradaya”: Such traditions would be best protected by embracing the words of the Founder-Ācārya:

If a woman is perfect in Kṛṣṇa consciousness... Just like Jāhnavā-devī, Lord Nityānanda’s wife, she was ācārya. She was ācārya. She was controlling the whole Vaiṣṇava community. . . . She was controlling the whole Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava community. . . . It is not that woman cannot be ācārya.

– Room Conversation, San Diego, 29 June 1972

As a woman is not prohibited from becoming ācārya, none of the ācārya’s duties mentioned in the *Manu-saṁhitā* should be precluded to her:

The Manu-saṁhitā (2.140) explains the duties of an ācārya, describing that a bona fide spiritual master accepts charge of disciples, teaches them the Vedic knowledge with all its intricacies, and gives them their second birth.

– Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Ādi-līlā 1.46, purport

As far as “the ideology of daivi varnashram” – which the submitters wish to “protect” – it’s not clear why having women dikṣā-gurus would contravene the principles of *daiva-varṇāśrama*. The proposal postulates that women dikṣā-gurus are against *daiva-varṇāśrama*, but no reason, evidence or explanation is offered. This writing has already addressed the “*varṇāśrama* argument”; for now let’s take note of what Śrīla Prabhupāda wrote:

In *daiva-varṇāśrama* there cannot be acknowledgement of social status according to birthright because in *Bhagavad-gītā* it is said that the

determining considerations are *guṇa* and *karma*, one’s qualities and work.

– *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 5.1.24, purport

Daiva-varṇāśrama doesn’t work by “birthright” (which includes gender). If a woman’s “qualities and work” propel her to teach, to preach, to inspire people in spiritual life, to enthuse them to advance, and to attract them to take initiation from her, where is the wrong? In fact this would simply show a practical and beneficial application of *daiva-varṇāśrama*: “The *brāhmaṇas* should live by spreading knowledge.” (*Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 4.21.50, purport)

In brief, the proposal tries to create as much fear as possible; fear of opening the doors to the practices of the *prākṛta-sahajiyās*, of the caste *gosvāmīs*, of disobeying a non-specified but all-encompassing “rule” against women dikṣā-gurus, of violating *daiva-varṇāśrama*, of going against tradition... In trying to obliterate the existing GBC resolutions the submitters predict all sorts of horrors. Nonetheless, to their credit, they refrain from suggesting that having women dikṣā-gurus would turn all ISKCON devotees into zombies and vampires.

Are Such Fears of Spiritual Ruination Justified?

Caution has its place in any endeavor; the problem is that the sweeping scaremongering of the proposal is not based on Śrīla Prabhupāda’s instructions. Let’s also remember that the GBC resolutions don’t say that *any* woman can just decide to start initiating disciples. The concern that significant spiritual roles be made available to unqualified candidates, men or women, is a legitimate one. At the same time we should consider that in ISKCON today both men and women have to go through a process of evaluation before starting initiating disciples.

Nobody can just self-appoint himself or herself without any screening. Below we reproduce the essential parts of ISKCON Law delineating the procedure:

6.4.1.1 Endorsement by an Area Council

A candidate for guru in ISKCON must first receive a three-fourths majority vote of approval in a council composed of all the GBC zonal secretaries of his current preaching area and at least ten other senior devotees residing in his area of activity . . .

6.4.1.1.1 Composition of Council

The council must include all Regional Secretaries, Temple Presidents, and resident *sannyāsīs* in the candidate's current preaching area. In addition to the ten (or more) local area members, spiritual authorities and senior devotees in good standing from neighboring areas may also be included in the council.

6.4.1.1.2 Principles of Evaluation

The council shall evaluate the candidate according to the qualifications for guru given by Śrīla Prabhupāda in his oral and written teachings and by the GBC Body in its standards and guidelines. . . .

6.4.1.3 Names Sent to All GBC Members

6.4.1.3.1 Letter of Nomination to GBC Corresponding Secretary

The Chairman of the area council shall send a letter of nomination for

the guru candidate endorsed by the council to the GBC Corresponding Secretary. The letter of endorsement must include the following items:

1. A thorough description of the qualifications of the candidate, showing point by point how he conforms to the GBC standards and guidelines for guru.
2. A complete history of the devotional service of the candidate, including the dates and places of his engagements.
3. A list of the names of the members of the nominating council, giving for each member the service, the seniority, his vote, and an explanation for his vote. . . .

6.4.1.4 Three GBC Objections Veto Candidate

Any member of the GBC who has a misgiving concerning the suitability of a candidate, or who would prefer the matter to be discussed and decided by the GBC body, has six months from his date of notification to file a written statement of non-approval with the GBC Corresponding Secretary. If the Corresponding Secretary receives at least three letters of non-approval, the candidate shall not take up the role of guru, and his candidacy shall be considered by the GBC body at its next annual general meeting.

GBC resolution 317, from 2008, added another prerequisite:

Whereas there is a need for devotees who serve as initiating spiritual masters to understand clearly their role within the International Society for

Krishna Consciousness as well as the need to work cooperatively within the society and the GBC leadership;

Whereas there is a need to build stronger bonds of association among the spiritual masters of ISKCON for their mutual benefit and the benefit of the society;

RESOLVED: That all devotees of ISKCON who, in the future take up service to the society as initiating spiritual masters, must first attend the ISKCON Guru Seminar, prior to initiating disciples.

The submitters envisioned terrible catastrophes that would befall ISKCON if women are allowed to become *dikṣā-gurus*. The procedure above, with its various passages, should assist in assuaging their fears. As per today, to become *dikṣā-guru* in ISKCON, men and women have to be evaluated by various senior devotees. If those Vaiṣṇavas endorse the candidate, the GBC has still the power to veto the candidacy. If the candidacy goes through and the devotee does start initiating disciples, he or she can always be subject to disciplining in case of misconduct. ISKCON Law 6.4.5, “Discipline of Devotees Approved to act as Initiating Gurus” describes “Reasons for Discipline,” “Disciplining Authority” and the various forms of discipline, which include:

Censure

Censure is a reprimand aimed at reformation of the devotee and prevention of further offending acts. It is preliminary step that may lead to probation or rescinding of approval. Censure may serve as a precedent to other forms of religious discipline . . .

Probation

Probation is an opportunity for a devotee to rectify and regain his or her status as an ISKCON-approved initiating guru in good standing. Probation does not mean that the privilege to initiate has been withdrawn, but it may include a partial curtailment of such approval . . .

Suspension Pending Investigation

Where there is substantial reason to believe that a devotee approved to initiate in ISKCON has acted irresponsibly, inappropriately, or in violation of ISKCON Law such that continuation of the privilege to initiate is likely to damage the good name, reputation, or other resources of Śrīla Prabhupāda or the society, or if there are serious allegations of impropriety requiring investigation, then the devotee’s privilege to initiate should be suspended pending investigation. . . .

Suspension

When there has been a determination that a devotee approved to initiate in ISKCON has acted irresponsibly, inappropriately, or in violation of ISKCON Law such that the privilege to initiate is likely to damage the good name, reputation, or other resources of Śrīla Prabhupāda and the society, but there is possibility that eventually the devotee may be rectified, then the devotee’s privilege to initiate should be suspended. . . .

Rescinding of Approval

When there has been a determination that a devotee approved to initiate

in ISKCON has acted irresponsibly, inappropriately, or in violation of ISKCON Law such that the privilege to initiate is likely to damage the good name, reputation, or other resources of Śrīla Prabhupāda and the society, and there is little or no possibility that the devotee may eventually be rectified, then the devotee’s privilege to initiate shall be rescinded.

Dikṣā-gurus – men or women – trying to introduce in ISKCON the deviant practices of *sahajiyās* and caste *gosvāmīs* would likely (and hopefully) have a very hard time.

Conclusion

Viśākhā devī dāsī, who, among many other services, personally traveled with Srīla Prabhupada in India, shared her reflections on the current debate; although we would recommend reading her paper in full, here are a few excerpts:²⁶

Śrīla Prabhupāda imbued us with the desire to be all we could be and do all we could do for Kṛṣṇa. His calling impelled us to stretch beyond our boundaries; to acquire a “can do” mentality (“impossible is a word in a fool’s dictionary”) . . . among the first group of disciples to return to India with Prabhupāda were strong and talented women who, by Prabhupāda’s request, led *kīrtanas* and spoke before thousands, served the Deities and were part of Prabhupāda’s personal entourage, as they were in the West. . . Srīla Prabhupada’s female disciples sacrificed enormously and without material compensation to collect millions of dollars—the BBT funds that helped establish opulent Kṛṣṇa conscious centers in Bombay, Mayapur and Vrindavan . . .

“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” (SPL to Govinda dasa, 7 April, 1973) . . . “A devotee is no longer *śūdra*. We are creating *brāhmaṇas*. Just like these Europeans and Americans: according to *Manu-saṁhitā*, they are *mlecchas*, *yavanas*. But we are not keeping them *mlecchas* and *yavanas* . . . (room conversation, 5 June 1974). . . . “*Vaiṣṇave jāti-buddhih*. If anyone considers a Vaiṣṇava, a devotee of the Lord, in the categorical estimation of birth, then that is hellish consideration” (lecture, SB 6.1.41). . . .

When devotees touch the magnificent spiritual possibilities within themselves, when they’re clear that they want to excel in their service for Śrīla Prabhupada’s pleasure, by Kṛṣṇa’s grace they will excel and we will all benefit. . . . While the principle that a devoted woman may do whatever service is suited for her may seem straightforward and clear, some hold that a woman’s birth precludes her from doing certain services for the Lord regardless of her qualifications. . . . Formerly, *smārta-brāhmaṇas* in India criticized Prabhupada for making Westerners *sannyāsīs*; now, ironically, some Western *sannyāsīs* and others are attempting to use the same *smārta* arguments Śrīla Prabhupāda defeated to try to restrict women’s service. . . . Some Krishna conscious women gloriously express their *bhakti* through traditional services: cleaning, cooking, garland-making, caring for children. Other Krishna conscious women gloriously express their *bhakti* through speaking, singing, managing, leading. Srīla Prabhupada captured and engaged all types of women in his transcendental net. . . . By curtailing the service of Śrīla Prabhupāda’s female followers we depart from Śrīla Prabhupāda’s instructions and example and thus effectively cripple

26 Reflections on the Current Debate - Regarding the activities of Śrīla Prabhupada’s female followers

ourselves. Rather, taking heart from Śrīla Prabhupāda, we can fully include and engage all his followers according to their individual propensities so that each one of them can become Kṛṣṇa conscious and give that priceless transcendental consciousness to others.

A key ingredient for moving forward is, as Viśākhā devī dāsī mentions above, “taking heart from Śrīla Prabhupāda”; understanding that women *dikṣā-gurus* were part of his overall plan for ISKCON. We suggest we should welcome and facilitate the fulfillment of this aspect of the blueprint, without being blocked by apprehension. As a general rule, generating fear is easier than inspiring fearlessness; creating doubt is easier than building faith. The parents who experienced consoling and counseling a child afraid of the dark or of monsters under the bed know how much energy it can take to persuade him that everything is all right; that there are no impending threats. We don’t believe there are “monsters under the bed”; we trust in Śrīla Prabhupāda’s vision. We believe that having qualified women initiating disciples corresponds to a natural positive development for an ISKCON coming of age (50 in a couple of years!); a symptom of an ISKCON reaffirming and fortifying its alignment with the instructions of its Founder-Ācārya.

We won’t make predictions; but we wouldn’t be surprised if in ten or twenty years ISKCON looks back and realizes that having women *dikṣā-gurus* was just the right thing to do; that it enhanced our credibility; it offered legitimate avenues of service for senior Vaiṣṇavīs; and provided new opportunities for seekers and new devotees to connect and grow. We wouldn’t be surprised if in 100 years very few would know that there was ever a debate; and we wouldn’t be surprised if in 500 years some might not even *believe* that there was ever a controversy.

In one sense we are very grateful to those who have expressed their reservations, because they inspired us to dive deeper into the ocean of Śrīla Prabhupāda’s instructions to extract luminous gems that dispel doubt and clarify the subject. Precious statements such as this one:

Dikṣā actually means initiating a disciple with transcendental knowledge by which he becomes freed from all material contamination.

– Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, *Madhya-līlā* 4.111, purport

Among all the objections, arguments and protests we couldn’t find any substantial reason why women should not be able to transmit transcendental knowledge and initiate disciples. Since the main thrust of this writing is about listening to the Founder-Ācārya, it is only appropriate to conclude with Śrīla Prabhupāda’s own words, sharing two quotations that again verify the correctness of the GBC resolution stating that “a mature, qualified, female devotee may accept the role of an initiating spiritual master.” The first is from *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, where Śrīla Prabhupāda wrote:

Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu informed Rāmānanda Rāya that knowledge of Kṛṣṇa consciousness is more important than caste. In the system of *varṇāśrama-dharma* there are various duties for the *brāhmaṇas*, *kṣatriyas*, *vaiśyas* and *sūdras*. Actually the *brāhmaṇa* is supposed to be the spiritual master of all other *varṇas*, or classes, but as far as Kṛṣṇa consciousness is concerned, everyone is capable of becoming a spiritual master because knowledge in Kṛṣṇa consciousness is on the platform of the spirit soul.

– Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, *Madhya-līlā* 8.128, purport



The second and final quote is what Śrīla Prabhupāda personally spoke during his Vyasa-puja celebrations to his disciples assembled in London, on 22 August 1973:

My dear sons and daughters . . . Anyone who is coming to Kṛṣṇa consciousness, he's not ordinary living being. Anyone who is connected with our movement, he's not ordinary living being. Actually, he's liberated soul. And I am very much hopeful that my disciples who are now participating today, even if I die, my movement will not stop, I am very much hopeful. Yes. All these nice boys and girls who have taken so seriously . . . To become spiritual master is not very difficult thing. You'll have to become spiritual master. You, all my disciples, everyone should become spiritual master. . . . Remain always a servant of your spiritual master and present the thing as you have heard. You'll be spiritual master. . . . So I hope that all of you, men, women, boys and girls, become spiritual master.

Appendix One

The Sacred Thread, an Eternal Male Monopoly?

*The sacred thread is the sign of those
who are competent to study the Vedas
from the ācārya.*

– Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 1.2.2, purport

During the discussion on women *dikṣā-gurus*, some devotees often mentioned the sacred thread – also known as brahmin thread, *upavīta* or *yajñopavīta* – and therefore we felt encouraged to look into it. Although we don't intend to offer an exhaustive treatment of the subject – which could warrant a book in itself – what's shared here show that the history of its usage is more complex than some may expect. The sacred thread has more knots than meet the eye (pun intended). Anyway, as a starting point of our exploration, let's understand that Śrīla Prabhupāda gave the sacred threads only to his male disciples, as he personally explained during an initiation ceremony in 1968: "Some of the students, boys and girls, will be offered this Gāyatrī *mantra*. And when the Gāyatrī *mantra* is offered

men, they are offered also sacred thread, and girls, they are not offered sacred thread. . . . So don't be sorry because you will not be offered the sacred thread. That's all right."²⁷

While on a tour of South India in 1932, Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura offered some background information on the sacred thread:

While visiting Madras, Srīla Sarasvatī Thākura gave insights into his vast knowledge of *sastra* and Vedic culture by explaining to his disciples salient points about the dress of South Indian *brahmanas*, who characteristically wore a *vesti* as lower cloth, and a cotton wrap across the shoulders or tied at the waist, with the rest of the chest and back bare except for an *upavīta*.²⁸ He said that previously the *upavīta* was not used, only the dhoti and upper cloth, but later it became acceptable for *brahmanas* to wear an *upavīta* instead of an upper cloth. When the Bengali devotees expressed surprise that South Indian *brahmanis* wore their saris with a *kaccha*, Srīla Sarasvatī Thākura stated that this was the correct Vedic method.

– Bhakti Vikāsa Swami, "Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī's South India Tour"²⁹

So, wearing the sacred thread had not been a fixed fixture in the *brāhmaṇas'* attire throughout the ages; "the *upavīta* was not used." In this connection, the *Smṛti Candrika* (a Sanskrit legal digest from the twelfth or thirteen century CE) quotes a passage attributed to sage Ṛṣyaśṛṅga, who performed a sacrifice on behalf

27 Initiation of Satyabhāmā Dāsī and Gāyatrī Initiation of Devotees Going to London, Montreal, 26 July 1968

28 Footnote inserted in the original: "Vesti: a dhoti worn double-folded and without a *kaccha* (the length tucked in at the back)."

29 Book excerpt, published in *Back to Godhead* magazine #43-02, 2009.

of Mahārāja Daśaratha, the father of Lord Rāmacandra: “One may carry out all purposes for which *yajñopavīta* [sacred thread] is required by means of a garment and in its absence by a string of three threads.” The book *Pañcarātra-Pradīpa*, ISKCON GBC Press, resonates with the above:

The *upavīta* also represents the upper cloth in case of an emergency when a devotee must perform a ceremony but has no upper cloth. According to tradition, women do not wear the *upavīta*. Rather, the husband wears an additional three strands of thread in his *upavīta* on behalf of his wife.

Despite the mention that “women do not wear the *upavīta*” (certainly valid for Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavīs), there are women in India who do wear the sacred thread. Some of them are members of the deviant group known as Arya-samaj (in a *Bhagavad-gītā* lecture in London, on 28 August 1973, Śrīla Prabhupāda said: “Arya-samaj. *Ārya* means advancing party. They are degrading party.”). In the following brief anecdote, Mālatī devī dāsī describes a mini-clash between followers of the two practices:

The mother of a devotee had invited me and my daughter to lunch at her residence. While speaking to her about our KC practices, I mentioned that we had been given gayatri mantra. She told me that she was also a Brahmin, then pulled out her thread. My daughter, who as a bit over 3 yrs exclaimed, “That’s bogus!” I mentioned this incident to SP and . . . Śrīla Prabhupāda told us (in Mumbai when the question came up) that there is “no need of the thread for ladies, the mantra in itself was sufficient.”

– Emails dated 16 and 18 October 2012, PAMHO texts 24207998 and 24217501

The Arya-samaj is certainly off philosophically; stressing also its irrelevance in modern society, Śrīla Prabhupāda wrote: “The arya samaj movement started in India but now it is dead and gone. A few people are there only. . . . The atheistic arya samaj does not believe in Bhagavad-gita. Therefore they are not strictly speaking followers of the Vedic varnasrama dharma.” (Letter to Sri Sharmaji, 25 August 1971) Because this inauthentic group gives brahmin threads to ladies – and, more importantly, because Śrīla Prabhupāda never instituted the giving of the thread – we might be tempted to conclude that the practice must be absolutely wrong. Nonetheless we might wish to analyze such reaction a bit more closely, especially upon discovering that there are other cases in India – outside the Arya-samaj – of women wearing the *upavīta*. Could the practice be unnecessary without being fundamentally, *eternally* wrong? Could it be a detail that the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava *ācāryas* never considered appropriate or necessary introducing, but which possesses a substantial tradition going back millennia? Accounts of women wearing the sacred thread in ancient times are quite common in both scholarly writings and internet journalism; below we reproduce a few examples of such statements:

An honoured place for woman in the home and in the society was the counterpart of the worship of feminine deities. Girls received education (which at that time mainly meant learning the Vedas) along with the boys. Both were invested with the sacred thread, marking initiation into studies, at a ceremony known as Upanayanam. Raj Bali Pandey, former professor of Ancient Indian History and Culture at the Banaras Hindu University, says in *Hindu Samskaras: a socio-religious study of the Hindu sacraments* (Vikrama Publications, Banaras) that there was a decline in the age of marriage of

girls due to “the stoppage of Vedic study and the Upanayanam of girls.”

– *Discovering the Rigveda – A bracing text for our times*, by G.N.S. Raghavan

The sacred thread ceremony is called *upanayana*; Śrīla Prabhupāda defines it as follows:

When the spiritual master brings nearer to spiritual consciousness, a person is given the *upanayana*, or the sacred thread. The sacred thread is the indication that “This man is now under the control of the spiritual master for advancing in Kṛṣṇa consciousness.” This thread ceremony. This is called *upanayana*.

– Lecture on *Bhagavad-gītā* 1.32-35, London, 25 July 1973

Dr. Bir Pal Singh, National Law Institute University, Bhopal, India, wrote:³⁰

During the Vedic era women enjoyed almost equal status with that of men. . . . Initiations of girls were common, and they were provided all sorts of facilities to develop their personality fully. Like their brothers the girls wore the sacred thread (*Upavita-Dharana*) and used to pass through the period of *Brahmacharya*. According to *Sarvanukra-manika* there were as many as twenty women who are credited with having composed the hymns of the *Rigveda*. Apart from a literary career, women entered fields of teaching, medicine, business, defense and administration.

As their creations demonstrate, ancient Indians artists were familiar with the idea of female personalities wearing the sacred thread.

30 “Sociology of Female Foeticide and Infanticide. Where does the Law Stand?” Published in Gender Forum, an Internet Journal for Gender Studies



Bronze of Pārvatī, from Tamil Nadu; Chola period, 10th century (Collection Marcel Nies, Belgium); the collection’s web site describes: “The enchanting young goddess sits graceful and composed . . . She wears a triple necklace, the outermost fringed with tiny dangling pendants. Her armbands are of the makara type, and the motif is repeated in her headdress. Generally, Parvati wears a *karandamukuta*, a tiara resembling a conical pile of pots. Here, however, her hair has been gathered up, as if in a linga, in a diadem with four *makarakeyuras* . . . A triple *yajnopavita*, the handspun sacred thread, wends from her left shoulder between her breasts to the right of her broad hips.”



Someone could argue that this is the image of a goddess; how relevant could it be for human beings? However, the sculpture was made by humans living in South India more than a thousand years ago; it shows that their culture was familiar – and apparently comfortable – with the idea of females wearing the sacred thread.

On the left is another artistic representation of Mother Pārvatī, also from the Chola dynasty and also sporting the sacred thread.

The Cholas appear to have been quite accustomed to ladies with sacred threads.

Below is another example, this time in granite, of another female figure, carved in the twelfth century CE: “This beautiful lady’s torso is a fine example of the skilled craftsmanship that prevailed in the Chola kingdom. . . . A yajnopavita or sacred thread flows down artistically over the body.”³¹ The examples shown here represent only a small percentage of the available iconographic evidence.



31 Saffronart, Indian antiquities’ auction house.

This writing doesn't attempt – in any way, shape or form – to promote that ISKCON ladies start wearing the sacred thread. The aim of this appendix is to show that our historical and psychological assumptions of what is “Vedic” *might* benefit from deeper research and analysis (especially as *anything* Vedic or pseudo-Vedic could be impugned to defy the vision of the Founder-Ācārya that women can become *dikṣā-gurus*). As we have seen above, the idea that Vedic women had no access to *upanayana* and no role in the intellectual and academic life of ancient India is repeatedly challenged. Sreenivasa Rao, for instance, writes in his article “Rig Veda – Position of women”:

There is reference to the birth of an only daughter, who was assigned the legal position of a son; and she could perform funeral rites of her father and could also inherit the property. It indicates that the position of a girl in Rig Vedic times was not as low as it was to become in medieval times. (S. R. Shastri, *Women in the Vedic Age*- 1960). . . . Education was considered essential for girls and was therefore customary for girls to receive education. The girls with education were regarded highly. Vedic literature praises a scholarly daughter and says: “A girl also should be brought up and educated with great effort and care” (*Mahanirvana Tantra*). The importance of a girl's education is stressed in the Atharva Veda which states, “The success of woman in her married life depends upon her proper training during the *BrahmaCharya* (student period)”

The girls were entitled to Upanayana (to receive sacred thread) and to the privilege of studying Vedas; just as the boys. . . . There were eminent women in the field of learning and scholarship. These highly intelligent and greatly learned women, who chose the path of Vedic studies and, lived

the ideal life of spirituality were called Brahmavadinis; and the women who opted out of education for married life were called ‘Sadyovadhus’. Co-education seems to have existed in this period and both the sexes got equal attention from the teacher. As many as about thirty Brahmavadins of great intellect and spiritual attainment are immortalized in the Rig Veda and are credited with hymns. They participated in philosophical debates with men and were highly respected. To name a few of those significant women rishis (rishikā) who figure in the Rig Veda Samhitā: Goshā Kakshivati, Lopamudra, Romasha, Sarama Devasuni, Yami Vaivasvathi, Rathir Bharadwaja, Apala, Paulomi and others. Needless to say they were held in high esteem for their work to be included in the important religious text of the era.

What should we make of the above? It's not within the scope of this appendix to delve more deeply into the subject or to address the questions that might arise: Are the above references fully accurate and reliable? Are the views expressed in the above excerpts the fruit of rigorous scholarship? If they were wearing it before, why and when did women stop wearing the sacred thread? What or who made them stop? What historical and cultural shifts were involved in the change? We don't know the answers and, frankly, we believe they don't truly matter in regard to the central subject of this writing (women *dikṣā-gurus*). As for ourselves, we are confident that Śrīla Prabhupāda expertly presented the essence of Vedic wisdom and culture, kindly providing *every tool* necessary so that both men and women can reach perfection. We don't suggest women start (or re-start) wearing the sacred thread. The Founder-Ācārya didn't think it was needed; why should we disagree? His instructions to women to excellently perform domestic duties (in

their *gṛhastha* days) and to vigorously preach (throughout their lives) – while, all-along, regularly chanting the holy name and studying the scriptures – are incalculably more important than a few strands of cotton, especially as “wearing or holding the *upavīta* thread is not integral to chanting *Gāyatrī mantras*.”³² In any case, Śrīla Prabhupāda never said that wearing the sacred thread was an indispensable prerequisite to become *dikṣā-guru*.

Appendix Two

What Do You Mean by *Feminism*?

So far your question regarding women, I have always accepted the service of women without any discrimination.

– Śrīla Prabhupāda letter to Gurudasa, 26 May 1972

Do we assume that by labeling *any* idea as “feminist” we can automatically delegitimize it? Do we believe that by branding *any* argument as “feminist” we can effectively dismiss it? We noticed much muddled thinking around the word *feminism*. Pursuing a better understanding, we took a look at the standard dictionary definitions of *feminism*:

- A doctrine or movement that advocates equal rights for women (Collins)
- The theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes (Merriam-Webster)
- An attitude favoring the movement to eliminate political, social, and professional discrimination (-Ologies & -Isms)

32 *Pañcarātra-Pradīpa*, ISKCON GBC Press, Chapter 1

We look at the Glossary of the Bhaktivedanta Vedabase's (Folio) and we encounter:

- Feminism—The promotion of the rights of females in human society.

What to make of the above? If by *feminism* we imply a stance discarding all notions of women's protection; then feminism is an insidious social policy. If we define feminism as the rejection of all the standard guidelines and all the traditional teachings on proper interaction between the genders, then surely feminism is an ill conceived theory, one that should have no place in ISKCON. At the same time we wonder: Is the idea that women have rights – or even *equal rights* – an abominable one? Is it always corrupt and corrupting to suggest that women should not be discriminated against? Is the view of “political, economic and social equality” so misguided and evil, on any level? We also wonder: Are there dangers in the wholesale condemnation of *anything* connected with the idea of gender equality? Is it wise to believe that some forms of equality should be reserved only for extraordinarily advanced Vaiṣṇavīs? Certainly Srīla Prabhupada did not favor materialistic feminism and therefore he cannot be considered a feminist; but he did express the equality of all living entities on the spiritual platform, and he spoke about equality of the sexes amongst those performing devotional service. So the question is: How should we distinguish when the sense of equality among the genders comes from the “puffed-up concept of womanly life,”³³ which is questionable, and when it comes from “equal vision,”³⁴ which is commendable?

Feminism in the Three Modes

As anything in this world – food, sacrifice, charity, activity, austerity, etc. – also

33 *Bhagavad-gītā* 16.7, purport

34 *Bhagavad-gītā* 5.18, purport

the idea of equality between genders can take different flavors according to the *guṇas*, the three influences of material nature. Feminism can take the dark, fanatical, inflexible and even destructive form of *tamo-guṇa* (ignorance); or the bodily-centered, selfish, utilitarian and politically correct form of *rajo-guṇa* (passion); or it could take the soul-centered, philosophical, purified and unbiased form of *sattva-guṇa* (goodness). In other words, the subject of the rights and potentiality of women will be colored and filtered by our assumptions and the modes that affect us. As Kṛṣṇa explains in *Bhagavad-gītā* (18.20-22):

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. 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. 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.

Discarding *all forms* of women's equality shows undeveloped consciousness and unripe wisdom; such attitude results in the proverbial throwing of the baby (spiritual equality) with the bath water (materialistic feminism). Kṛṣṇa consciousness promotes the all-encompassing vision that acknowledges and honors the physical differences between men and women (with their concomitant recommended social arrangements) while accepting the possibility for both genders to reach spiritual perfection. As Śrīla Prabhupāda said in a lecture:³⁵

35 Lecture on *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 5.5.2, Johannesburg, 22 October 1975

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. If he wants to go back, there is no restriction. *Te 'pi yānti parām gatim. Mām hi pārtha vyapāśritya ye 'pi syuḥ pāpa-yonayaḥ* [Bg. 9.32]. This is the difference. For God there is no discrimination. Women, men have equal rights to become godly and back to home, back to Godhead.

We should reject the counter-productive, unenlightened and debasing feminism of the lower modes of passion and ignorance; but we should embrace the soul-centered equality Śrīla Prabhupāda promoted:

In the material platform there is difference, high, low, man, woman, this or that. But in the spiritual platform there is no such difference . . . So today this nice girl is going to be initiated. She must learn this science, this very nice science, and you all Godbrothers and sisters will help her. Anyone who is trying to be Kṛṣṇa conscious, he should be given or she should be given all kinds of facilities.

– Initiation of Rukmiṇī Dāsī, Montreal, 15 August 1968

After all, male and female bodies are only temporary coverings. Not only that; Śrīla Prabhupāda explained that, whether male or female, all over the universe, “everyone is in the temperament of male, even the so-called females.” Irrespective of their gender, all conditional souls aspire to enjoy, as an independent *puruṣa*, the material resources. We all need to reconnect with our deepest, feminine identity as personal entities enjoyed by the Lord. As Śrīla Prabhupāda wrote, “our perfection of life will be actually realizing that we are all females”:

Regarding your questions, as Brahma realized that he was the maidservant of Krishna, similarly, everyone 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. Please do not try to understand this male and female in the material sense. In other words, our perfection of life will be actually realizing that we are all females. In the material world we have got simply different dresses. Here in the material world, everyone is in the temperament of male, even the so-called females are also in the temperament.

– Letter to Janaki, 28 February 1969

Physical Differences and Spiritual Equality

Śrīla Prabhupāda wrote in the *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* (7.12.10, purport): “On the spiritual platform, the learned person not only gives up the duality of man and woman, but also gives up the duality of man and animal.” How to practically apply this vision, without neglecting the need for clear guidelines in the interaction of the genders? How to find balance between the Vedic ideals of the past and the need to consider the ground realities of the present? How to identify which traditional norms are relevant and useful today, and which were meant only for previous ages? To explore these questions we turn to the Founder-Ācārya and note that he carefully distinguished between the physical and the spiritual dimensions; between the platform of the body and that of the soul. Acknowledging the obvious physical distinctions, Śrīla Prabhupāda clarified that equality can and should be

reached on a higher level. He said during a lecture in Los Angeles: “People say everyone is equal. How you can say equal? . . . On the material platform it is not possible. You have to come to the spiritual platform; then equality is possible.³⁶” Four years later, again in Los Angeles, Śrīla Prabhupāda said: “You have to come to the stage of spiritual platform; then there is question of love, brotherhood, equality, fraternity, otherwise, all bogus propaganda. It’s not possible.³⁷” To progress towards the platform of non-distinctions, distinctions *must* be made. Śrīla Prabhupāda explained in another lecture:

So in the *Bhagavad-gītā* you will find different statement by the Supreme Personality of Godhead. In one place He says that *vidyā-vindaya-sampanne brāhmaṇe gavi hastini*. In another place Kṛṣṇa says . . . *strīṣu dustasu* [Bg 1.40]: “When woman becomes polluted, then there is unwanted population.” So if in one place it is stated that *paṇḍitāḥ sama-darśinaḥ* [Bg 5.18], man and woman is equal . . . so the fact is that, in order to make progress towards the end of spiritual realization, that we must make distinction, but the aim should be one. If you artificially do not make distinction, that will not stay. . . . So our point is that you come to the spiritual platform, then this equality will be possible . . . Therefore we request everyone that you come to the spiritual platform. Then everything will be very nice. There will be no distinction.

– Arrival Lecture, Philadelphia, 11 July 1975

Acknowledging the physical differences should not be used as an excuse to deny women any intellectual or social development. Recognizing, for instance, that

³⁶ Lecture on *Bhagavad-gītā* 2.26, Los Angeles, 6 December 1968

³⁷ Lecture on *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 1.2.19, Los Angeles, 22 August 1972

women get pregnant and need support to raise children doesn’t justify negating any opportunity to women. As Śrīla Prabhupāda said during a morning walk in Vṛndāvana:

Prabhupāda: I am speaking the truth that, “If you have equal right, then let your husband become pregnant. Make some arrangement.” . . .

Harikeśa: Well, in America they have women senators now.

Prabhupāda: Huh?

Harikeśa: 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.

Prabhupāda: No, that is possible. That it requires education. That is another... By nature the woman’s body is different from man’s.

– Morning Walk, Vṛndāvana, 10 December 1975

As far as the role of women in ISKCON, in an interview in Toronto, on 18 June 1976, Śrīla Prabhupāda said that “the rights are the same” (which is the very essence of *feminism*):

Woman: Swamiji, would you say something about the place of women in your movement?

Prabhupāda: There is no distinction between man and woman. That is

clearly said in the *Bhagavad-gītā*. *Mām hi pārtha vyapāśritya ye 'pi syuḥ pāpā-yonayaḥ striyo śūdrās tathā vaiśyāḥ* [Bg. 9.32]. The first is mentioned, *striya*. *Striyaḥ śūdrās tathā vaiśyāḥ*. These classes are understood to be less intelligent-woman, *śūdra*, and the *vaiśyas*. But Kṛṣṇa says, “No, even for them it is open.” Because in the spiritual platform there is no such distinction, man, woman, or black, white, or big or small. No. Everyone is spirit soul. *Paṇḍitāḥ sama-darśinaḥ*. *Vidyā-vinaya-sampanne brāhmaṇe gavi hastini śuni caiva śva-pāke ca paṇḍitāḥ* [Bg. 5.18], one who is actually learned, he is *sama-darśinaḥ*. He does not make any distinction. But so far our material body is concerned, there must be some distinction for keeping the society in order.

Woman: The women could become *paṇḍitas*, then.

Prabhupāda: Oh, yes. *Te 'pi yānti parām gatim*. Not only come, she can also attain perfection. There is no such restriction. Kṛṣṇa said.

Woman: Do you have any *paṇḍitas* in the Western movement?

Prabhupāda: There are so many Western woman, girls, in our society. They are chanting, dancing, taking to Kṛṣṇa consciousness. 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.

In a lecture given in Philadelphia, on 11 July 1975, Śrīla Prabhupāda elaborated on how to reconcile and harmonize equal vision and variegated treatment:

Paṇḍita means spiritually advanced. A person who is spiritually advanced,

he sees on equal level a very learned man, *vidyā-vinaya-sampanne brāhmaṇa* [Bg. 5.18], *brāhmaṇa*, the first-class man; *vidyā-vinaya-sampanne gavi*, an animal like cow; *hasti*, animal like elephant; *vidyā-vinaya-sampanne brāhmaṇe gavi hastini, śuni*, means dog; *śva-pāka*, means the dog-eater; *caṇḍāla*—all of them, they see equal. So what is that seeing? If I invite one learned scholar, and if I ask him, “Please sit down with the dog,” will he be pleased? He will feel insulted. But I see that within the dog, there is spirit soul, and within the learned scholar, there is spirit soul. . . . *Sama-darśinaḥ* means from different platform. On the material platform, if I say, “Oh, you may be a learned scholar, and you may think the dog is dog, but I see you are all equal,” so it will be insult. So the fact is that we cannot disturb the . . . different position materially; at the same time, we have to understand what is the position, spiritual. That is wanted. If we make distinction between man and woman, black and white, then how in our temple we are enjoying together? Because we... Actually, we are equal on the spiritual platform. We do not say that “You are woman. You cannot become my disciple,” or “You are black; therefore you cannot become my disciple” No. We welcome everyone. So they may not misunderstand. Just you can issue one statement that “We say that if you want to see everyone equally, treat everyone equally, then you have to come to the spiritual platform, Kṛṣṇa consciousness. Materially, it is not possible.” . . . distinction is already there. That I explained today. But we are trying to go above the distinction. But when I say that distinction is already there, they misunderstand that I am making distinction. I am not making distinction. . . . Why the structure of the body, woman, is different from the man? . . . That distinction is there by nature. But if you come to the spiritual platform, then you will

understand that “I am not this body. These distinction are on the bodily platform. I am spirit soul. My function is how to serve God.” Then it is equality. It is clear thing. But because they do not understand that there is distinction between spirit and matter—they amalgamate or they have no brain that spirit is different from matter – therefore they think that I am making distinction. No. So we should understand the real position, and then automatically there will be equality.

“I Was Married When My Wife Was Only Eleven Years Old”

Between man and woman “That distinction is there by nature” but “we are trying to go above the distinction.” Traditional Indian culture recognizes the distinction between genders and recommends – as part of the program of protecting women – arranging the marriage of girls when they were very young. Of course this doesn’t mean that the girl grows up without intelligence or personality; or that she can’t develop into a spiritual leader. The dozens of lady *dikṣā-gurus* in the history of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism presumably also married at an early age (as was the custom in Bengal in previous centuries); but that didn’t prevent them from taking major responsibilities in the *sampradāya* later in life. As a contemporary, twenty-first century testimonial, a senior ISKCON lady wrote:³⁸

My daughter-in-law was 16 (almost 17) at the wedding, and early marriage (and eight children) have not prevented her from getting a bachelor’s degree in social work, homeschooling her children, and organizing dramas for the devotee community. She is an intelligent capable person with desires and personality beyond being a wife and mother. She is also a very solid devotee.

38 Email dated 3 January 2013

In a lecture Śrīla Prabhupāda shared his personal experience:

I was also married man, you know. I was married when my wife was only eleven years old. And at the age of fourteen years she gave birth to first child. And next generation, when my eldest daughter was married at the age of sixteen years—it is little increased—but I was also very much upset that the daughter is sixteen years old. . . . This was the system. So women were taken so much care by the Vedic civilization.

– Lecture on *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 1.8.51, Los Angeles, 13 May 1973

“This was the system.” Although Śrīla Prabhupāda supported the idea (obviously when properly implemented), child marriage is extremely controversial and widely condemned in the world today. For instance, as recently reported by an Indian newspaper:³⁹

In a joint letter . . . four U.N. organisations have urged India to address the issue of child marriage immediately and seek a political commitment to the goal of ending this harmful practice. . . . the letter says child marriage denies a girl childhood, disrupts her education, limits her opportunities, increases the risk of her becoming a victim of violence, jeopardises her health, and therefore constitutes an obstacle to . . . the development of healthy communities . . . child marriage . . . is a fundamental human rights violation and impacts all aspects of a girl’s life.

Obviously: 1) Śrīla Prabhupāda was talking of a system in which all the adults involved were civilized and motivated by the girl’s best interest; 2) child marriage

39 “U.N. appeal follows outrage at child marriage demand,” *The Hindu*, 12 October 2012

has been widely misapplied, for economic gain or to get rid of daughters as soon as possible; 3) Vaiṣṇava values, traditions and overall interpretation of human life are quite different from the United Nations official policies; 4) Devotees considering to implement the marriage of minors must carefully evaluate the circumstances, including the local laws. In any case, Śrīla Prabhupāda, during a morning walk, explained how the method of early marriage – when implemented by responsible, enlightened and affectionate parents – ensured the girl’s chastity, allegiance and love for her husband, thus facilitating virtuous progeny and stable relations:

[F]ormerly, at least in the Indian society, at an early age they were married . . . gradually, remaining together, the quality of love increases. Then the wife takes care of the husband, and the husband takes care. They become bound up, united in love. That is quality. In the beginning, what the child knows about love? No. But they are allowed to remain as husband and wife. They are thinking that “I have got my husband,” “I have got my wife,” and as the age increases, the dealings become intimate. Then they become affectionate. That is quality. Not in the beginning there is any quality. It is by the parents’ arrangement. That’s all. In our day, the marriage was performed when the girl is ten years, twelve years, nine years. Twelve years is very late marriage. My second sister, she became twelve years old. So my mother became so disturbed that “This girl is not being married. Shall I commit suicide?” Yes. You see? My eldest sister, she was nine years old, older than me, and she was married before my birth. And my mother-in-law was married at the age of seven years, and my father-in-law was eleven years. I was married... My wife was eleven years. So in this age there is no question of love. It is not that the husband and wife lives together, no. Unless the girl is grown up, she is not going to the husband. She remains with the father and mother.

Sometimes they meet, and the wife is taught, giving some sweetmeat to the husband – official. Official. The parents of the girl: “Just go up to your husband and offer this.” So she comes as obedient servant. But gradually they get the connection. In this way the love develops, and when they are fifteen, sixteen years old, they are allowed to live together. Because both of them have already developed that “She is my wife,” “He is my husband,” psychologically. And there was no question of divorce. The love is so strong, they cannot dream even that “I have to leave my wife,” “I have to leave my husband.” . . . Both the husband and wife, they cannot dream of divorce. The love was so strong.

– Morning Walk, Nairobi, 2 November 1975

Even though in the “Vedic science of living” women married early, millions (and perhaps billions) of women don’t get that opportunity:

In our Vedic science of living . . . woman must have husband. And it is recommended they should be married at very early age . . . it is when people are a little grown-up, when they have got little independence and their own ways of doing things, then if they marry there is often difficulty to adjust, just as it is more difficult to bend the bamboo when it is yellow.

– Letter to Mr. Loy, 7 November 1972

What to do when the bamboo is *already* yellow? What to do when girls have grown up being largely autonomous and self-reliant; with “their own ways of doing things”? Should we declare them permanently unfit for Kṛṣṇa consciousness? Or should we try to engage them in divine service according to their innate devotion,

their present inclination and to the best of their ability – as Śrīla Prabhupāda did? Let’s consider that in every standard there is the *ideal* and the *real*. For example the *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* (7.6.1) says that one should take up spiritual life from childhood:

śrī-prahrāda uvāca
kaumāra ācaret prājño
dharmān bhāgavatān iha

Prahlāda 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.

What about boys who grow up in ignorance, within sinful cultures? Should they be shunned as wicked, incorrigible outcastes? Or should we invite them to embrace the process of *bhakti-yoga* and become purified? For the girl who grew up as an independently spirited free citizen, and for the boy who grew up exposed to all sorts of degrading influences, the path of liberation opens up when they seriously take up Kṛṣṇa consciousness. Of course, it would have been fantastic if all of us had been born and grown up in a spiritual, Vaiṣṇava environment; but how many of us received that blessing? As Śrīla Prabhupāda wrote to a lady disciple:

You are exactly correct when you write that Kṛṣṇa has benedicted you with a first class husband. In Vedic society no girl was allowed to remain

independent and unmarried.

– Letter to Naiskarmi, 28 July 1973

How many young girls nowadays are “benedicted . . . with a first class husband”? After all, if their father didn’t get them married, what can they do? Girls who do “remain independent and unmarried” must make their own arrangements. Yes, the *Manu-saṁhitā* says that women should not be given freedom, but what can girls do if their fathers *force* that freedom upon them? These girls must use that freedom to be best of their ability. We may complain that, “*Manu-saṁhitā* is not being followed!” but we shouldn’t forget that it’s the fathers that should follow the *Manu-saṁhitā*. We need to offer mature, productive directions to women in that situation; we can’t simply lament because the Vedic standard wasn’t followed. If their fathers don’t arrange a proper, early marriage – or *any* marriage – the girl has to look for a husband herself. As Śrīla Prabhupāda said in a lecture (emphasis ours):

[F]or girls *brahmacārī* system is not recommended. **Therefore girls are advised to get a husband. Or the parents take the responsibility,** according to Vedic rites and according... 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 *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 5.5.2, Boston, 28 April 1969

Śrīla Prabhupāda didn't plan to introduce the system of early, arranged marriages in America, and, apparently with bitter irony, he marked that even "modernized, educated Indians" had abandoned the practice. By failing to arrange early marriages with qualified boys, fathers everywhere have *forced* their daughters to become autonomous and self-reliant. Although those who wish to see "Vedic" protections might tend to blame women, actually the responsibility for the unprotected female population lays entirely on men. The problem is their lack of planning and vision; these fathers are to be blamed if their daughters grow up independent.

Transcending the Need for Early Marriage

During a morning walk in Māyāpur, on 9 February 1976, Śrīla Prabhupāda spoke to some of his top leaders about the duty of the father (or elder brother) to arrange an early marriage for the girl. He also explained that devotional service is so powerful that such *varṇāśrama* considerations become secondary and negligible. ("Varṇāśrama-dharma is a good help undoubtedly, but it is not important for Kṛṣṇa consciousness"):

Prabhupāda: In the *sāstra*... I do not know exactly what is that *sāstra*, 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 . . . getting the girl married rests on the father. In the absence of the father, the eldest brother. The girl must be married. . . . 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 . . . I mean in ISKCON, in our society.

Prabhupāda: 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*. If one is absorbed in Kṛṣṇa consciousness, all benefit is there. So long in the bodily concept of life, we require this *varṇāśrama-dharma*. Otherwise there is no necessity . . . 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*, no, because the whole movement is spiritual. It starts from the spiritual platform, *aham brahmāsmi* . . . just like here is a gap. So you can go by the bridge, and if you can jump over, that is also going. That is also going. So to become Kṛṣṇa conscious means to jump over to the spiritual platform immediately. . . . That lift and the staircase. By staircase you go step by step. By lift you can go immediately, faster. . . .

Hṛdayānanda: Even some of these women, they're not married but they are serving Kṛṣṇa.

Prabhupāda: Yes. *Striyo vaiśyās tathā sūdrāḥ*. [Bg. 9.32] This *striya*, generally they take it, “Even she is prostitute,” *striya*. *Te ‘pi yānti parām gatim*: “They can also go back to home, back to Godhead.” *Mām hi pārtha...* If he takes Kṛṣṇa very seriously, then everything is possible. No impediment. *Ahaituky apratihata*. Kṛṣṇa devotional service is so strong that it cannot be checked by any material impediments. The *smārtas*, they are thinking like that, “How these *mlecchas* and *yavanas* can become a *brāhmaṇa*?” But they do not know that by Kṛṣṇa consciousness one can jump over. *Māyām etām taranti te*. *Daivī hy eṣā guṇamayī mama māyā duratyayā*. [Bg. 7.14] *Māyā* is very strong. Therefore there are gradual process. *Varṇāśrama-dharma, karma-tyāga*, this, that, so many things, pious activities, rituals. But this is the process, step by step, to cross over *māyā*. But Kṛṣṇa said, *mām eva ye prapadyante māyām etām taranti te*. Anyone who surrenders to Kṛṣṇa sincerely, immediately he crosses over.

Both aspects should be understood: Kṛṣṇa consciousness doesn’t depend on social arrangements and, at the same time, part of the mission is to gradually introduce progressive principles of civilized behavior in society. Certainly it’s the responsibility of fathers to protect their little girls; but what to speak of neglecting their duty to provide an early marriage; millions of fathers prefer to just kill their daughters.

Female Killing Fields

Killing babies takes various forms and names; the general term is *infanticide* (infant homicide), but there is also *neonaticide* (killing the child within 24 hours of the birth) and *feticide* (murdering unborn babies). Mostly the victims are girls. Before trying to impose “Vedic” or “*varṇāśrama*” norms on contemporary Vaiṣṇavism,

we should carefully consider if such norm could be misused, creating disasters. The application of Vedic social guidelines requires men with Vedic values. The conventional understanding of traditional Indian culture bestows upon men an almost unrestricted power over women; but the degraded descendants of the Vedic men are fast abandoning their role as guardians and protectors and instead assuming the part of torturers and assassins. From Wikipedia, for instance, we learn that, “Recent studies suggest that over 40 million girls and women are ‘missing’ in China. . . . According to a recent report by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) up to 50 million girls and women are missing in India’s population.” In 2008 the UN announced that the number of women missing (which means exterminated) in India had climbed to 62 million;⁴⁰ that is, more than *ten times* the common figure for Jews killed in Nazi Germany. A study in Tamil Nadu, South India, concluded that “female infanticide is rampant,” though only among Hindu families (rather than Muslims or Christian). “Of the 1,250 families covered by the study, 740 had only one girl child and 249 agreed directly that they had done away with the unwanted girl child.”⁴¹ The murders varied in method: “Some were fed dry, unhulled rice that punctured their windpipes, or were made to swallow poisonous powdered fertilizer. Others were smothered with a wet towel, strangled or allowed to starve to death.”⁴² Other regions have their own *traditional* ways of killing the infant girl, including drowning her in a bucket of milk, feeding her salt or burying her alive in an earthen pot. As some of these methods can be easily detected in case of a police investigation, parents have devised more sophisticated ways of murdering their

40 “Eliminate gender bias,” *Sunday Tribune*, 4 May 2008 edition 1, online

41 Malavika Karlekar, “The girl child in India: does she have any rights?” *Canadian Woman Studies*, March 1995.

42 John-Thor Dahlburg, “Where killing baby girls ‘is no big sin’” *The Los Angeles Times* (in *The Toronto Star*, February 28, 1994)

daughters. In her book *Disappearing Daughters*,⁴³ author Gita Aravamudan explains:

Female infanticide I found had become more ‘scientific.’ Inducing pneumonia was the modern method. The infant was wrapped in a wet towel or dipped in cold water as soon as it was born or when it came back home from hospital. If, after a couple of hours, it was still alive it was taken to a doctor who would diagnose pneumonia and prescribe medicine, which the parents promptly threw away. When the child finally died, the parents had a medical certificate to prove pneumonia. Sometimes the infant was fed a drop of alcohol to create diarrhea: another ‘certifiable disease.’

Talk about protecting women! But millions of parents don’t wait for their daughter to be born to murder her. In India, the leading country in sex-selective abortions, the prenatal scans determining the gender of the baby can often turn into death sentences for girls. For instance, according to UNICEF, “A report from Bombay in 1984 on abortions after prenatal sex determination stated that 7,999 out of 8,000 of the aborted fetuses were females.”⁴⁴ The 2011 Indian census reveals that, in the zero-to-six age group, the gender ratio is 914 girls to 1000 boys; which means that about 8.6 percent of all Indian girls were eliminated before or within six years of their birth, by premeditated murder or by “homicide by neglect.” Some girls are deliberately subjected to hunger and die of malnutrition or starvation. When the girl falls sick, the family may not take her to the hospital or buy her medicines. A 2007 UNICEF report showed that Indian girls under five had a mortality rate 40 percent higher than boys of the same age. But for girls who manage to survive

43 Penguin Books, 2007, page 22

44 Zeng Yi *et al.*, “Causes and Implications of the Recent Increase in the Reported Sex Ratio at Birth in China,” *Population and Development Review*, 19:2, June 1993, page 297

childhood, their troubles might not be over. According to the Home Ministry’s National Crime Bureau of India, violence against women is the fastest-growing crime. Every 34 minutes a woman is raped, and every 43 minutes a woman is kidnapped. Thirty-seven years ago Śrīla Prabhupāda said, “In India it is so poverty-stricken. Still, even in villages, they are freely moving, man, woman, at dead of night. They know there is no danger.”⁴⁵ Could he say the same today? Due to the massacre of girls, some 62 millions males won’t find female partners.

Already, there is massive trafficking of girls across state boundaries in India, to be sold as ‘brides’ in those regions where the gender ratio has dropped so low that men cannot find women to marry. Families with many sons, who cannot afford to ‘buy’ a bride for each, often will buy a ‘bride’ for all the men to share.⁴⁶

Among girls who do get a “normal” marriage, every year thousands are murdered or driven to suicide by husbands and in-laws striving to extort more dowry. Sometimes the woman is set on fire – which is commonly known as “bride burning” – a method the murderers can disguise as suicide or accident. In 2008, the Indian National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reported 8172 dowry death cases; but, according to Wikipedia, “these figures have received a great deal of scrutiny from critics who believe dowry deaths are consistently under-reported.” Nonetheless, even *just* the official 8172 dowry deaths are more – in *one year* – than the total US casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan over *twelve years* (6618 deaths); with the essential distinction that those Americans were fighting wars, not just getting married.

45 Lecture on *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 6.1.22, Chicago, 6 July 1975

46 Archana Jyoti, “15-yr-old girl’s abduction reveals gender gap,” *Asian Age*, 14 July 2005

Many women who survive their husbands also face plenty of tribulations. How many of India's more than 40 million widows have been thrown out of their homes by their sons and forced to beg to survive? Only 28 percent of them are eligible for pensions, but, being at the mercy of their families, less than 11 percent receive anything. Writers on the plight of Indian widows often mention Vṛndāvana:

“My husband died when I was 18,” whispers Radha, who is now 28. She finds it difficult to express herself. Her unfinished sentences are the after-effects of sexual abuse by her family members—Radha feels she must remain silent out of fear of not being believed or of giving her family a bad name. Eventually, Radha tired of living in an emotional prison constructed by not only her own silence, but that of those around her. No one in her family or community would speak to her because of the bad luck she is thought to carry. She went to Vrindavan, about 90 miles (145 kilometers) south of New Delhi, five years ago. . . . When she arrived at Vrindavan, she found a job that earned her a few rupees a day by looking after a sadhu, a man who renounces worldly pleasures to attain enlightenment through meditation. She cleaned, prepared food for him, and bought him medicine. After the sadhu died, Radha inherited his small house and stayed there for her own protection—she did not want to be raped as a young widow in the streets or fields. Behind a locked door was safest.

One day, on the way to the sacred river of Yamuna, she saw a man following her. It was the same man who had previously sent messages to her via his friends offering large sums of money, most likely for prostitution. A primary form of survival of widows in Vrindavan is prostitution, with the younger

ones often forced into the sex trade and “owned” by pimps. The man urged Radha to come with him. She ran into a temple, repeating: “No, no, no sex!”

Today Radha can say that she has escaped rape and even prostitution, but others have not been as lucky. In some of the ashrams in Vrindavan, the same protection that young widows seek hidden in courtyards is misshapen into sexual exploitation. The heads of some ashrams use their power to force young widows into prostitution in order to earn themselves “extra” money. And what happens to those who become pregnant after being raped? . . . These widows are mauled by quacks for a painfully searing abortion.⁴⁷

The above examples don't cover the whole range of violence practiced against Indian women. We won't get into the details of acid throwing (due, for example, to refusing a marriage proposal), eve teasing (a euphemism for public sexual harassment and molestation), honor killing (for marrying outside one's caste or without family approval), marital rape, etc. We focused on India because it's the cradle of Vedic culture and supposedly the motherland of “women's protection”; but also because of the magnitude of the violence. Still, according to the survey of the Thomas Reuters Foundation, India is *only* fourth among the countries considered most dangerous for women.⁴⁸ The first is Afghanistan (where, for instance, 87% of women are illiterate); second is Congo (where, for example, 1152 women are raped *every day*); third is Pakistan (where, to name just one aspect, 90% of women experience domestic violence in their lifetime); fifth, and

47 “The ongoing tragedy of India's widows,” by Sara Barrera and Eva Corbacho, www.womenundersiegeproject.org, 22 June 2012

48 Reuters, Thomas (2011-08-13), <http://www.trust.org/trustlaw/womens-rights/dangerpoll/>

therefore considered *safer* than India, is Somalia (where 95% of girls undergo genital mutilation, female-circumcision, mostly between the ages of 4 and 11). Other countries have their own characteristic forms of women abuse; Cameroon distinguishes itself for “breast ironing” (also known as “breast flattening”), practiced by all the 200 ethnic groups of Cameroon to make girls less attractive and prevent unwanted pregnancies. Cambodia stands out for child-prostitution. According to Wikipedia: “Some children are sold by their own parents, others are lured by what they think are legitimate job offers like waitressing . . . Young girls working in brothels are in effect sex slaves. They receive no money, only food, and there are armed guards to stop them from running away.” These enslaved underage girls attract sex-tourists from all over the world; up to twenty men per day do to a small girl what they can’t do to a woman in their country.

Over and above the national realities, human trafficking – mainly for sexual exploitation or forced labor – constitutes a global phenomenon. Some say that trafficking in people is the second most profitable illegal industry in the world, after the drug trade.⁴⁹ According to a 2008 UN estimate, nearly 2.5 million people from 127 different countries are being trafficked into 137 countries around the world. The *Times of India* reported.⁵⁰

India has emerged as a key destination and transit point for global trafficking of women and girls, a UN report has said . . . the United Nations Population Fund report on ‘State of World Population’ said . . . “India and Pakistan are major destinations for trafficked women and girls . . .

49 Haken, Jeremy, “Transnational Crime In The Developing World,” *Global Financial Integrity*

50 10 September 2006

Trafficked women are usually forced into prostitution and sex tourism, commercial marriages and other “female” occupations such as domestic work, agricultural and sweatshop labour.”

Should we go on? Are we still so afraid, terrorized of allowing women a little self-determination, the chance to get an education and become self-reliant? The above examples show that in cultures that consider women unfit for equal rights, the traditional male dominance (originally for protection) can transmogrify into murder and abuse. Fathers that kill their daughters or sell them into prostitution; husbands that beat, rape or burn their wives; sons who cast away their widowed mothers as if they were bags of garbage... We ask ourselves: Do women have a scriptural obligation to remain submissive to cruel and exploitative men? Should women’s dependence hinge on the *dependability* of men; and when men are unqualified that social contract is not binding anymore?

What Kind of Society Treats Women Best?

Śrīla Prabhupāda said, “Vedic civilization is so perfect that the man, as father, as husband, or as son, takes care, full care of the woman.”⁵¹ In the absence of that “Vedic civilization,” what kind of society provides better care? The crucial question is: Accepting the *principle* of woman protection; what would provide better protection, a culture that treats females as annoying financial burdens and promotes – legally or criminally – exploiting or getting rid of them as much as possible; or a culture that treats them as equals and promotes equal opportunities in education, occupation and civil rights? We are not talking East or West, feminism or anti-feminism; we are simply wondering which system treats women

51 Lecture on *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 3.25.5-6, Bombay, 5 November 1974

better. Latitude or even the century is irrelevant. In 1871, Śrīla Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura expressed in writing his concerns about the mistreatment of women:

The Marriage System of Bengal—an English pamphlet detailing Hindu marriage customs and their deplorable forms. He gives historical outlines of various types of traditional marriages and expresses sympathy for the women subjected to the inhumane marital practices of certain groups in Bengal.⁵²

Yes, yes, yes, women can *possibly* degrade when unsupervised by well-wishing male figures. Yes, they can *possibly* fall prey to unscrupulous men; but hearing of all the murders and abuse of women by the degraded descendents of Vedic India we are tempted to shout: “Equal rights for women ki jaya! Feminism ki jaya! Social and legal equality between genders ki jaya!” At least in those countries that truly give equal rights to women (even if for mundane reasons) we don’t see so many crimes against the female population. Thirty-six years ago, in a private exchange, Śrīla Prabhupāda called Westerners “white aborigines”⁵³ Would he perhaps recognize that, with all the rampant mistreatment of Indian women, today those “white aborigines” could teach Indian men one or two things about women’s protection? India still retains remarkable symptoms of true culture and civilization, but alongside those venerable remains, thrives a fathomless darkness.⁵⁴

52 *Seventh Goswami*, by Rūpa-vilāsa dāsa, appendix entitled “The Literary Works of Ṭhākura Bhaktivinoda (1838-1914)”

53 Morning Walk, Bhuvaneśvara, 24 January 1977

54 We wonder: We witness that certain devotees invest extraordinary amounts of time and energy relentlessly trying to block a few elderly ISKCON ladies from becoming *dikṣā-guru* (for their protection, of course). Wouldn’t that energy (or part of it) be better spent to promote a more Kṛṣṇa conscious treatment of women in general? If their motivation is to promote the Vedic ideals of women’s protection, shouldn’t they give at least *some* attention to the widespread abuse and murder of women in Indian society?

The Vedic ideal of women’s dependence is turning into a deadly tool in the hands of selfish, obtuse, unenlightened males. In a lecture, Śrīla Prabhupāda gave a glimpse of the consciousness required to properly protect women:

So children, *brāhmaṇa*, and here it is said *strī*, woman. . . . They require protection. . . . woman also. Just like old man like us, I am always taken care of. Similarly, a *brāhmaṇa* also should be taken care of, first consideration. First protection, *brāhmaṇa*, saintly person. That is civilization. That is human society. Not that the children, women and the *brāhmaṇas* should be treated like cats and dogs. No, that is not civilization. So Mahārāja Yudhiṣṭhira is very much repentant: “I have killed so many men, and they are, some of them are father, some of them are brother, some of them are sons, some of them are husbands of the women. And because I have killed them, now this woman class, they have become friendless.” . . . Just see how much he is aggrieved, thinking of the condition of the woman. . . . The king is thinking of woman so seriously . . . not like the present government officers, all rogues and simply take taxes and let the citizens go to hell. There is no protection for anyone, either for the children, either for the *brāhmaṇas* or for the women. . . . No. The king must be so responsible that he should see to the comfort of the citizens, especially the *brāhmaṇas*, the children and the women.

– Lecture on *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 1.8.51, Los Angeles, 13 May 1973

Vedic standards require Vedic men; Vedic-sounding norms in the hands of non Vedic people can turn a woman’s existence into a living hell. If we find ourselves opposing equal rights, we should honestly analyze our motivations. Are we just

concerned with preserving male supremacy or do we *really* want to prevent abuse of women? The following exchange shows that Śrīla Prabhupāda was worried about the exploitation of women; he wasn't interested in promoting an illusory and irresponsible sense of male superiority:

Prabhupāda: Equal rights. The rascal father has left, and poor mother is carrying the burden. . . . We are the only shelter for these forlorn women.

Tamāla Kṛṣṇa: We have to give them shelter.

Prabhupāda: Oh, yes, certainly.

– Morning Walk, Los Angeles, 4 June 1976

The solution of social concerns is not anachronistic literalism, traditionalistic bigotry, mundane feminism or mundane anti-feminism. The solution is God consciousness; as Śrīla Prabhupāda said:

Now everything is spoiled. But we don't care for this. We say take to Kṛṣṇa consciousness, everything will be adjusted.

– Room Conversation, Vṛndāvana, 6 September 1976

And Kṛṣṇa consciousness can take unexpected forms. When people mishandled the *Vedas* and turned Vedic sacrifices into indiscriminate butchering of animals, Lord Buddha appeared; he denied the authority of the *Vedas* and stopped the violence. He considered that humans were better off *without* the *Vedas* than misusing them as an excuse for killing animals. Should we adopt a similar attitude? Should we consider that it would be better not to artificially or

too strictly impose the norms of women's submission if irresponsible men misappropriate those customs to torment women? What is better, a system in which – by misusing the *Vedas* – men acts as despots and tyrannize women, or a (non Vedic) system in which men take women as equals and grant them the same civil liberties, legal rights, economic opportunities and social dignity? In any case, Śrīla Prabhupāda, although certainly not an enthusiast of the *mundane* notion of “equal rights,” had accepted equality among the genders as an established feature of contemporary Western society.

“Taking Consideration of the Place, Audience and Time”

In *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta* (*Ādi-līlā* 7.38, purport) Śrīla Prabhupāda wrote (emphasis ours):

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.

Śrīla Prabhupāda adjusted his approach according to local customs; in this case that “boys and girls” have “equal rights.” He considered engaging them in Kṛṣṇa consciousness more realistic, beneficial and urgent than trying to obliterate their cultural upbringing. To give another example of this attitude: Śrīla Prabhupāda often criticized *democracy* – to the point of calling it “demon-crazy” – but that didn't prevent him from appreciating its positive aspects, the opportunities offered by it. He wrote to one of his American leaders:

In your country there is very good system of democracy. . . . So if we can simply convince a good majority of persons then they will automatically want a Kṛṣṇa Conscious leader.

– Letter to Rupanuga, 18 December 1974

In another letter Śrīla Prabhupāda clearly indicated that in our activities we need to consider, and respect, the cultural traits that are not opposed to the principles of Kṛṣṇa consciousness:

I have seen the agenda of your president’s meeting. This is nice. One thing should be followed, however, as 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 Tamala Kṛṣṇa, Rupanuga, 13 October 1969

“According to Sanskrit moral principles” we must consider the mentality and cultural climate of our environment. In connection with the promotion of equal rights, is this idea so evil that it can’t be reconciled with Kṛṣṇa consciousness? Is this notion so foul that it can’t be harmonized within Vaiṣṇavism? Should it be constantly fought against as the most lethal cultural leprosy? We don’t think so. We think that a healthy respect for ladies and engaging them on an equal footing in missionary activities is one of the hallmarks of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism. More than one hundred years ago, Śrīla Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura instructed his followers in his

Śrī Godruma Kalpāṭavī:⁵⁵

Women who are pure devotees can become traveling saleswomen for distributing the holy name to other women, but they cannot give the name to men. Yet, according to time, place, and circumstances, and with great care and caution, mature women can distribute the name to men. Apart from elderly women or very young girls, male preachers should avoid discussing with women.

For nineteenth century’s Bengal these instructions were truly visionary and egalitarian. In keeping with the same mood, some eighty years later Śrīla Prabhupāda wrote feminist-sounding statements in *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta* (both boys and girls are “trained to become preachers” and the girls are considered “as good as their brothers”):

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.

– *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Ādi-līlā 7.31-32, purport*

55 ISKCON Congregational Development Ministry, translation and commentary by Jayapataka Swami

Again we find the observation that “one cannot suddenly change a community’s social customs.” Our priority should be to attract people to Kṛṣṇa and the practice of *bhakti-yoga*, not to pedantically attack “social customs” such as equal rights. And let’s not forget that in many places those rights are guaranteed and protected by law, not just by culture. In a large portion of the planet, challenging equality between the genders not only would marginalize ISKCON, making it irrelevant and despised, but could also have serious legal repercussions.

The above statement in *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta* provides an official, public declaration by the Founder-Ācārya, a sacred reference that should remain fresh in the mind of ISKCON devotees for thousands of years. To “suddenly change a community’s social customs” is out of question; and even accepting it as a long term goal, it would have to be pursued patiently and expertly. It’s like clipping one’s fingernails: When done at the right time is painless, but when done prematurely it can be extremely painful. In any case, his sentence that “those girls are not ordinary girls but are as good as their brothers” should be cherished and honored by all true followers of Śrīla Prabhupāda. And he doesn’t appear *apologetic* about the situation. In the following letter, to a woman disciple, Śrīla Prabhupāda seems to enjoy and recommend such egalitarian dynamics in ISKCON:

[I]n *Bhagavad-gīta* 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 December 1969

Equal Rights Facilitate Spreading Kṛṣṇa Consciousness

Śrīla Prabhupāda warned us that equality can be misused to exploit women; but let’s also acknowledge that the civil rights guaranteeing equality and the culture of self-determination can also *facilitate* women to take up spiritual life. As Śrīla Prabhupāda said in a lecture, “These young boys and girls, they are fed up. They do not want to live like their fathers or grandfathers. They want something better.”⁵⁶ They want something better and, thank God, they can *choose* not to live like their fathers. The anti-feminist can scream until he is blue in the face: “WOMEN SHOULD NEVER BE GIVEN FREEDOOOM!!!” But what if women *already* have that freedom? Is someone suggesting taking that freedom away from them? Would that be practical or feasible? Let’s also recognize that it’s often *because* of that freedom that women *can* join Śrīla Prabhupāda’s movement. Would it be better for them to remain under the control of their fathers and keep eating meat, etc.? Where women are already free, private citizens, with their liberties protected by law, where is the question of giving or taking freedom from them? Let’s base our plans and policies for spreading Kṛṣṇa consciousness on reality, not on daydreams.

It’s because women today *can* make individual choices that they can freely start practicing Kṛṣṇa consciousness in Russia, Australia, South Africa, Poland, Mexico, and so on – and they can also bring their male friends along. Because of their autonomy they can “take shelter of Kṛṣṇa.” Śrīla Prabhupāda said: “We see so many boys and girls, without an aim, loitering, do not know what to do, all confused. So... But if you take shelter of Kṛṣṇa, then you’ll know: ‘Oh, I have got

now shelter.”⁵⁷ And Śrīla Prabhupāda was “glad” to see them using their liberties to “come to the right place”: “I am very glad. You all young boys and girls, you are fortunate. I am not bluffing you. Actually you are fortunate. You have come to the right place, where you can learn Kṛṣṇa consciousness.”⁵⁸ Speaking in Māyāpur, India, Śrīla Prabhupāda said: “My mission was that, I shall go to America, and if some of the American boys and girls, younger section, would accept it, then I’ll bring them here.”⁵⁹ Because those boys and girls could make a free choice, Śrīla Prabhupāda could “bring them here,” to Māyāpur. And Śrīla Prabhupāda acknowledged that their joining ISKCON was possible due to their autonomy, their independence: “Just like you have taken to Kṛṣṇa consciousness out of your independence. There are many other American boys and girls—they are not taking to it. It is not obligatory. But the door is open for everyone. One who is intelligent, he is taking to it. That is due to independence.”⁶⁰ Are we now planning to attempt to curb or erase the independence that allowed these girls to join the movement? Do we really think any of us can turn off and on their “independence switch” as if these women were blenders or water-heaters? We need to assimilate that equal rights are a precious facility for a missionary movement; as Śrīla Prabhupāda observed during an interview with Indian journalists:

Reporter (5): Do you have women followers also in this movement?

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

– Conversation with News Reporters, Delhi, 25 March 1976

57 Lecture on *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 1.8.29, Los Angeles, 21 April 1973
 58 Lecture on *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 2.1.1-5, Boston, 22 December 1969
 59 Lecture on *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 1.9.48, Māyāpur, 14 June 1973
 60 Lecture on *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 2.3.20, Los Angeles, 16 June 1972

That’s why they could join. Women’s self-determination is a non-negotiable cultural feature in many places. As preachers – following Śrīla Prabhupāda’s example and precept – we must consider the circumstances of the preaching field. During a lecture in Delhi, Śrīla Prabhupāda described the Western customs in connection with the interaction of the genders and concluded that he had to adapt his presentation accordingly:

So a *brahmacārī* is strictly prohibited not to see even one young woman. But what can be done? In the Western countries, the boys and girls, they mix very freely. And if I say, “My dear boys, you cannot see even a young girl,” then finished. My business there is finished. Therefore I have to arrange according to the country, according to the circumstances, as far as possible. So gradually, they are coming to the perfectional stage. So we have to adopt *deśa-kāla-pātra*, according to time, according to... But we are keeping our principles as it is, but making arrangement according to the circumstances. That is required.

– Lecture on *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 1.2.10, Delhi, 16 November 1973

“Keeping our principles” without mistaking details of social outlook as crucial. As Śrīla Prabhupāda wrote in *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta*:

An *ācārya* should devise a means by which people may somehow or other come to Kṛṣṇa consciousness. First they should become Kṛṣṇa conscious, and all the prescribed rules and regulations may later gradually be introduced . . . special concessions regarding their customs and habits are necessary to bring them to Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

– *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, *Ādi-līlā* 7.37, purport

We should recognize that in many countries it would be counterproductive to insist on women's submissiveness. Such message could easily turn many audiences into sworn enemies. ISKCON could end up being considered as a pitiable, irrelevant, medieval cultural relic. Someone might object, saying that we must present the message "as it is." In that case the first question would be: Are we sure we know *what* the message is? Otherwise how can we present it "as it is"? Are we sure we are not mistaking details for principles? Are we sure we simultaneously understand both the physical inequality *and* the spiritual equality of the genders? What if we stress only the bodily differences and turn away many people? What if we present our views nihilistically, as if we were kamikazes on our last mission? Without considering the consequences, we might mindlessly repeat what "Śrīla Prabhupāda said" in completely different contexts; to completely different audiences; with completely different depth of realization, compassion and wisdom. We might commit terrible mistakes, similar to that made one day by an inexperienced veterinary. As the story goes, a 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 considering the situation, the expert doctor took a hammer, forcefully hit the bulge, and the horse was cured. 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 got 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. What relevant lesson can we

learn from this story? The "hammer" of advocating ancient social customs should be used very, very carefully, and only by expert practitioners.

We should not neglect Śrīla Prabhupāda's precious example: "if I say . . . then finished. My business there is finished . . . we are keeping our principles as it is, but making arrangement according to the circumstances. That is required." If we don't know how to do that, we should avoid volatile themes we don't know how to present with maturity. We need to acknowledge that large sections of humanity accept women's equal rights and civil liberties as sacrosanct. Irresponsibly attacking those ideas can cause plenty of traumas. It would be like hammering horses' necks without discrimination. Introducing social *varṇāśrama* principles should be done with the utmost care and maturity. Presenting *varṇāśrama* fanatically can do more harm than good. If we can't speak about *varṇāśrama* tactfully and intelligently, it would be better to leave comparative sociology alone and, in all serenity, stick to "We are not these bodies" and "Chant Hare Kṛṣṇa." Thus we can avoid agitating people and bring embarrassment to the *sampradāya*. Instead of fantasizing about the Vedic age, wouldn't be better to follow the example of Śrīla Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura and of Śrīla Prabhupāda, who empowered both men and women to preach and make devotees? If their approach was valid in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, why should we reject it today?

"If There Is First-class Man, Then Whole Question Is Solved"

When talking about "feminism" the focus goes instinctively on women; but actually the real crux of the issue is the men, as Śrīla Prabhupāda explains in the following conversation (emphasis ours):

Prabhupāda: 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. . . . And because **there is no first-class man to take charge of the woman, they are declaring independence . . .**

Brahmānanda: In that sense we can say that the women are inferior, but the men also, they are not first-class.

Prabhupāda: That we also said, that there is no first-class men. So **if there is first-class man, then whole question is solved.**

– Room Conversation after Press Conference, Chicago, 9 July 1975

The heart of the problem is the lack of “first-class man.” Between the protector and the protected it’s the protector that must demonstrate his reliability, his dependability. We might lament that women “are declaring independence”; but should they depend on someone who is not dependable? We need men who can *command* respect, not just *demand* it. That’s the pivot of the whole discussion. The whole issue revolves around the man’s capacity to lead and protect. Women *wish* to see that. They would like to have shelter; as Śrīla Prabhupāda explained in a conversation in Vṛndāvana:

Her psychology is dress very nicely so that man may be attracted. Because they want shelter. This is the whole psychology. They, although they declare independence, they cannot live independently. That is not possible. Therefore they are by nature accustomed to dress attractively so that one may accept her and give her shelter. This is psychology. Otherwise, why the woman are naturally inclined to dress herself nice. Man does not. This is the psychology. A boy, sixteen years old boy, he does not... He is roughly dressed, he does not... But a sixteen year old girl will never remain roughly. She’ll always try to decorate herself very nicely and utilize her youthful beauty for attracting. Why attracting? Because she wants shelter. Therefore it is the duty of the father and mother that she is young girl, she wants shelter, and out of passion, lusty desires, her selection may be wrong. So before she selects out of her own way, let me, it is my duty, I am guardian. Give her some good shelter. This is Hindu process.

Akṣayānanda: Perfectly natural.

Prabhupāda: Very natural.

Akṣayānanda: But they say restricting. But they will say restricting, unnatural.

Prabhupāda: They may say, but this is natural psychology. Father, mother, they know, the well-wisher of the children. Now everything is spoiled. But we don’t care for this. We say take to Kṛṣṇa consciousness, everything will be adjusted.

– Room Conversation, Vṛndāvana, 6 September 1976

“By Violence You Cannot Force a Woman, Agree to Love You”

All males wishing to hold sway over a woman (although in itself a mundane aspiration) and give her shelter should carefully consider the following advice:

Learn to be a man – a real man – and your woman will automatically behave as a woman. First deserve, then desire. Lead like a man and she will follow like a woman. *Be* the guru you are supposed to be for your wife. Your woman won’t submit until she sees you are qualified to lead her. Why should she? Your relentless attacks on feminism and your demands of submission might simply represent a public declaration of your ineptitude and betray your inadequacy. You don’t need to jump up and down petitioning for respect. Learn to command respect; then you won’t need to demand it.

As far as the difference between *demanding* and *commanding* obedience, Śrīla Prabhupāda gave his own example, of how his disciples enthusiastically obeyed him:

Just like in our society, we are not perfect. Still, you boys and girls, you love me. Whatever I say, immediately done.

– Lecture on *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 2.8.7, Los Angeles, 10 February 1975

After all, what is the essential need, to control or to progress? What’s our priority, to dominate or to grow? If the lady is more advanced, shouldn’t the man, humbly and realistically, follow her example? Śrīla Prabhupāda wrote (Letter to Silavati, 14 June 1969):

The actual system is that the husband is Spiritual Master to his wife, but if the wife can bring her husband into practicing this process, then it is all right that the husband accepts wife as Spiritual Master.

Picking and showing off *Manu-saṁhitā* quotes as if they were baseball cards, won’t do; men have to *demonstrate* to be worthy protectors. No amount of “*Manu-saṁhitā* thumping” or “*Manu-saṁhitā* cut-and-paste” can persuade an intelligent woman to submit. She needs to be convinced that her man is “Vedic” also in deeds, not only in borrowed *śloka*s. Why should a woman be impressed by a man whose main claim to leadership is parroting some ancient text? We suggest it would be more fruitful to focus on creating some “first-class man,” instead of trying to curb self-reliance in women. As Śrīla Prabhupāda said:

You cannot create love by violence. That is another thing. But if you want kingdom, there must be violence. By violence you cannot force a woman, agree to love you. That is not possible.

– Morning Walk, Perth, 8 May 1975

Following the Husband Indiscriminately?

We also need to acknowledge that, even within the traditional devotional culture, a woman should maintain her individual dignity, her personal self-determination to ensure coherence with her spiritual standards. For example, Śrīla Prabhupāda wrote:

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 a chaste woman unfortunately marries a husband who is fallen, she should live separately from him.

– *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 7.11.2, purport

Ladies can and should maintain their individual autonomy without blindly acquiescing to materialistic husbands. Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura displayed the principle by initiating unmarried girls and expecting them to stick to their spiritual practices even if later they would face adverse conditions:

Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī accepted some unwed girls as *śiṣyas* [disciples] . . . in those cases it was understood that the maiden was taking *harināma* 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.⁶¹

From the same source we learn that, “In some cases women were initiated even if their husbands were not.”⁶² This indicates that Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura considered these women competent to perform their obligations as

61 *Śrī Bhaktisiddhānta Vaibhava*, by Bhakti Vikāsa Swami, Volume One, page 440

62 *Śrī Bhaktisiddhānta Vaibhava*, by Bhakti Vikāsa Swami, Volume Two, page 246

initiated disciples even without the support, or with the limited support, of less-advanced protectors.

What is the overriding principle; that a woman should *always* listen to her husband, or that she should choose to do what ultimately pleases Kṛṣṇa? Hopefully often there won’t be contradiction between the two. In any case, isn’t it ultimately best that between husband and wife *whoever* is more Kṛṣṇa conscious gets the upper hand? Let’s imagine a husband telling the wife, “This year we should go to the Bahamas for vacation; during daytime we can tan on the beach and at night we can watch the latest Hollywood movies.” Imagine the wife replying, “Dear Prabhu, wouldn’t it be better to go to Vṛndāvana instead? We could do Govardhana *parikrama*, serve the cows in the *goshala* and listen to the lectures of advanced devotees.” Whose opinion should prevail, the husband’s – because he is the male of the situation; or the wife, because she is more God conscious?

Feminism in the *Bhāgavatam*?

In all humility, we suspect that a good portion of what is promoted as “the traditional role of women” is often misunderstood or distorted. When we look into the *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*, for instance, we see exemplary women who stepped forward and expressed themselves. In the seventh chapter of the First Canto, we witness how Draupadī argued with her husband against the killing of Aśvatthāmā. Respectfully (“O most fortunate one who knows the principles of religion”) but firmly (“it is not good for you to cause grief to glorious family members”) she urged Arjuna to spare the son of his teacher. We learn that “King Yudhiṣṭhira fully supported the statements of the Queen, which were in accordance with the

principles of religion and were justified, glorious, full of mercy and equity, and without duplicity.” Besides Bhīma, everyone else, including Lord Kṛṣṇa, agreed with Draupadī’s conclusions.⁶³

In the next chapter we see how, in the presence of the royal *brāhmaṇas* and of Śrīla Vyāsadeva himself, Queen Kuntī stood out and offered her prayers to Kṛṣṇa. Her realizations were so elevated and perfect that they are still studied all over the world.⁶⁴ Both Draupadī and Kuntī offer examples of Vedic ladies who spoke up when they had something to say. We don’t see Lord Kṛṣṇa – personally present at both episodes – disapproving their confidence or condemning them for taking the initiative; we don’t see Him criticizing their self-assurance and self-expression.

In the Tenth Canto we find the example of the *dvija-patnīs*, the wives of the *smārta-brāhmaṇas* who had refused to send food to Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma. They are eternally glorified for ignoring their husbands’ orders and instead choosing to please Kṛṣṇa. Śrīla Prabhupāda writes in *KṚṢṆA, The Supreme Personality of Godhead*, Chapter 23:

Lord Kṛṣṇa then asked all the boys to go again, but this time to the wives of those *brāhmaṇas* . . . the boys immediately went to the wives of the *brāhmaṇas* . . . the boys said, “Dear mothers . . . All of us are very hungry; therefore, we have come to you for some food. Please give us something to eat for Kṛṣṇa, Balarāma and ourselves.”

Immediately upon hearing this, the wives of the *brāhmaṇas* became anxious

63 *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*, First Canto, Chapter Seven, “The Son of Droṇa Punished,” verses 43-51

64 *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*, First Canto, Chapter Eight, “Prayers by Queen Kuntī and Parīkṣit Saved,” verses 17-44

for Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma . . . All the wives then became very busily engaged in filling up different pots with nice food. Due to the performance of the sacrifice, the various foods were all very palatable. After collecting a feast, they prepared to go to Kṛṣṇa, their most beloved object, exactly in the way rivers flow to the sea.

For a long time the wives had been eager to see Kṛṣṇa. However, when they were preparing to leave home to go see Him, their husbands, fathers, sons and relatives asked them not to go. But the wives did not comply. When a devotee is called by the attraction of Kṛṣṇa, he does not care for bodily ties. . . . Kṛṣṇa welcomed them with the following words: “My dear wives of the *brāhmaṇas*, you are all very fortunate and are welcome here. Please let Me know what I can do for you. Your coming here to see Me, neglecting all the restrictions and hindrances of relatives, fathers, brothers and husbands, is completely befitting.”

Interestingly, Kṛṣṇa praises the ladies’ disregard for their “protectors.” Later, their husbands also praise them:

Just see how fortunate these women are! They have so devotedly dedicated their lives to the Supreme Personality of Godhead, Kṛṣṇa, that they could easily do what is ordinarily so difficult: they gave up their family connections, which are just like a dark well for the continuation of material miseries. . . . They have surpassed all of us in firm faith and devotion unto Kṛṣṇa.

Despite all opposition, the *dvija-patnīs* had successfully chosen the right course of action, the absolute path of divine service and surrender. Although they had

outwardly disobeyed the norms of womanly submission to their guardians, they were congratulated by Kṛṣṇa Himself and remain shining examples for all women at all times.

Later in the Tenth Canto we also encounter Queen Rukmini’s “transcendental feminism” in the form of a declaration of psychological independence from the false, temporary “protectors” of this material world and an exhortation to all women to take full shelter in Kṛṣṇa:

[A] woman who has learned about You [Kṛṣṇa]—that You are praised not only in this world but in the halls of the great demigods like Lord Brahmā and Lord Śiva—will not accept anyone besides You as her husband. A man within this material world is just a dead body. In fact, superficially, the living entity is covered by this body, which is nothing but a bag of skin decorated with a beard and mustache, hairs on the body, nails on the fingers, and hairs on the head. Within this decorated bag are bunches of muscles, bundles of bones, and pools of blood, always mixed with stool, urine, mucus, bile and polluted air and enjoyed by different kinds of insects and germs. A foolish woman accepts such a dead body as her husband and, in sheer misunderstanding, loves him as her dear companion. This is possible only because such a woman has never relished the ever-blissful fragrance of Your lotus feet.

– KṚṢṆA, *The Supreme Personality of Godhead*, Chapter 60

Some men feel threatened when women speak philosophy and relativize the male position; but that’s Kṛṣṇa consciousness, to distinguish reality from illusion and to

ultimately take shelter in Lord Kṛṣṇa, not in ordinary males. While, in general, on some level considerations of protection and dependence are certainly appropriate and necessary, Vaiṣṇavīs should internally cultivate the understanding that only Kṛṣṇa can offer them real protection:⁶⁵

If one becomes Kṛṣṇa conscious, then he [she] doesn’t require husband. He [she] does not require. . . . She knows that “Kṛṣṇa 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 Kṛṣṇa. This is temporary, but because we have got this material body we require some.

– Room Conversation, Bombay, 7 January 1977

Some social arrangements must be there “because we have got this material body”; at the same time we should not use the need for protection as an excuse to prevent or curtail engagement in devotional service. Śrīla Prabhupāda wrote to a disciple:

So far as girls or boys lecturing in the morning, that doesn’t make any difference. Either girl or boy devotees may deliver lecture if they choose to do. We have no such distinction of bodily designations, male or female. Krishna Consciousness is on the spiritual platform.

– Letter to Syama dasi, 21 October 1968

On 5 July 1975, in Chicago, when Śrīla Prabhupāda was asked, “Could a woman be a temple president?” he replied, “Yes, why not?” On 25 December 1974 Śrīla Prabhupāda wrote to Mālatī devī dāsī:

⁶⁵ And, of course, devotees in a male body should do the same.

Women in our movement can also preach very nicely. 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 Kṛṣṇa then he is to be accepted as guru. . . . The qualification for leading class is how much one understands about Kṛṣṇa and surrendering to the process. Not whether one is male or female.

Let Men and Women Serve to the Best of Their Ability

Taking to Kṛṣṇa consciousness involves adopting the “Vaikuṅṭha thinking” Śrīla Prabhupāda described in the following purport. From his words we can learn to engage everyone to the best of his or her ability, without imposing artificial impediments:

Everyone should be friendly for the service of the Lord. Everyone should praise another’s service to the Lord and not be proud of his own service. This is the way of Vaiṣṇava thinking, Vaikuṅṭha thinking. There may be rivalries and apparent competition between servants in performing service, but in the Vaikuṅṭha planets the service of another servant is appreciated, not condemned. This is Vaikuṅṭha competition. There is no question of enmity between servants. Everyone should be allowed to render service to the Lord to the best of his ability, and everyone should appreciate the service of others. Such are the activities of Vaikuṅṭha. Since everyone is a servant, everyone is on the same platform and is allowed to serve the Lord according to his ability.

– Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam, 7.5.12, purport

Restricting devotees from excelling in devotional service simply on the basis of gender appears contrary to the “Vaiṣṇava thinking, Vaikuṅṭha thinking” Śrīla Prabhupāda recommended. In conclusion, we suggest that ISKCON devotees should at least embrace a purified, balanced, reasonable, mature, beneficial Kṛṣṇa conscious form of “equal rights” (*feminism*, if you really must call it so) in which, for instance:

1. Women anywhere can choose to take up Kṛṣṇa consciousness (despite what their “protectors” think)
2. Women can and should stop serving or obeying a fallen guardian (father, husband or son)
3. Women can operate in a variety of fields, including becoming university professors
4. Women can give *Bhāgavatam* lectures
5. Women can become temple presidents
6. Women can become *śikṣā-gurus*
7. Women can become *dikṣā-gurus*

There is ample evidence that Śrīla Prabhupāda approved all of the above.

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Apologies to those inadvertently omitted.

All emails quoted in the “1977 argument,” page 128, are from Hṛdayānanda dāsa Goswami; he also contributed other comments, quoted in other sections.