

Bhaktivikas Swami

Gurudevis and Grandmothers

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Undoubtedly, several senior women devotees in our movement are as learned, dedicated, and in other ways spiritually qualified as many of their godbrothers. Why then should there be any hesitation to induct them as diksa-gurus?

An important consideration is that the role of a guru, although wholly spiritual by nature, also has an inescapable social dimension. No one can live in any society without having a social role, which is determined by various factors including gender. For instance, only women can be mothers, and motherhood is much more than merely a biological function.

Among all possible forms of social organization, followers of Krsna's Vedic culture accept varnasrama-dharma as being axiomatically the best. In varnasrama-dharma, a specific, subtle, and subdued role is the norm for women, and men are accorded a more dominant role. From the beginning, Gaudiya Vaisnavas have largely accepted these gender roles, as is apparent in the sparse references to females among the associates of Lord Caitanya. More recently, Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati's Gaudiya Matha was clearly a male-dominated institution.

Yet Lord Caitanya declared Himself to be not a member of any varna or asrama, and Gaudiya Vaisnavism aims to transcend all bodily designations and social roles. Lord Caitanya accepted among His topmost devotees Rupa, Sanatana, Haridasa, and others who were unacceptable to the social orthodoxy. Srila Prabhupada took this principle much further by inducting as brahmanas persons of wholly mleccha stock.

However, in accord with previous acaryas, Srila Prabhupada also wanted to reintroduce varnasrama-dharma. (“Varnasrama-dharma should be established to become a Vaisnava,” said Srila Prabhupada in 1977. “It is not so easy to become a Vaisnava.”) Varnasrama-dharma being a social arrangement and Vaisnavism a spiritual endeavor, there is a natural tension between the two. If devotees become overly concerned with the procedures of varnasrama-dharma, they risk subordinating its spiritual purpose and becoming dully ritualistic. Yet without varnasrama-dharma, aspiring Vaisnavas risk becoming sahajiyas, or losing Krsna consciousness altogether.

Why at all varnasrama-dharma is required, when Vaisnavism is meant to help its practitioners transcend all social considerations, was several times explained by Srila Prabhupada (e.g. in a conversation in Mayapur on 14 February 1977). Indeed, Srila Prabhupada stated that 50% of his mission was yet to be established, in the form of varnasrama-dharma. If we consider what Srila Prabhupada actually did, we can perceive a little of the massive task that Srila Prabhupada has left us. Just as spreading Krsna consciousness worldwide and compiling volumes of lawbooks

for the next ten thousand years was an unprecedented and seemingly impossible achievement, so is the reestablishment of varnasrama-dharma.

Unfortunately we as an institution have opted to acquiesce with a misguided civilization that is collapsing all around us, rather than implementing varnasrama-dharma as the literally God-given remedy for all social ills. We have found it easier to be content with urban properties and followers rather than taking Srila Prabhupada's revolution to the next level by living on the land, protecting cows, producing our own food, and being happy by chanting Hare Krsna. For several years the GBC has been conducting strategic planning, but varnasrama-dharma is not on the agenda, even as a long-term project.

There is ample evidence of ISKCON's becoming increasingly compromised—in fact that is the subject of a whole book by Professor E. Burke Rochford (“Hare Krishna Transformed”). That we have converted the gurukulas started by Srila Prabhupada into schools that teach government syllabi (in contravention of Srila Prabhupada's express order), and that we increasingly present our movement as being Hindu, are just two examples of our pronounced “mission drift.” (See <http://www.oneiskcon.com/2012/07/explaining-some-concerns-about-iskcon-mission-drift/>)

The non-implementation of varnasrama-dharma should be considered in light of the following grave words (Cc Adi 12.10):

acaryera mata yei, sei mata sara

tanra ajna langhi' cale, sei ta' asara

TRANSLATION

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.

PURPORT

Here is the opinion of Srila Krsnadasa Kaviraja Gosvami. Persons who strictly follow the orders of the spiritual master are useful in executing the will of the Supreme, whereas persons who deviate from the strict order of the spiritual master are useless.

(end quote)

Just as Srila Prabhupada criticized his godbrothers as being useless (see Cc Adi 12.8 purport) for not having fulfilled their guru's open order to preach Krsna consciousness, so future generations might well criticize us as being useless for having deviated from Srila Prabhupada's open order to establish varnasrama-dharma.

Therefore I suggest that the issue of female diksa-gurus be considered in relation to the whole direction of our movement. If we wish to continue neglecting Srila Prabhupada's order to institute varnasrama-dharma, then introducing female diksa-gurus is the logical next step in our pandering to the egalitarian fantasy that is intrinsic to modern so-called civilization.

But if somehow we get back to what Srila Prabhupada so much wanted and we decide to implement varnasrama-dharma, then we will have to put much energy into community development, starting at the family level. If husbands and wives cannot live happily together, there cannot be stable families, without which there cannot be stable communities, without which there cannot be varnasrama-dharma.

Sannyasis tend to get all the name, fame, and glory, but it is a great mistake to underestimate the importance of mothers and grandmothers. The body and psychology of women are designed to perform an essential function that men simply cannot do, which is to be mothers. Without the total giving of themselves to their children that is the natural characteristic of motherhood, we cannot expect children to develop into emotionally secure adults. In the modern world, females

are unnaturally drafted into go-getter male roles, and not encouraged to develop their innate feminine tendencies toward motherly affection and selflessness. This is undoubtedly a major unseen factor in the discontent and psychological imbalance of innumerable individuals today. People can suffer lifelong if they do not grow up being soaked in mother's love.

ISKCON already has many devotees competent to deliver learned lectures, but we have yet to demonstrate to the world a better way of life based on stable, happy families. Because we have not yet have a developed family culture, it might seem that that the only way that senior Vaisnavis can share their years of experience in Krsna consciousness is by traveling around giving lectures. No doubt some of our exalted godsisters can lecture as well as the best sannyasis in our movement. Yet by adopting a sannyasi-like lifestyle, they are inadvertently sending a message to junior matajis that the topmost aspiration for a woman in Krsna consciousness is to be an independent preacher—and now maybe a guru also. (However, guruship in ISKCON means a lot more than just big seats and flowers, and would-be gurudevīs might have second thoughts if they knew what they were getting into.)

I respectfully submit that our senior Vaisnavis can better serve Srila Prabhupada's mission, not by trying to emulate sannyasis, but by serving as ideal grandmothers, helping to guide young mothers in how to manage households expertly, with unlimited warmth and affection, and in an exemplary Krsna conscious manner. By acting as home-based guides within small communities, senior Vaisnavis can perform a vital role in establishing Krsna conscious culture at grassroots level in a way that sannyasis cannot. Although in emergencies anything can be done, if we are to

demonstrate to the world that varnasrama-dharma is the most stable, satisfying, and enlightened form of social organization, then we shall have to train our men as responsible husbands and fathers, and our women as devoted wives and affectionate mothers. Trying to cast everyone into male roles simply underlines our failure to institute varnasrama-dharma, and our unwillingness to reverse this trend.

We cannot browbeat lady devotees to adopt stri-dharma, and to attempt to do so would likely result in offenses. Yet if we are to establish that traditional household roles for women, although scorned by feminists, are indeed what Krsna has prescribed for them and is what works best for them and for the world, then first we as a society will have to understand and emphasize this point. We shall also have to praise and adore chaste women, as sastra teaches us to do, rather than simply neglect them.

The present controversy about female diksa-gurus is a symptom of the cultural rift that has been widening within ISKCON for at least fifteen years, and that if not resolved can only result in a distinct schism. It all centers on the question of the cultural orientation of our movement.

Over the years, the leadership of ISKCON has quietly, without consulting the wider body of devotees, promoted assimilation with the broader society rather than conquest of it by varnasrama-dharma. Hopefully, this current standoff concerning female gurus will lead to a society-wide reassessment of our cultural values and of the whole direction of our organization.

If that discussion were to result in a commitment to establish varnasrama-dharma, it would be a great step forward for our movement. By continuing to neglect this order of Srila Prabhupada, we risk being gradually cut off from his full mercy, as is manifest even today in our increasing adoption of secular and mundane traits.

For a detailed discussion of the need for stri-dharma in ISKCON today, please listen to:

Women: Masters or Mothers?