

Woman gurus and normal clothes: the common link

- By Chandrashekhara acharya dasa

I think that the “women as diksa-guru” issue is organically related to the “dress-code” issue. This is why:

With exceptions - both today and in the past - the category of “woman” is often associated with the realm of the “private,” while the category of “man” is often associated with the realm of the “public.”

Arguing for the right for women to act in the capacity of diksa-guru is arguing for the right of women to exercise an activity (i.e., a service) that is public in nature. A guru, especially in ISKCON, is a public figure. For a woman to act as a diksa-guru means for a woman to come out of the realm of the “private” and be a prominent figure in the real of the public. The “private” “enters” into the “public.”

Similarly, with the dress-code issue, it is also generally accepted that the realm of the private is a realm in which there exists no formal uniform. When one is “at home,” one does not need to show a public display of a uniform to anyone. Conversely, if a person is to garb any type of uniform, it is in the realm of the public that one does so. If one performs prominent services such as leading a kirtan, giving a lecture (not to speak of initiating disciple) while wearing normal, local, contemporary clothes, one again is symbolizing the intrusion of the “private” into the “public.” This threatens certain devotees.

It is no coincidence that the “anti women-as-guru” proponents are practically also always “pro-traditional Indian uniform” because in both cases, the “private” challenges the boundaries of the “public.” These devotees do not want the realm of the private to become prominent in the realm of the public.

However, when we look at the history of the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition, the fact is that the realm of the private - as I defined it above - has repeatedly and consistently taken a prominent role in the realm of the public. It is undeniable that Vaishnavis have served publicly as gurus. Similarly, except for discrete symbols such as tilaka and tulasi beads, the Vaishnavas and Vaishnavis have never dressed drastically differently from the rest of society. Queen Kunti and the Pandavas did not dress differently from the non-devotees of their time. Lord Chaitanya and His associates did not put on a uniform to practice Bhakti-yoga.

Therefore I claim that those devotees who insist that women can never be diksha-gurus and that devotees must as often as possible wear traditional Indian clothes are being “more Catholic than the Pope” or “more Vedic than Prabhupada.” They are ignoring explicit statements from Prabhupada on the subject. They are ignoring fundamental Gaudiya theological concepts (i.e., we are not our bodies). And they are ignoring the very history of their tradition.