

Hari Parsada Dasa's comments on FDG

1. Is our tradition opposed to FDGs?

Hari Parsada Dasa (HPD): Women diksa guru were part of history, although there is evidence of opposition. Rupa Kaviraja was opposed to the idea and was rejected. In that sense, our tradition is not opposed to FDG, but it should be well known that our tradition is strictly opposed to any guru (male/female) who is using his/her position to execute desires other than those favorable for Guru and Krishna. Our tradition has strictly opposed the concept of a false guru who cannot lead his/her disciple to the ultimate goal of life (SB 5.5.18) and this seriousness of the position of the guru must be considered by one and all.

2. Won't FDG attain high status and power, and thus manipulate finances and human resources to the extent of creating troubles in our Society?

HPD: In principle, this can happen with any individual guru, not only FDG, for vulnerability to the temptation for power is a universal human weakness. A relevant verse from the Purana-vakya, quoted in Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura's "Gaudiya Kanthahara":

*guravo bahavah santi sisya vittapaharakah
durlabhah sad-gurur devi sisya santapa harakah*

"Many gurus take advantage of their disciples and plunder them. They exploit their disciples for sex, and use them to amass wealth, but a guru who can remove the miseries of his disciples is very rare."

This verse is applicable to both men and women gurus, therefore ISKCON can apply the same policy for overseeing female diksha-gurus as it does with male diksha-gurus. In practice, misuse of power by FDGs is ~~unlikely because our literature and tradition and our institutional structure with GBC oversight won't allow it possible~~ in case the FDG's are occupying a majority within the GBC institutional structure and in case certain FDG's are willing to manipulate the laws in a whimsical way. However, since Srila Prabhupada clearly did not create the GBC structure with ladies having a majority of positions, and since this is unlikely to happen in the near future, it seems unlikely that FDG's will misuse power. Our tradition and our goswami literature are our best friends in this regard.

Additionally, disciples need to be trained and responsible to see if their guru (male or female) crosses the line. Banning FDGs is no solution to the problem.

3. Doesn't the verse "A wise man should never insult women, not should he trust them. He should never become jealous of women nor should he ever appoint them" forbid appointing women on important positions?

HPD: Not necessarily; the verse has an alternative reading: "A wise man should never insult women, nor should he trust them. He should never become jealous of women nor should he ever take possession of them [as slaves]." Srila Sanatana Goswami has given both interpretations in his commentary on this verse.

4. Doesn't the Manu-Samhita forbid women from taking leadership positions such as the brahminical service of diksha-guru?

HPD: The quotes from the Manu-samhita, according to Srila Prabhupada, proclaim everyone born in the western world to be mlecchas and yavanas. There is not even a fraction of evidence in the Manu samhita that a mleccha or a yavana male can turn into a Brahmin by vaishnava diksha. However, we in ISKCON accept that a mleccha or yavana male can turn into a fully qualified Brahmin by vaishnava diksha because "Hari Bhakti Vilasa says so". So we counteract our disqualification of birth by using the Hari Bhakti Vilasa as a shield.

Very well. There are two questions here to be answered by the ISKCON proponents of Manu samhita — (1) That if hari bhakti vilasa would not have been a part of our sampradaya and if all westerners would be considered as mlecchas and yavanas, would they still be so eager to implement Manu samhita in ISKCON? and (2) That if the mleccha/yavana born men can ride on the benefits that the Hari-bhakti-vilasa provides to them, why can't women? It has been clearly shown in the paper of Madhavananda and Bhaktarupa that Hari-bhakti-vilasa considers ~~women~~ all vaishnavas on the level of Brahmins. Therefore, I said that application of Manu Samhita selectively to the female diksha guru is "by all means inappropriate". The discussion on whether FDG's should be allowed to bestow second initiation requires further scriptural and traditional deliberation and that should probably be part of another paper by the SAC. There is no doubt howsoever that the FDGs can bestow first initiation.

5. Does Srila Prabhupada's statement about "not so many" FDGs discourage FDGs in general?

HPD: 1. It's undeniable that Srila Prabhupada never wanted absolutely equal rights for man and women. Rather we live in a patriarchal society, where man takes a leading role. But this doesn't mean that women should keep quiet and stay in the background; rather it means that in carrying out the role of the guru, the men will take primary responsibility, because for that they have a default mindset. Jahnava Mata respected patriarchal society and let male gurus do the main task while taking care only of those who came to her. In this way, she obtained highest respect, up to the point that a great male guru sings: "sri jahnava pada padma koriya smarana dina krishna dasa kahe nama sankirtana". He feels her importance in his spiritual life.

One of the reasons was that she respected patriarchal society and preached from the social position acceptable to all. ISKCON FDGs can and should act similarly. There is no escaping the fact that ours is traditionally a patriarchal society which gives freedom to ladies in unique ways that no other form of religion does.

2. While Srila Prabhupada and B.R.Sridhara Maharaja speak only about Jahnavi mata as a FDG example, there is no reason to infer that they intend that only those such an exalted level can act as a diksha-guru. They just show the most prominent example of FDG. [I am uncomfortable quoting him too much. The reason is not that I respect him any less, but that since he is NOT the founder acharya of ISKCON, his statements, no matter how profound, will always be given a sort of step-motherly treatment by decision makers in ISKCON policies.]

3. This statement “not so many” may refer to all tenses – past, present and future, meaning that there can be some FDGs at all times. Women should accept this and respect Srila Prabhupada’s “not so many” statement.

4. In a large lake, there can be many lotus flowers (pink) and a few special blue colored lotus flowers. Which ones are special? Both are (in their own ways). A lesser quantity of FDG can be very beneficial for ISKCON if it (a) gives dignity to the society and (b) conserves traditional values.

6. Will not women becoming FDGs lead to their abandoning their varnashrama duties as mothers? E.g. women FDGs having small children traveling all over the world and not caring for the children.

HPD: Varnashrama is a social framework to govern civilized human life. Unless one is situated on the topmost platform of bhakti, one is not allowed to abandon varnashrama dharma. Doing so only causes a disturbance in the society (sruti smrti puranadi pancaratra vidhim vina...).

Therefore, even the male gurus in the Gaudiya vaishnava society have been extremely careful about abandoning their duties. Gurus who abandoned their families in the past, did not do it whimsically to obtain social power. Rather, they did it only after long and careful consideration of the ultimate goal of life. Other gurus (like Srila Bhaktivinoda Thakura) never gave up their families and instead, dovetailed everything (including their families) in the service of the Lord, and demonstrated the perfection of varnashrama dharma.

Just as there is a restriction of age for anyone who wishes to take sannyasa in ISKCON, it will be inevitable soon that even for gurus, an age limit will have to be set. In the case of FDG’s the ideal position is when they are free from the responsibilities of taking care of infants or children i.e. when the children have grown up to be independently situated. Also, just as a grihastha who is aspiring for sannyasa is required to have consent of separation from his wife, it seems logical that a FDG should have permission from her husband to execute her duties. To say that all

FDG's will flout varnashrama is an extreme alarmist scenario that is unlikely to happen. There is no problem in ladies becoming diksha guru. However, why do we have to resort to extremes in all cases? Can a lady be a book distributor or a mother? Srila Prabhupada would say – both.

Nonetheless, to address concerns about the possible socio-cultural implications of introducing FDG, a committee can be appointed for oversight - but these concerns don't at all justify banning or indefinitely postponing FDGs. Undoubtedly, the SAC has a lot of work to do in this direction, but the sooner the better.