

Feminism, Submission and the Diksa Guru

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I wanted to call this article "Femininity-Rosewater, Submission-Syrup and the Guru-Gulabjamun: Favorable and Flavorable", but I thought it might be too long. Those who prefer delectable titles may prefer it, however...

In response to "Can Women Be Diksa Gurus?", the fully expected arguments about the need for women to be submissive, ensued, despite the fact, pointed out in the essay, that humility, a service attitude, and submission that is not blind, is desirable conduct for a diksa guru. It is clear from this reaction that we still have a stereotyped conception of what a diksa guru is. Then a prabhu kindly posted some direct verses from Srimad Bhagavatam, which helped us out. Here they are, and herein is a second attempt to reconcile sastra with Srila Prabhupada's order to have female diksa gurus in ISKCON:

SB 7.11.25: To render service to the husband, to be always favorably disposed toward the husband, to be equally well disposed toward the husband's relatives and friends, and to follow the vows of the husband — these are the four principles to be followed by women described as chaste.

"Rendering service": Since a diksa guru must be a self-realized soul, and the position of the self is "das das anudas", a diksa guru is very anxious to render service to the servants of the servants of the Lord. If her husband is a devotee of the Lord, even a very weak one, the self-realized wife is very anxious to offer him service, and if she is a diksa guru as well, she will always encourage him in his spiritual practice. Just as Srila Prabhupada found ways to engage everyone in Krsna's service, however fallen, a diksa guru does not discourage anyone by having a harsh or self-righteous attitude. She simply waits for the process of devotional service to take effect, delighting in every step forward, however small.

"Favorably disposed towards the husband": A devotee is favourably disposed towards every living entity. A self-realized wife not only treats the husband very kindly, but every creature that comes into the house as well. She tries not to hurt ants, spiders or even cockroaches.

"To be equally well disposed toward the husband's relatives and friends." A self-realized soul is equally disposed even in regard to friends and enemies. Indeed, she sees no one as enemy. Even if someone is annoying, they are giving her an opportunity to be tolerant. If they cheat her of her inheritance, they give her an opportunity for detachment. Harsh words can be seen as an opportunity to be equipoised in honour and dishonour. Whatever comes along can be used as a gift from Krsna, if it is seen in that way. If we see things according to what pleases our mind and senses, however, then we will never be peaceful, because we will find fault in every situation.

"Following the vows of the husband". If one partner is following vows of austerity, such as fasting, it can be very difficult when everyone else is enjoying, such as by feasting on delicious foodstuff. Austerity is far easier in an austere environment, (just as business is easier in a business environment), and it is essential also to spiritual practice. If the husband is not so advanced and is struggling just to give up smoking, for example, it is much easier if the wife tries along with him. So, whether at an advanced level of giving up food, or at the basic level of giving up unhealthy addictions, this instruction is a good one.

SB 7.11.26-27: A chaste woman must dress nicely and decorate herself with golden ornaments for the pleasure of her husband. Always wearing clean and attractive garments, she should sweep and clean the household with water and other liquids so that the entire house is always pure and clean. She should collect the household paraphernalia and keep the house always aromatic with incense and flowers and must be ready to execute the desires of her husband. Being modest and truthful, controlling her senses, and speaking in sweet words, a chaste woman should engage in the service of her husband with love, according to time and circumstances.

"A chaste woman must dress nicely and decorate herself with golden ornaments for the pleasure of her husband."

For many, the golden ornament of chastity is the wedding ring, and since most of us like to dress nicely, this is no big deal.

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This is a description of cleanliness, which is an essential sattvic principle, along with maintenance, also sattvic. "Ready to execute desires" does not necessarily mean executing them- obviously there is a difference. Between having a service attitude- being ready to execute service, and actually executing service, is a time for reflection, which is necessary so that one's submission is not blind. Such non-blind submission is necessary to make sure that the husband is not falling into a ditch, with the wife in tow. To the extent that the desire is not against anyone's well-being, material or spiritual, but is indeed favourable to the same, to that extent, the "readiness" mentioned here is transformed into action, by the self-realized and self-controlled wife. It is not only cleanliness that is a sattvic principle- wisdom and foresight are as well.

SB 7.11.28: A chaste woman should not be greedy, but satisfied in all circumstances. She must be very expert in handling household affairs and should be fully conversant with religious principles. She should speak pleasingly and truthfully and should be very careful and always clean and pure. Thus a chaste woman should engage with affection in the service of a husband who is not fallen.

"A chaste woman should not be greedy, but satisfied in all circumstances." This is a natural symptom not only of a wife, but of a self-realized soul as well, and therefore, of a diksa guru.

"Very expert in handling household affairs and (sic) fully conversant with religious principles."

"Expert" is one of the 26 symptoms of a devotee, and therefore, a great devotee diksa guru, would logically be "very expert". "Fully conversant with religious principles" may be a tall order for a wife, but it is absolutely essential to being a guru. Anyone can be guru, Sri Chaitanya taught, the only requirement being that they know the science of Krsna, Who incarnates just to establish the principles of religion. While one is not fully surrendered to Krsna, one must follow all religious principles to the letter. Ultimately one must be ready to renounce them all, for Krsna's pleasure. This will be elaborated on, as we proceed...

"Thus a chaste woman should engage with affection in the service of a husband who is not fallen."

We think of "fallen", generally, in a sexual context only, but actually it is far more subtle than that. The ultimate fall down is to lose sense of one's identity as servant of Krsna and want to enjoy the service of His servants. This is something like a servant in a household telling the other servants to serve him. Sometimes this illusioned servant declares that for them (the other servants), this service is the same as serving the master...

It is not, and it is not the same as "das das anu das" either. How are they different? In a properly functioning household, sometimes servants assist other servants in rendering service to the master. Servant A may wash pots, so that servant B can cook lunch, so that servant C can serve the master directly, his lunch. Certainly, servant A is serving servant B, and servant B is serving servant C, but all in relation to the service of the master. So, Srila Prabhupada engaged everyone in helping him serve his spiritual master in various ways, by preaching Krsna consciousness in the western countries. In that respect only, was serving him the same as serving the Lord.

Serving a person, any person, who is serving the Lord, is the same as serving the Lord, but serving a person because he says "You should serve me. It is your duty as my wife" is not the same thing, as it is not in relation to the Lord's service, even if backed up by extracts of sastra. A Krsna conscious husband, or one who is not fallen, will invite or inspire the wife to help him in his service to Krsna- he will not demand it, because his focus is on Krsna and he knows Krsna is only pleased by happy and willing service. A Krsna conscious wife, or one who fully knows the science of Krsna and may thus initiate disciples, as per the order of Srila Prabhupada, will happily take up the opportunity to put the philosophy into practice and be a servant of the servant of the servant. After all, without the practice, the philosophy is dry and like licking the outside of a honey jar. Service, in devotion, is our honey.

The Vedic instructions, especially Srimad Bhagavatam, are only meant for liberation of the soul from matter, symptomised by the mistaken conception that one is Lord and master- to be served, rather than to serve. Therefore, these instructions for a woman to serve her husband, are for the woman's benefit, to be heard and read and taken up by women, not utilized by men to show how they should be served as masters. We are all servants, and to the extent we forget this, and think we are masters of all we survey, we are lost. That being so, our men should be utterly disinterested in these instructions, knowing them to be specifically and only relevant to women. Whether women serve or don't serve them, they should remain peaceful in executing their own devotional service, undisturbed in all circumstances. In this way, they can remain "not fallen" and inspirational to the willing service described in these verses.

"She should speak pleasingly and truthfully" Married life is not meant to be a battle of egos for supremacy, or even equality, save and except that every woman, regardless of the instructions or desires of the husband, should have equal opportunity for advancement. When the husband is suppressing the realizations of the wife, telling her to be quiet when she knows she must speak the truth, then one must put one's relationship with Krsna before anything else. Therefore, "speaking pleasing words" is followed by "truthfully" It is sometimes not possible to do both, as Srila Prabhupada acknowledges in Bg purport 10.4-5. Here he describes " speaking the truth only if it is pleasant" as a "social convention", but "that is not truth" He then recommends always speaking truth, even if it is unpalatable. This is an example of a religious principle which must sometimes be renounced in the course of devotional service, but it is never done so whimsically.

" (She) should be very careful and always clean and pure." Again, this is necessary for executing devotional service in the mode of goodness. We tend to assume we have transcended the modes, just by performing devotional service. If that were the case, then why Srimad Bhagavatam has described three different varieties of devotional service, one for each mode of nature, and described devotional service in the lower modes as "a means for continuing on in material life"? Vigilance in cleanliness and purity is essential to prevent this.

Cleanliness refers to the body, home and environment also. For a brahmana, everywhere is the home of God, which he tries to keep pure. He would not allow his waste to be dumped in a holy river like the Ganges or Yamuna, any more than he would defecate in a temple. God is everywhere, not just in the temple. Therefore, brahmanas everywhere should join in environmental protection campaigns, not so we can enjoy the environment for a long time to come, but because it is Krsna's residence. Therefore, the Krsna conscious wife uses cleaning products that do not poison rivers and kill creatures or cause abnormalities in their offspring. "Other liquids" do not refer to those which are non-biodegradable and will clean in one place, and poison fish in another.

She is aware that the Lord is in her husband, in every living creature, in her home and outside it, and serves accordingly. Thus, her creative, willing and happy service attitude has no boundaries, and she considers "Nothing is mine, including 'my' husband. All are Krsna's, as am I." Therefore, there is no need to establish superiority, and create a warring environment of egos which will create distress and disturbance for the children.

These instructions about the woman's requirement to be submissive to her husband, thus have a transcendental context in which they can be used, and they are accepted and executed in this way, by those on the transcendental platform. Although on this platform, one is not required to execute such duties, one does not whimsically give them up either, and certainly not on account of false ego. For those ignorant of spiritual life, they still make sense, as much as in the animal kingdom, there is peace within the species- much more so than in the human species- because the physically weak members- females, the elderly and the young-submit to the physically strong, and the strong offer them all protection. Only in the beginning is there a test of strength about who is stronger. It is a waste of time to continually test it, and more so for anyone even remotely interested in transcendental awareness, what to speak of one who actually has it, the guru.

Can A Die-Hard Feminist Be A Guru?

There has been unspeakable exploitation of women in the course of human history, specifically by men, or those who purport to be men, but are actuality of a species far lower than any on this earth. A guru is opposed to all forms of exploitation and even its subtle equivalent, domination, and therefore Srila Prabhupada wrote, as one of the purposes of ISKCON, "to stop domination of one over another... by birthright or vested interests". Since the feminist movement was born out of anger against the exploitation of women, it was started with a purpose similar to our own.

But, as with everything in this world, actions become controlled by the modes of nature. When rajas takes control, feminism becomes a battleground of egos, with children, the victims of friendly fire. When tamas is the modus operandi, the battle becomes violent and one supports the killing of offspring through abortion, in the name of "my body, my right". When one conducts feminism in goodness, one acts for the welfare of all, including oneself. One focuses on rights which benefit, not hurt- not the right to kill, but the opposite- the right to be protected. One insists on it.

Srila Prabhupada insisted on it. He was the ultimate die-hard feminist, caring more for the women he met, than they cared for themselves. He saw and he spoke up against exploitation, explaining how men were seducing women by their "free-love" philosophy- which was nothing more than free prostitution. At least prostitutes are paid, and generally paid well, for their service. Prostitutes are paid, while wives are supported and committed to, with love. By calling one-night-stands "love" and "freedom from sexual taboos" men have free reign to enjoy the bodies of women without responsibility or payment, and the woman is left with either the moral anguish of abortion or the emotional and financial struggle of raising a child alone. He pointed out "How is that equality? You are being cheated!"

In this way, Srila Prabhupada set the example of how feminism can be conducted entirely in the mode of goodness, with the focus on life, love and commitment. He was a diksa guru feminist of the die-hard, or never-say-die type.

In addition, he wanted all his spiritual daughters to be diksa gurus, thus proving himself devoid of any sense of male chauvinism. How many of our GBC men want that too, thus aligning themselves with Prabhupada more than in name only? And if they do, how come there is only one female guru, and none with a Bhaktivedanta degree, Srila Prabhupada's only condition? Instead, the only condition to be guru in ISKCON is GBC approval! This means that they don't care for Srila Prabhupada, their care and concern is for absolute control. They put themselves above Srila Prabhupada's direction, and they expect us to follow and obey them, despite that. We are not required to do so. That would be blind submission.

When they introduce varnashrama as the social paradigm for ISKCON, and Bhaktivedanta degrees as the only requirement for diksa gurus, and do away with their nonsense approval system which requires absolute submission to the GBC, whether or not they are right; when they remove the ban on truthful books based on sastra, such as "Our Mission" and instead encourage every devotee to read them and discuss them; when they remove all those laws which discourage independent thoughtfulness and encourage and reward blind submission; when they ensure the complete protection of women and children in our movement; when all our farms are open for any devotee wanting to come and live peacefully, regardless of whether they pay rent or criticize leadership; when they require local leaders to welcome challenge and criticism that is truthful; when they do these things, then they can be seen as representatives of Srila Prabhupada, as he wanted all these things done. If not, they are not.

The purport of 4.34 describes that blind following is condemned, even in regard to the spiritual master. What to speak of in regard to those who vary so widely from his instructions? How much more condemned would that be?

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