

## Rocana Dasa

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### Sep 17, CANADA (SUN) — A weekly response to Dandavats editorials.

Following last week's Obeisances commentary on a document found in the Dandavats Archive, this week we will comment on another archived paper, "Female Diksha-gurus in ISKCON: A paper by the Sastric Advisory Council (SAC)" (in Word format). Interestingly enough, it was four years ago to the day when the GBC Executive Committee requested their Sastric Advisory Council (SAC) to research the philosophical topic of possible future female diksa-gurus in ISKCON. Our commentary today is on the SAC paper published in response to that request. At the time this paper was written, there were no female members participating on the SAC, although HG Urmila devi dasi subsequently became a member. As we understand it, to this day, Urmila devi has still not been confirmed as a guru.

The first thing one should carefully take into consideration when studying this paper is the actual request itself. Coming from the Executive Committee, this statement is very indicative of how the GBC operates. We should also keep in mind that the persons who are requesting this research are themselves purporting to be gurus, sannyasis, and advanced spiritualists, yet they feel the need to go to this committee to have their philosophical research done.

Upon reading this report, most devotees will have discovered nothing new. The statements contained in the paper are common knowledge to anyone who has studied Srila Prabhupada's books. We do get a hint that there's a lot of contention and tension within the ranks of the GBC on this issue, and they want to use this research and opinion by the SAC to sway certain members. They inform us that there's already been three objections to Urmila devi's application for guruship, which according to GBC law requires her nomination to go before the entire GBC body in Mayapur. One would assume that at the Mayapur Meeting of 2004 they would have discussed this issue. Given the fact that Urmila devi is still not a diksa guru, we can assume that regardless of the information provided in this SAC report, the GBC rejected her nomination. We find no reference to the matter in the 2004 GBC Resolutions.

One of the most important sentences in the GBC's request is: "All we request from you is a philosophical understanding."

The "all" aspect of this is obvious -- they don't want any political opinions or anything that can be construed as the SAC members commenting on what goes on behind closed doors in the GBC. There is, for instance, no comment whatsoever on what the three objections are to Urmila devi's nomination, who made the objections and why, or what their philosophical position was for rejecting the nomination.

The closing sentence of the GBC's request is also typical, in the sense that they say they want to reassure the devotees that the GBC will make their decisions in full knowledge of what they call "Vaisnava history and siddhanta." Not considering the fact that their whole policy on institutional approval for diksa is against our siddhanta and our Sampradaya history, to mouth these words in the context of the issue of women being accepted and approved is really beside the point, and I think somewhat disingenuous.

The SAC provides five categories in which they gathered evidence and of course, the number one is Srila Prabhupada. The others are Gaudiya Vaisnava Acaryas, which includes commentaries by B.R. Sridhar Swami, along with other Vaisnava Acaryas, Vaisnava smrtis, and historical evidence. Interestingly enough, in the early 1980's the GBC banned its members from going to B.R. Sridhar Maharaja for instruction.

Their first heading is "Negative Evidence". SAC members commented on the fact that all the "negative evidence" is based on commentaries made by Srila Prabhupada, in which he is describing varnasrama culture in general, and the overall position that women took in that culture. We're all aware of the controversy surrounding this issue in the context of today's society. Srila Prabhupada, as a Sampradaya Acarya, naturally supports all the sastric conclusions and has given his commentary on such. But in fact, Srila Prabhupada himself was criticized even by his godbrothers for giving the women a unique position, in the sense that he initiated them, allowed them to serve in the temples and take prominent roles in his society.

The SAC members have made it know right from the beginning of the paper that they are in a very subservient or inferior position to the GBC, and they say it's not that they're giving suggestions - but only humble suggestions. Of course, why the GBC themselves couldn't come with the same conclusions is beyond me. The SAC certainly didn't turn up some previously unknown angle or evidence on this issue and their conclusions seem more than obvious, and should have been easily ascertained by the GBC members themselves.

For the most part, the SAC extensively quotes from Srila Prabhupada and then offers brief commentary. Any devotee with experience and common sense would have come to the same conclusions as they do. On the negative side of the equation, they haven't really come up with much. On the positive side they've come up with a great deal of evidence, firstly from Srila Prabhupada himself wherein he states that he's requested both his male and female disciples to become gurus. He points out that Lord Caitanya Mahaprabhu's request is that everyone become a guru, amara ajnana guru hana -- Lord Caitanya requests everyone to become a guru and spread Krsna consciousness throughout the world.

Being a guru is not at all dependent on any kind of material circumstance, especially erudite scholarships. Of course, here the GBC are, going to these so-called erudite scholars to get their philosophical opinion, even though the mass of research that is provided here points to the fact that guru, sastra and sadhu -most recently from Lord Caitanya forward - points to the fact that women have in the past been gurus. The most notable example, of course, is Jahnava Devi, the wife of Nityananda Prabhu. Other examples are also cited here in the paper, so why is it that regardless of all this evidence presented to the GBC, they still have not approved Urmila devi as a diksa guru, even to this day? This is the big question. Of course, due to the lack of freedom of information in ISKCON we have no understanding why this is the case. We don't know who objected in the first place, or why the GBC body took the side of the objectors.

One can assume that the members of the SAC were fully aware of which powerful persons or groups in the GBC were objecting to Urmila devi's nomination. One can read between the lines what the arguments are, because the evidence that they presented is such common knowledge. There's already been enough discussion in support of why there would be objections.

The commentaries that are presented as evidence from Srila Prabhupada's side are in the context of conversations he held with professors and notorieties who are themselves concerned about the general Hindu cultural concept of subjugating or relegating women to a lesser position than they enjoy in the West. As such, the SAC members state that the arguments are that Srila Prabhupada was "acting diplomatically" just to pacify them. But the SAC also points out that this really wasn't Srila Prabhupada's mood ever, for any reason, to simply pacify people by watering down the philosophy.

The general opinion or conclusion made by both Srila Prabhupada and B.V. Sridhar Swami or the sastra is that our tradition is that women have been, and can be, gurus, although it is relatively rare. You can't, however, exclude this set of circumstances using sastra or the sadhus. We are a revolutionary movement. Our movement, as we should understand it and preach it, is not a religion and we stand strictly, 100%, on spiritual principles, not material principles. Everyone's qualifications to be a guru or

even be a devotee is strictly based on how much they understand and have assimilated and realized the principles of the Science of Krsna consciousness.

This whole debate of whether or not a woman can accept the position of the guru is foreshadowed by the fact that anybody, according to our philosophy, can accept this position so long as certain etiquettes are observed, namely the aspirant's guru has departed. That also goes for the principle of sannyasa. Now if ISKCON as an institution wants to place rules on some aspect of the institutional framework, such as who can be a GBC or a Temple President, that's fine. That's on a lower platform and as such, is much harder to argue with. But the whole principle of guru is very different because you can't institutionalize these spiritual principles. But this, of course, is precisely what ISKCON is doing. They typically rely on the argument that they're trying to "protect" their members, but this is a very weak argument. They haven't been able to protect their members so far using this rule. Instead they've excluded many, many qualified members and have created huge, catastrophic messes in an attempt to implement this rule. There are thousands of ex-disciples of fallen gurus who were approved by this method, and yet they insist on maintaining it. To this day they are looking for weasel clauses in an attempt to bypass the test of guru, sadhu and sastra, which is symptomatic of the religious institution.

The most educational aspect of this document, really, is the examples of numerous women in our tradition who have assumed the position of guru. These serve as an example that if Urmila devi, for instance, is accepted as a diksa guru, she'd join the ranks of some very exalted Vaisnava women in the past who have accepted this responsibility. Of course, the SAC comments that we can't imitate these great devotees - in other words, that Urmila devi in this particular case can't imitate these great examples of women Vaisnavas. Of course, so many of the men in ISKCON have been permitted, and even encouraged and mandated to imitate the great Acaryas, including Srila Prabhupada, but the women have to be careful not to do that. Clearly, this is nothing but institutional hypocrisy.

So really this document produced by the SAC committee is supposed to give us the impression that it was produced by an objective, unbiased, brahminical committee. Yet the whole document clearly shows that to a large degree, it is political. This committee has had to dance around a lot of false egos amongst the power elite within the institution in order to not offend them, and the Executive Committee has more than just hinted that they'd better not do that.

In their closing comments the SAC members emphasize what they call the psycho-physical difference between men and women, which they think is something we, as unqualified western devotees, have to take into consideration. They did not clearly state the fact that the Sampradaya Acaryas, especially since Lord Caitanya Mahaprabhu, have emphasized the importance of preaching Krsna consciousness above

and beyond any kind of 'psycho-physical' nature. And if you want to take into consideration 'psycho-physical' natures, then you'd have a far bigger consideration to deal with as to the nature of persons born and raised in the West and their tendencies towards deviation. This has proven to be the biggest impediment in our attempt to preach Krsna consciousness.

Of course, the overall principle that Srila Prabhupada, as a representative of the Sampradaya, has emphasized is that we can do anything and everything as long as we are doing it based on the principle that we are serving Lord Caitanya, our motives are pure, and our objective is to preach Krsna consciousness. We should all at least understand and have actually realized that when you're preaching this philosophy in the West, especially, there is absolutely no impediment based on whether this knowledge and philosophy is being spoken by a woman or a man. It has just as much potency, especially when you consider that a lot of women are just as pure, both in actions and words, then men - if not more. I think I could say with a degree of certainty that there's been far fewer examples of women falling down in this movement than men. The men falling down has resulted in huge setbacks to the preaching, and has deteriorated the preaching potential in the West. But that doesn't prevent them from putting the women under the microscope when it comes to sharing what they perceive to be the power of the diksa role.

The GBC has already made an exception in allowing Malati devi serve as a GBC member, even though frankly, of all the women in ISKCON leadership I can think of, her history is far more spotty than any. So why not take a chance on someone like Urmila devi dasi? I don't personally know Urmila devi well, but as ISKCON is a small-town mentality in which everybody knows everybody's else's business, it's obvious that if she'd done anything questionable we would have heard about it by now. We all know of her achievements in terms of education, and all her children are considered good devotees. So what's the problem here? It's ridiculous to prevent her, what to speak of any qualified Srila Prabhupada female disciple, from assuming this kind of responsibility. And whether you get GBC approval or not, there's absolutely no guarantee whatsoever that a person is spiritually qualified or isn't going to have some difficulty. Look, for example, at Suhotra Prabhu, who was a member of the SAC producing this Report. His personal difficulties are well known, but that didn't preclude the GBC Executive Committee from seeking his input on such an important philosophical issue.

Before this SAC Report disappears from view, as so many other GBC documents have in the past, I think it would be very educational and important for all serious devotees to take a good look at this document and put it in their own archives. If you want a panoramic view of the entire Vaisnava landscape, documents like this certainly help you to get a focus on what ISKCON is and what it's up with respect to institutionalized religion. This must be kept in mind when considering today's ISKCON as one of the options you have on your journey towards the ultimate goal of pure devotional service.

Obeisances to Dandavats, to the Sastric Advisory Council, and to HG Urmila devi dasi.

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