

Female Dīkṣā-gurus in ISKCON

A paper by the Śāstric Advisory Council (SAC)

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Introduction

On the 17th of September 2003, the Sastric Advisory Council (SAC) received a request from the Executive Committee (EC) of the GBC requesting it to research the philosophical topic of possible future female *dīkṣā-gurus* in ISKCON:

“We are aware that the possibility of devotees wanting ladies to become *gurus* in ISKCON is there, but so far no one has addressed the matter of how correct or appropriate it may be in terms of Śrīla Prabhupāda’s statements, *śāstra*, the statements of previous *ācāryas*, or historical considerations. Now that Urmilā’s name has been proposed as a *guru* within ISKCON it has brought the subject to the forefront, and the EC feels there is a need for research to be done for a clear understanding. We would like SAC to research this and give us a report. We will conduct a separate discussion about the cultural impact of this decision. All we request from you is a philosophical understanding.”

In regards to the processing of Urmilā Devī’s particular case in ISKCON one member of the EC wrote, “As far as I understand it is the regular process. We haven’t changed GBC law. But she has already received three objections, which means that her nomination goes before the entire GBC body in Māyāpur for discussion. So the GBC body wants to be prepared sastrically to discuss this issue, draw a conclusion and make an informed vote on it. Also, we want devotees in general to understand that the decision of the GBC was made in knowledge of Vaiṣṇava history and *siddhānta*.”

SAC members felt that the circumstances of the task were valid, and the topic interesting, and so accepted the task. Urmilā Devī, however, being a SAC member involved in this case before the GBC, excused herself from the discussion and writing of this paper.

Furthermore, in order to ensure that all sides of the topic were properly represented, SAC accepted a temporary member representing Vaiṣṇavas raised in Bhārata where one might question the propriety of female devotees as *gurus* due to cultural background.

SAC members decided to proceed by trying to gather evidence in the following categories: (1) statements by Śrīla Prabhupāda (2) statements by other Gauḍīya

Vaiṣṇava ācāryas (3) statements by other Vaiṣṇava ācāryas (4) statements from Vaiṣṇava *smṛtis* and (5) historical examples.

We also decided to broaden our view and assist the GBC in their discussions on cultural impact by conducting a limited survey of leaders of Gauḍīya and other Vaiṣṇava *sampradāyas*; That will be presented separately. We began our discussions on the 8th of May 2004. The results are found below.

Negative Evidence (SAC comments in italics / essential points in bold italics)

1) *Hari-bhakti-vilāsa* (11.708) quotes from the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* (3.12.30) (regarding how a *gṛhastha* should work in this world):

*yoṣito nāvamanyeta
na cāsām viśvased budhaḥ
na caiverṣur bhavet tāsū
nādhikuryāt kadācana*

“A wise man should never insult women, nor should he trust them. He should never become jealous of women, **nor should he ever appoint them.**”

Śrīla Sanātana Gosvāmī comments: *nādhikūryāt adhikāraṁ na kūryāt. yad vā strībhyo 'dhikāraṁ na dadhyāt ity arthaḥ.* “*Nādhikūryāt*” means one should not appoint women or that **one should not give authority to women.**

This is a general statement. It states that women should not be given positions of authority. Of course, this authority could mean only administrative positions like kings or other heads of state. After all, being a mother is also a role of authority.

2) “As for behavior, there are many rules and regulations guiding human behavior, such as the *Manu-saṁhitā*, which is the law of the human race. Even up to today, those who are Hindu follow the *Manu-saṁhitā*. Laws of inheritance and other legalities are derived from this book. **Now, in the *Manu-saṁhitā* it is clearly stated that a woman should not be given freedom.** That does not mean that women are to be kept as slaves, but they are like children. Children are not given freedom, but that does not mean that they are kept as slaves. The demons have now neglected such injunctions, and they think that women should be given as much freedom as men. However, this has not improved the social condition of the world. Actually, a woman should be given protection at every stage of life. She should be given protection by the father in her younger days, by the husband in her youth, and by the grownup sons in her old age. This is proper social behavior according to the *Manu-saṁhitā*. But modern education has artificially devised a puffed-up concept of womanly life, and therefore marriage is practically now an imagination in human society. Nor is the moral condition of woman very good now.” (Bg 16.7 purport)

One will find many such restrictive statements about women made by Śrīla Prabhupāda. These are in regard to eternal varṇāśrama principles given by Manu. Therefore they also apply to today's world. If female devotees are to follow their Godbrothers in accepting the role of guru in ISKCON at all, such a decision will surely not be based upon the equal-rights doctrine found in modern Western civilization.

3) "In the *Manu-smṛti* it is stated that *a woman should not be given independence*, but should be given protection by her father, husband and elderly sons. *In all circumstances a woman should remain dependent upon some guardian*. Presently women are given full independence like men, but actually we can see that such independent women are no happier than those women who are placed under guardians. If people follow the injunctions given by the great sages, *śrutis* and *smṛtis*, they can actually be happy in both this life and the next. Unfortunately rascals are manufacturing so many ways and means to be happy. Everyone is inventing so many methods. Consequently human society has lost the standard ways of life, both materially and spiritually, and as a result people are bewildered, and there is no peace or happiness in the world. Although they are trying to solve the problems of human society in the United Nations, they are still baffled. Because they do not follow the liberated instructions of the *Vedas*, they are unhappy." (*Bhāg.* 4.18.3 purport)

One may refer to such statements in connection to our theme. Śrīla Prabhupāda, however, is not directly speaking about female dīkṣā-gurus. Then again, these kinds of statements may be followed, and thus reconciled, by supportive facilities in the form of relative prerequisites in deciding female dīkṣā-guru eligibility. Samples of such conditions are presented at the end of this paper as only humble suggestions.

4) "*Abalā*, another name of the woman. Just like if somebody attacks woman... Any young man, when he has got sixteen years old, he can attack any woman. But a woman, even though she is sixteen years or eighteen years or twenty years, she becomes immediately victim. So *abaleva*. Even the woman is higher in age, still, she cannot protect. *Therefore woman requires protection. Woman requires protection. According to Vedic culture, woman has no independence, because they cannot keep their independence.* It is not possible. A sixteen-year-old boy can go safely all over the world, but a sixteen-year girl cannot. That is not possible."

If female devotees are to assume the role of spiritual master, then that role would be executed differently than a sannyāsī because women require protection. Śrīla Prabhupāda continues:

"By nature, they are weak. So they require protection. And until she reaches youthhood, she is protected by the father. As soon as she reaches youthhood, she is given to a young man, her husband, to give protection. And in old age, she is protected by the elderly sons. This is the Vedic culture. They have three phases of life: childhood, youthhood, and old age. Because they are weak. *In the Western countries, the women are given freedom like man, but that is unnatural. Unnatural.* Therefore these poor

souls are being exploited by the other section. It is a great deficiency of the Western sociology. But the Vedic culture is different from this. Woman is not given independence.” (Bhāg. 1.15.20 lecture 30 November 1973, LA)

If women accept the role of spiritual master they should not consider that they will be socially independent.

5) “Actually, Dhruva Mahārāja’s mother, Sunīti, was his *patha-pradarśaka-guru*. *Patha-pradarśaka-guru* means “the guru, or the spiritual master, who shows the way.” Such a guru is sometimes called *śikṣā-guru*. Although Nārada Muni was his *dīkṣā-guru* (initiating spiritual master), Sunīti, his mother, was the first who gave him instruction on how to achieve the favor of the Supreme Personality of Godhead. It is the duty of the *śikṣā-guru* or *dīkṣā-guru* to instruct the disciple in the right way, and it depends on the disciple to execute the process. According to śāstric injunctions, there is no difference between *śikṣā-guru* and *dīkṣā-guru*, and generally the *śikṣā-guru* later on becomes the *dīkṣā-guru*. *Sunīti, however, being a woman, and specifically his mother, could not become Dhruva Mahārāja’s dīkṣā-guru.*” (Bhāg. 4.12.32 purport)

This is the strongest statement against the possibility of female dīkṣā-gurus. However, in itself, this statement is not conclusive, as we will see when we examine the positive evidence. The previous chapter of Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam (4.11) presents the conversation of Svāyambhuva Manu with Dhruva. This pastime of Dhruva was enacted during Svāyambhuva Manu’s reign (Laghu-bhāgavatāmṛta 3.54).

Positive Evidence (SAC comments in italics / essential points in bold italics)

1) *Hari-bhakti-vilāsa* (1.211) quotes from *Kulārṇava-tantra* (15.97):

*svapna-labdhe striyā datte
mālā-mantre ca try-akṣare
ekākṣare tathā mantre
siddhādīn naiva śodhayet*

“One should not test a *mantra* attained in a dream, a **mantra given by a woman**, a *mālā-mantra* [*mantra* over 20 syllables] or *mantras* of one or three syllables for *siddha* and so on.” [Note: This is in connection with a discussion on how to test the effect of *mantras* by various means. The author writes about *mantras* not needing testing, later stating that *kṛṣṇa-mantras* are exempt from testing.]

This verse points to the fact that, in the past, women sometimes gave mantras. One could then assume that women, on occasion, had acted as dīkṣā-gurus.

2) “*I want that all of my spiritual sons and daughters will inherit this title of Bhaktivedānta*, so that the family transcendental diploma will continue through the generations. *Those possessing the title of Bhaktivedānta will be allowed to initiate*

disciples. Maybe by 1975, all of my disciples will be allowed to initiate and increase the numbers of the generations. That is my program.” (Letter to Hamsadūta—Los Angeles 3 December, 1968)

Śrīla Prabhupāda’s statement is general, but it does include female disciples. And it is spoken in reference to ISKCON.

3) “Therefore, we have begun *Bhagavad-gītā As It Is*. Don’t try to become over spiritual master. Then you’ll spoil. Remain always a servant of your spiritual master and present the thing as you have heard. You’ll be spiritual master. This is secret. You should know it. Don’t try to become over-intelligent. That will spoil. *Evam paramparā-prāptam imam rājarṣayo viduḥ* [Bg. 4.2]. So Caitanya Mahāprabhu says, *āmāra ājñāya guru hañā tāra ei deśa...yāre dekha, tāre kaha, 'kṛṣṇa'-upadeśa* [Cc. *Madhya* 7.128] Just see. It is very nice. You’ll find in *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, now it is published. Caitanya Mahāprabhu says—He is the Supreme Lord, Kṛṣṇa—He says, *āmāra ājñāya*. ‘Whatever I say, *āmāra ājñāya*, by My order, you become a spiritual master.’ Caitanya Mahāprabhu. So one may be very illiterate, no education, or no scholarship, may not be born in *brahmaṇa* family, or may not be a *sannyāsī*. There are so many qualification. But one may not have all these qualifications. He may be rascal number one, but still, he can become spiritual master. How? *Āmāra ājñāya*. As Kṛṣṇa says, as Caitanya Mahāprabhu says, if you follow, then you become spiritual master. One may be rascal number one from material estimation, but if he simply strictly follows whatever is said by Caitanya Mahāprabhu or His representative spiritual master, then he becomes a *guru*.

“So it is not very difficult. One may not think that ‘I am not qualified to become *guru*.’ No, you are qualified if you follow strictly the *paramparā* system. Then you are qualified. That’s all. *Āmāra ājñāya guru hañā...* And what is the difficulty? Caitanya Mahāprabhu says, ‘Don’t feel any difficulty.’ Because as spiritual master, what you have to do? *Yāre dekha, tāre kaha, 'kṛṣṇa'-upadeśa* [Cc. *Madhya* 7.128]. Whomever you meet, you simply speak to him the instruction which Kṛṣṇa gives. What Kṛṣṇa instruction gives? That is also very easy. What is that? Kṛṣṇa says *man-manā bhava mad-bhakto mad-yājī mām namaskuru* [Bg. 18.65]. Kṛṣṇa says ‘Just become My devotee, always think of Me, offer Me obeisances, and worship Me.’ So here is Kṛṣṇa. If you simply think ‘Here is Kṛṣṇa, Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa Deity,’ you may be fool number, rascal number one. That doesn’t matter. But you are getting impression of this Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa, think of Him: ‘Oh, how nicely Kṛṣṇa is decorated.’ This much. No erudite scholarship. Simply. Kṛṣṇa says, *man-manā bhava mad-bhakto*. Here is Deity. Worship Him nicely as it is regulated principle. Even you are not worshiping, simply think of Kṛṣṇa, ‘Here is Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa.’ Impression. What is the difficulty? As soon as you see Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa, you get some impression. Think of that impression. Where is the difficulty? *Man-manā bhava mad-bhakto*. ‘Worship me.’ If you have got opportunity, worship. If you are initiated, worship here. Or you install Deity at home... Practical. *Man-manā bhava mad-bhakto mad-yājī mām namaskuru* [Bg. 18.65]. And if you cannot do anything, simply come and offer your obeisances: ‘My dear Lord Kṛṣṇa, I am so

poor, so unfortunate, I cannot do all these things, but I offer my humble obeisances unto Your lotus feet.' That much also. If you do this, you become spiritual master.

“So, simply by accepting this principle, and even if you are not learned, illiterate, you are hearing so much from *Bhagavad-gītā*, you simply repeat that. Simply repeat that. There is no question of becoming very learned scholar. God has given you this ear. Even if you are blind, you cannot read, you can hear. So *kṛṣṇa-upadeśa*, what is Kṛṣṇa...? This is *kṛṣṇa-upadeśa*. And at last, Kṛṣṇa says, *sarva-dharmān parityajya mām ekaṁ śaraṇam vraja* [Bg. 18.66]. So if you simply preach this cult, ‘My dear friend, my dear brother, you surrender to Kṛṣṇa,’ you become spiritual master. You become spiritual master....

“Immediately, touch his feet. Immediately, even if he's enemy, he'll be a friend. Even if he's your enemy, it is so nice process. Take a grass on your mouth and immediately fall on his feet, *padayor nipetya*, and with folded hands, much flattering... All flattering words. *Ahaṁ bravīmi*. So immediately he will agree, ‘Yes, what you say I'll hear. I'll hear.’ Immediately, convert to hear you at least. Just see how perfect process is. ‘Then what is your purpose, sir? Why you are becoming so humble, meek? “And now say.” ‘Yes sir, I'll say.’ What is that? *He sādhaḥ*, ‘You are a great *sādhu*.’ Although he may be rascal number one. Still, you call him, *he sādhaḥ*. ‘Yes, I am *sādhu*, yes. What is your proposal?’ ‘Now kindly forget all nonsense, whatever you have learned. That's all. I am flattering you because I want that you forget everything, all these *yogīs* and this and that and that and that and meditation. Please kick out all these.’ ‘Then what I have to do?’ *Caitanya-candra-carāṇe kurutānurāgam*. Just adhere yourself to the lotus feet of Lord Caitanya Mahāprabhu. Then you become spiritual master. That's all.”

“So I hope that all of you, men, women, boys and girls, become spiritual master, and follow this principle. Spiritual master, simply, sincerely, follow the principles and speak to the general public. Then Kṛṣṇa immediately becomes your favorite. Kṛṣṇa does not become your favorite; you become Kṛṣṇa's favorite. Kṛṣṇa says in the *Bhagavad-gītā*, *na ca tasmād manuṣyeṣu kaścin me priya-kṛttamaḥ*: ‘One who is doing this humble service of preaching work, Kṛṣṇa consciousness, nobody is dearer than him to Me.’ So if you want to become recognized by Kṛṣṇa very quickly, you take up this process of becoming spiritual master, present the *Bhagavad-gītā* as it is. Your life is perfect. Thank you very much.”

(Vyāsa-pūjā Lecture—London, August 22, 1973)

It is somewhat significant that this is a Vyasa-pūjā lecture in which the principle of disciplic succession is naturally being addressed by Śrīla Prabhupāda. Prabhupāda specifically says, “...all of you, men, women, boys and girls, become spiritual master.”

4) **Woman:** Svāmijī, would you say something about the place of women in your movement?

Prabhupāda: There is no distinction between man and woman. That is clearly said in the *Bhagavad-gītā*. *Mām hi pārtha vyapāśritya ye 'pi syuḥ pāpā-yonayaḥ / striyo śūdrās tathā vaiśyāḥ*. The first is mentioned, *striyaḥ*. *Striyaḥ śūdrās tathā vaiśyāḥ*. These classes are understood to be less intelligent—woman, *śūdra*, and the *vaiśyas*. But Kṛṣṇa says, “No, even for them it is open.” Because in the spiritual platform there is no such distinction, man, woman, or black, white, or big or small. No. Everyone is spirit soul. *Paṇḍitāḥ sama-darśinaḥ* [Bg. 5.18]. *Vidyā-vinaya-sampanne brāhmaṇe gavi hastini śuni caiva śva-pāke ca paṇḍitāḥ* [Bg. 5.18], one who is actually learned, he is *sama-darśinaḥ*. He does not make any distinction. But so far our material body is concerned, there must be some distinction for keeping the society in order.

Woman: The women could become *paṇḍitas*, then.

Prabhupāda: Oh, yes. *Te 'pi yānti parām gatim*. Not only come, she can also attain perfection. There is no such restriction. Kṛṣṇa said.

Woman: Do you have any *paṇḍitas* in the Western movement?

Prabhupāda: There are so many Western woman, girls, in our society. They are chanting, dancing, taking to Kṛṣṇa consciousness. Of course, because superficially, bodily, there is some distinction, so we keep women separately from men, that's all. Otherwise, the rights are the same.

Prof. O'Connell: Is it possible, Svāmījī, for a woman to be a *guru* in the line of disciplic succession?

Prabhupāda: Yes. Jāhnavā Devī was—Nityānanda's wife. She became. If she is able to go to the highest perfection of life, why it is not possible to become *guru*? But, not so many. Actually one who has attained the perfection, she can become *guru*. But man or woman, unless one has attained the perfection.... *Yei kṛṣṇa-tattva-vettā sei guru haya* [Cc. *Madhya* 8.128]. The qualification of *guru* is that he must be fully cognizant of the science of Kṛṣṇa. **Then he or she can become guru.** *Yei kṛṣṇa-tattva-vettā, sei guru haya.* [break] In our material world, is it any prohibition that woman cannot become professor? If she is qualified, she can become professor. What is the wrong there? She must be qualified. That is the position. **So similarly, if the woman understands Kṛṣṇa consciousness perfectly, she can become guru.**

Indian man: Well, to understand Kṛṣṇa consciousness, do you not require *adhikāra*?

Prabhupāda: *Adhikāra* means he must agree to understand. That is *adhikāra*. But we do not agree. That is our fault. (Interview with Professors O'Connell, Motilal and Shivaram—June 18, 1976, Toronto)

Śrīla Prabhupāda directly addresses the issue of a woman's qualification to be guru, and he says that if she meets the standard qualification mentioned in the śāstra, then she is qualified. Prabhupāda specifically says that "he or she" can become guru if they meet the standard qualification. There is no mention of any special qualification for women. There is mention, however, that although men and women are equal according to spiritual identity, women may not be allowed to associate with men in the temple. Although as spirit souls they may be qualified, still, because of the bodily difference, there is some separation.

He adds, "not so many." That could be because of two reasons: (1) the qualification for men and women is the same [which is clearly stated], but not so many women as men can attain that qualification, or (2) women and men can both attain the qualification in fairly even numbers, but there are other factors that cause women to become gurus in lesser numbers. Either way, there is no higher level of qualification required for women as compared to men.

Someone may argue that here Śrīla Prabhupāda is conversing with secular scholars and is thus speaking somewhat diplomatically to pacify them. But that was not his habit. He spoke the truth to whomever he met—scholars, scientists or reporters. In terms of women's issues particularly, he was very direct and had no fear of public opinion, as can be seen in his many conversations. It should also be mentioned that two Indian professors were present during this conversation. Therefore it could be concluded that Śrīla Prabhupāda was not considering a different approach among Indians.

Finally, in this conversation, Prabhupāda also provides a śāstric reference and employs systematic reasoning with a logical analogy to support his statement. Therefore this statement should be accepted as significant evidence.

5) **Prabhupāda:** So a crazy man's statement is not accepted. Child's statement, crazy man's statement, unauthorized person's statement, blind man's statement, we cannot accept.

Ātreya Ṛṣi: A woman's statement?

Prabhupāda: Huh?

Ātreya Ṛṣi: A woman's...

Prabhupāda: If a woman is perfect in Kṛṣṇa consciousness... Just like Jāhnavā Devī, Lord Nityānanda's wife, she was *ācārya*. She was *ācārya*. She was controlling the whole Vaiṣṇava community.

Ātreya Ṛṣi: Lord Nityānanda?

Prabhupāda: Wife. Jāhnavā Devī. She was controlling the whole Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava community.

Ātreya Ṛṣi: Do you have references about that in any of your books, Śrīla Prabhupāda?

Prabhupāda: I don't think. But there are many *ācāryas*. Maybe somewhere I might have mentioned. It is not that woman cannot be *ācārya*. Generally, they do not become. In very special case. But Jāhnavā Devī was accepted as, but she did not declare.

Women can be ācāryas, but it is rare—only in special cases. One meaning of this statement could be that not many women have been qualified to become an ācārya. Another may be that even though many women were qualified, still very few have assumed the service of initiating disciples for other reasons, e.g. social reasons. In context, the comment, “But there are many ācāryas” indicates that there were many female gurus. The conversation continues.

Ātreya Ṛṣi: Women today..., there is a very popular topic amongst women. They speak of liberation. And their desire to be liberated is sane, but they do not understand. And they object very strongly... I've spoken to some of these so-called liberated women, and they object strongly to Kṛṣṇa consciousness, because they think we discriminate against women. So I have been taking advantage of opportunities to describe to them that the only means to liberation for men and woman is through Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

Prabhupāda: Kṛṣṇa does not make any discrimination. Kṛṣṇa does not make. Whatever difference is there, it is bodily difference. But as soul, there is equality. So whatever difference we make, that is bodily difference. So when one is above the bodily concept of life, there is no difference. Why woman? Even cats and dogs. Woman is human being. Even cats and dogs, they have got the same spirit soul. So a learned scholar will see from the spiritual platform. Then there is equality. (Room Conversation: 29 June 1972 San Diego)

Equality is based on the soul being equal. That is the spiritual platform. Here Prabhupāda repeats the idea that there is no difference between genders or even between different species when one is above the bodily concept.

6) *kibā vipra, kibā nyāsī, śūdra kene naya / yei kṛṣṇa-tattva-vettā, sei 'guru' haya*

“Whether one is a *brāhmaṇa*, a *sannyāsī* or a *śūdra*—regardless of what he is—he can become a spiritual master if he knows the science of Kṛṣṇa.” [Caitanya-caritāmṛta Madhya 8.128]

PURPORT

“This verse is very important to the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement. In his *Amṛta-pravāha-bhāṣya*, Śrīla Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura explains that one should not think that

because Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu was born a *brāhmaṇa* and was situated in the topmost spiritual order as a *sannyāsī*, it was improper for Him to receive instructions from Śrīla Rāmānanda Rāya, who belonged to the *sūdra* caste. To clarify this matter, Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu informed Rāmānanda Rāya that knowledge of Kṛṣṇa consciousness is more important than caste. In the system of *varṇāśrama-dharma* there are various duties for the *brāhmaṇas*, *kṣatriyas*, *vaiśyas* and *sūdras*. Actually the *brāhmaṇa* is supposed to be the spiritual master of all other *varṇas*, or classes, *but as far as Kṛṣṇa consciousness is concerned, everyone is capable of becoming a spiritual master because knowledge in Kṛṣṇa consciousness is on the platform of the spirit soul.* To spread Kṛṣṇa consciousness, one need only be cognizant of the science of the spirit soul. It does not matter whether one is a *brāhmaṇa*, *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya*, *sūdra*, *sannyāsī*, *grhastha* or whatever. *If one simply understands this science, he can become a spiritual master.*

“It is stated in the *Hari-bhakti-vilāsa* that one should not accept initiation from a person who is not in the brahminical order if there is a fit person in the brahminical order present. This instruction is meant for those who are overly dependent on the mundane social order and is suitable for those who want to remain in mundane life.

If one understands the truth of Kṛṣṇa consciousness and seriously desires to attain transcendental knowledge for the perfection of life, he can accept a spiritual master from any social status, provided the spiritual master is fully conversant with the science of Kṛṣṇa. Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura also states that although one is situated as a *brāhmaṇa*, *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya*, *sūdra*, *brahmacārī*, *vānaprastha*, *grhastha* or *sannyāsī*, if he is conversant in the science of Kṛṣṇa he can become a spiritual master as *vartma-pradarśaka-guru*, *dīkṣā-guru* or *śikṣā-guru*. The spiritual master who first gives information about spiritual life is called the *vartma-pradarśaka-guru*, the spiritual master who initiates according to the regulations of the *śāstras* is called the *dīkṣā-guru*, and the spiritual master who gives instructions for elevation is called the *śikṣā-guru*. *Factually the qualifications of a spiritual master depend on his knowledge of the science of Kṛṣṇa. It does not matter whether he is a brāhmaṇa, kṣatriya, sannyāsī or sūdra.*

“If one becomes a *guru*, he is automatically a *brāhmaṇa*. Sometimes a caste *guru* says that *ye kṛṣṇa-tattva-vettā, sei guru haya* means that one who is not a *brāhmaṇa* may become a *śikṣā-guru* or a *vartma-pradarśaka-guru* but not an initiator *guru*. According to such caste *gurus*, birth and family ties are considered foremost. However, the hereditary consideration is not acceptable to Vaiṣṇavas. *The word guru is equally applicable to the vartma-pradarśaka-guru, śikṣā-guru and dīkṣā-guru.* Unless we accept the principle enunciated by Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu, this Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement cannot spread all over the world.” [Caitanya-caritāmṛta Madhya 8.128 verse & purport]

This is only one of many places wherein Śrīla Prabhupāda presents the proper vision of our philosophy on the topic of eligibility to become a Vaiṣṇava guru: there cannot be placed any material prohibition on the post of guru—it is transcendental being based on one’s

devotion. In his purport he focuses on varnaśrama considerations, but he quoted this verse in his conversation with Prof. O'Connell, indicating that gender is also a consideration to be discarded in judging a guru's eligibility.

Śrīla Prabhupāda also explains that there are instructions in Vaiṣṇava literature for those who are overly dependent on mundane social order. But there are higher level instructions for those with a deeper understanding: "...he can accept a spiritual master from any social status, provided the spiritual master is fully conversant with the science of Kṛṣṇa." He specifically states that this principle applies to all gurus including dīkṣā-gurus.

7) Devotee: Can women become guru?

B.R. Śrīdhara Mahārāja: Yes, if he [sic] sincerely feels that he can help others, he may be. There are so many. Jāhnavā Devī, wife of Nityānanda Prabhu, she began extensively this spiritual movement. And there are many others.

Devotee: Must you be in the renounced order of life?

B.R. Śrīdhara Mahārāja: Of course somewhat, a *gṛhasṭha*, then *gṛhasṭha* she may initiate *gṛhasṭhas*. But generally it is not found that the ladies take the robe of renunciation. That is red cloth or something. But they may have (the) respect even of the *sannyāsīs*, but they remain as *gṛhasṭhas* and may continue *gṛhasṭha-śiṣya*. (1981 Conversation with Sripada BR Śrīdhara Mahārāja)

And on another occasion...

B.R. Śrīdhara Mahārāja: But whether the lady *ācārya* should be appointed or not, that may come in future. Whether a lady devotee for the facility to propagate amongst the ladies, whether such qualified lady *ācārya* should be accepted or not, that may be a question of controversy. But I think that, for the sincere thinking person, wherever there is Kṛṣṇa consciousness, there is purity. And wherever the sincere urge for propagation, the sanction must be there. That should be the fair field. Here also previously Jāhnavā Devī and others, Ṭhākuraṅgī, they did that sort of function of the *ācārya*.

Devotee: So there were some lady *ācāryas*.

B.R. Śrīdhara Mahārāja: Yes, very rare. The number can be counted on fingers, lady *ācāryas*. (1981 Conversation with Śrīpāda BR Śrīdhara Mahārāja)

Śrīla Prabhupāda's respected Godbrother also says that women may become gurus, but it is very rare. His only stipulation is that they cannot wear *sannyāsī garb* and that they would accept only *gṛhasṭha disciples*.

8) “A woman's nature has been particularly well studied by Kaśyapa Muni. Women are self-interested by nature, and therefore they should be protected by all means so that their natural inclination to be too self-interested will not be manifested. Women need to be protected by men. A woman should be cared for by her father in her childhood, by her husband in her youth and by her grown sons in her old age. This is the injunction of Manu, who says that a woman should not be given independence at any stage. Women must be cared for so that they will not be free to manifest their natural tendency for gross selfishness. There have been many cases, even in the present day, in which women have killed their husbands to take advantage of their insurance policies. This is not a criticism of women but a practical study of their nature.”

Women on the bodily platform are selfish and should therefore be protected not only from lusty male predators but from their own lower natures as well. This is clear. The rest of the purport below, however, makes an important distinction.

“Such natural instincts of a woman or a man are manifested only in the bodily conception of life. When either a man or a woman is advanced in spiritual consciousness, the bodily conception of life practically vanishes.”

(Bhāg. 6.18.42 purport)

When the bodily concept of life vanishes, the material qualities of one's lower nature are transcended. The conclusion must be, therefore, that if a female devotee is actually advanced, above the bodily platform, she may assume the post of a spiritual master.

Here is a suggestion in relation to the above point: The bodily concept of life is transcended, along with the modes of nature, at the stage of bhāva-bhakti. But at the level of niṣṭhā the residual anarthas are only remnants that no longer obstruct one's progress (See Madhurya-kādambinī, chapter 4). Therefore, we recommend that at least the symptoms of niṣṭhā should be seen in dikṣā-guru candidates, whether male or female.

8) Historical Examples of Female Gauḍīya Dikṣā-gurus

a) **Sītā Ṭhākuraṇī**—The wife of Advaita Prabhu. According to the *Prema-vilāsa* (vilāsa 24) of Nityānanda Dāsa, Sītā Ṭhākuraṇī gave dikṣā (*kṛṣṇa-mantra*) to her two servants Nandinī and Jāṅgalī. The *vaikuṅṭha-svarūpas* of Nandinī and Jāṅgalī are the well-known gatekeepers Jaya and Vijaya (*Gaura-gaṇoddeśa-dīpikā* text 89). Their discipleship to Sītādevī, along with other interesting facts, is corroborated in the well-known and respected compilation named *Gauḍīya-vaiṣṇava abhidhāna* and in the *Sītā-caritra* by Lokanātha Dāsa.

b) **Jāhnavā Ṭhākuraṇī** - The wife of Nityānanda Prabhu. Jāhnavā Ṭhākuraṇī became one of the greatest leaders of our tradition in its second generation. Vīrabhadra and Rāmacandra, the sons (biological and adopted respectively) of Nityānanda Prabhu, were two of the most famous among her initiated disciples.

“Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura writes in his *Anubhāṣya*, ‘Vīrabhadra Gosānī was the direct son of Śrīla Nityānanda Prabhu and a **disciple of Jāhnavā Devī**.’” (*Caitanya-caritāmṛta Ādi-līlā* 11.8 purport)

“Yadunandana Ācārya's wife, Lakṣmī, was a very humble and submissive lady. She had two beautiful daughters named Śrīmatī and Nārāyaṇī. By the arrangement of Śrī Īsvarī (Jāhnavā Devī), these two girls became the fortunate wives of Vīracandra Prabhu. On the day of the wedding, Yadunandana took initiation from Vīracandra, and Śrī Jāhnavā happily accepted Śrīmatī and Nārāyaṇī as her disciples.” (*Bhakti-ratnākara*, ch. 13)

She is also confirmed as a *dīkṣā-guru* both in the *Gauḍīya-vaiṣṇava abhidhāna* (pg. 1246-47) and in the *Prema-vilāsa* of Nityānanda Dāsa (*vilāsas* 15 & 20).

c) **Hemalatā Ṭhākuraṇī** - The eldest daughter of Śrīnivāsa Ācārya. Hemalatā Ṭhākuraṇī, a contemporary of Jāhnavā, was one of the prominent leaders of the tradition at her time. Among her disciples, Yadunandana, the author of *Karṇānanda*, is particularly well-known (see *Karṇānanda* [ch.2 &3] and the introduction [pg 12] to *Kṛṣṇa-karṇāmṛta* by Sambidānanda Dās Ph.D). She also had a wayward disciple named Rūpa Kavirāja. (see *Gauḍīya-vaiṣṇava abhidhāna* pg. 1422)

“Now the disciples of Sri Hemalata shall be described. Sri Suvala Chandra Thakura, and his nephew Sri Gokula Chakravarti were her disciples. Sri Radhavallava Thakura from Mandala village, Sri Vallavadasa of the Gosvami family, and Yadunandana Vaidya dasa of Malihati village were all disciples of Sri Isvari. Kanurama Chakravarti and his two servants Darpanayana and Candi, Ramacarana, Madhu Miswas, and Radha Kanta Vaidya were other disciples of Hemalata. Jagadisa Kaviraja and his follower, who was the brother of Radhavallabh Kaviraja were initiated by Hemalata.” (*Karṇānanda*, ch.2, last paragraph)

“One day my spiritual master, Sri Hemalata, revealed the glories of Ramacandra to me.” “I shall describe another episode which I heard from my guru, Sri Isvari Hemalata.” (*Karṇānanda*, ch.3)

d) **Gaurāṅga-priyā Devī** – The second wife and disciple of Śrīnivāsa Ācārya (*Gauḍīya-vaiṣṇava abhidhāna* pg. 1224) She was from a Cakravartī *brāhmaṇa* family, her father being Raghunātha Cakravartī, a resident of West Gopālapura. She initiated a number of disciples, one being Gurucaraṇa Dāsa, who wrote a book at her behest called *Premāmṛta* which is based on the *Prema-vilāsa* (*Gauḍīya-vaiṣṇava abhidhāna* pg. 1203).

“Śrīnivāsa Ācārya's first wife, Śrīmatī Īsvarī Ṭhākuraṇī, was a highly devotional lady. Gaurāṅga-priyā, his second wife, also possessed exalted devotional qualities. In due course of time many persons became disciples of Śrīnivāsa Ācārya and his wives.” (*Karṇānanda*, ch.2)

e) **Gaṅgāmātā Gosvāminī** - A disciple of Haridāsa Paṇḍita Gosvāmī, the sevāite of Govindajī mentioned in Śrī *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*. Among others, King Mukundadeva of Jagannātha Purī and a number of Lord Jagannātha's sevāites received *dīkṣā* from her. She was also an eloquent speaker and explained *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* to large audiences. Gaṅgāmātā Gosvāminī's case is further confirmation that a woman can be a *guru* in a bona fide Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava line. At least up to her point in the line, the line was bona fide because her *guru* is confirmed by Śrīla Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja Gosvāmī in

the *Caitanya-caritāmṛta* (Ādi 8.60). Her acceptance of disciples is confirmed in *Gauḍīya-vaiṣṇava abhidhāna* (pgs. 1197-98) and by the present day *mahānta*, Balarāma Dās Gosvāmī, at the Gaṅgamātā Gosvāminī Matha in Purī.

Should We Follow Such Examples?

In *Bhagavad-gītā*, Lord Kṛṣṇa says *yad yad ācarati śreṣṭhas tat tad evetaro janaḥ / sa yat pramāṇam kurute lokas tad anuvartate*. The people in general follow the example set by great personalities. Lord Kṛṣṇa gave this as a reason why He Himself followed the laws of religion, because if He did not, others would follow His example. In this way, one might say that Lord Kṛṣṇa functioned as an *ācārya*, one who teaches by His own example. But in some cases, it is not correct for an ordinary person to follow the example of the Supreme Lord, as in His dancing with the *gopīs*. The same is true of the great Vaiṣṇavas: Sometimes their behavior is meant to be followed by ordinary persons, and sometimes not. So how do we know which actions of the Supreme Lord and great devotees are to be followed by us and which actions are not to be followed?

For example, in the few well-documented cases offered above for female gurus in Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, we have presented personalities such as Jāhnavā Devī, the wife of Lord Nityānanda. Is her becoming a *guru* a case to be followed as exemplary, or a case not to be imitated by us? One guide is the general scriptural warning to follow the instructions of the Lord and great devotees instead of imitating their activities. That should make us cautious.

Another guide is the indications from *sādhu* and *guru*. For example, Śrīla Prabhupāda was asked by a professor if women could become *gurus* in our movement. Śrīla Prabhupāda answered that they could, and he provided Jāhnavā Devī as an example. Because our founder-*ācārya* clearly indicated that the behavior of Jāhnavā Devī could be a guide for us on the question of whether or not women can become *gurus* in ISKCON, it is not wrong for us to follow that indication.

We have not found any statement by Śrīla Prabhupāda that the example of Jāhnavā Devī is not exemplary. Therefore we can take her example as one of the cases in which it is proper to follow the example. But Śrīla Prabhupāda also gave some cautionary remarks in this connection, indicating that it was rare for women to become *gurus*, and that should also be taken into account.

Weighing the Evidence and Concluding

The one significant negative statement—“Sunīti, however, being a woman, and specifically his mother, could not become Dhruva Mahārāja's *dīkṣā-guru*.” (*Bhāg.* 4.12.32 purport)—can be interpreted differently. One possible interpretation is that women cannot initiate male devotees, but could do so for female devotees. Another could be that women can initiate all others except their own offspring. This second interpretation could be supported by the fact that Lord Nityānanda's second wife, Śrī

Vasudhā Devī, did not initiate her own son, Vīracandra, but Śrī Jāhnavā Devī did so. In any case, Śrīla Prabhupāda is referring to an incident at a specific time in the distant past, and his other statements dealing with the present time (conversations with Professor O'Connell or with Ātreya Ṛṣi Dāsa), and specifically within ISKCON, are more valuable as *pramāṇas* in this discussion.

Additionally, the *vaidika* system was operating during the Satya-yuga. Under that system, women did not generally receive initiation. Therefore, logically, they also could not give it. Under the more recent *pañcarātri*ka system, however, qualified women can accept and offer initiation.

We have also presented statements, on the one hand, demanding the social dependency and protection of women and, on the other, statements declaring that in spiritual matters such considerations may be transcended.

When we look at all of Śrīla Prabhupāda's statements we see that he had the conception of female *gurus* in the future, i.e. if they could meet the standard, and that there were female *gurus* in the past whom Śrīla Prabhupāda cited as evidence for his position. But he did say that they were rare, and so we should follow that indication.

Weighing the philosophical evidence, the SAC team concludes that female devotees, if qualified, should be allowed to give initiation in ISKCON.

It seems unsupportable on the basis of *guru*, *sādhu* and *śāstra* to have a policy that asserts that there can never be female-*gurus* in ISKCON. The GBC, however, may choose to not have female-*gurus* at present on the basis of time, place and circumstance or cultural considerations. But then there would have to be some justification as to why this kind of policy should be necessary now.

If the GBC consensus is to go forward with female *gurus* in ISKCON, then we suggest relative prerequisites to be considered. The following prerequisites take social concerns into account:

Relative Prerequisites and Support

Since it is difficult to ascertain someone's level of *bhakti*, and to ensure stability, it may be considered prudent by the GBC to place some relative prerequisites, not absolute ones (otherwise it would violate the *kibā-vipra* verse [Cc *Madhya* 8.128]), on female *guru* candidates in ISKCON. Here are a few humble suggestions:

- a) The Vaiṣṇavī should normally be of a certain age (e.g. fifty or more).
- b) The Vaiṣṇavī should normally have performed a minimum number of years of *sādhana-bhakti*. (e.g. twenty-five or thirty years)

b) The Vaiṣṇavī should normally have some family support, e.g. husband, adult son or daughter or adult son-in-law or daughter-in-law, and a residential base to ensure her psycho-social stability. This suggested proviso corresponds to the many recommendations and warnings of women becoming independent given in *dharmasāstras*.

c) The Vaiṣṇavī should normally have spiritual support in the form of at least one or more *śikṣā-gurus* or senior mentors from which she can take assistance.

Why should relative conditions be placed on female *guru* candidates?

Women have a different psycho-physical nature than men. Therefore, while still in the *sādhana* stages of *bhakti*, a female-*guru* candidate would do well to have some relative support. Furthermore, it is rare to find examples of their taking the role of *guru*. This is clearly stated by Śrīla Prabhupāda and others in the above cited conversations. These relative prerequisites are simple measures to safeguard and support future female *gurus* without burdening prospective candidates with unnecessary bureaucracy.

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