

# **Response to Sivarama Swami's critique of the SAC paper**

by the Sastric Advisory Council

Sivarama Swami's points of objection to the SAC paper on female diksa-gurus are in bold and numbered.

## **1. Two members of SAC – Narayani and Urmila – are authors. Questions the neutrality if not the integrity of SAC**

SAC answer: Both Narayani Devi and Urmila Devi initially recused themselves from the work due to possible accusation of a conflict of interests. However, the other SAC members by a vast majority decided that these two Vaisnavis should participate, because:

- The GBC voted on the SAC members in toto, including Vaisnavis, thus deeming all of them qualified for a dispassionate and objective collaborative brahminical research, personal views notwithstanding.
- The paper does not deal with the question of whether or not FDGs are possible. That was the subject of the first SAC paper on Vaisnavi diksa-gurus, from which Urmila Devi recused herself. The present paper's subject is how to implement two GBC resolutions on women diksa gurus – the GBC resolution of 2005 that accepts Vaisnavis giving diksa in principle, and the 2009 resolution encouraging Vaisnavis to go through the current GBC process to get permission to initiate their siksa-disciples in ISKCON. In order to be objective and effective, this research needed to include first-hand experiences of Vaisnavi diksa-guru candidates and seniormost Vaisnavis in ISKCON, making the participation of Narayani Devi and Urmila Devi essential. Without their contribution derived from their lived experience in ISKCON, the discussion would have been largely theoretical and thereby vulnerable to the dystopian propaganda that is typical of uninformed alarmist discussions.
- The SAC felt that excluding them and having only male members discuss the implementation of FDGs in ISKCON may in itself constitute a conflict of interests and cast doubts on the comprehensiveness of the research.

## **2. No stated purpose, methodology or conclusion of the paper**

SAC answer: As for any other SAC assignment, the purpose of this research was determined by the GBC EC, that is:

- To provide sastric answers to the six questions of the EC.

- To assist with these answers in the work of the GBC committee appointed by an AGM resolution of 2013 to discuss the implementation of FDGs in ISKCON.

Therefore, it was not necessary for the SAC to formulate the purpose of this paper separately.

If by "methodology" is meant how we discuss and compile papers, this is an internal SAC matter which does not have to be – and has never been – publicly stated. Suffice it to say that all members mentioned as authors have contributed to all six questions and were involved in the many drafts of the final paper. The two members who chose not to have their answers or names included in the paper also contributed to the discussion and certainly added to the paper's value and scope by their points.

If by "methodology" is meant our hermeneutic process, we give a summary explanation in the first paragraph of Section 3, and in Section 4, paragraphs two and three. The SAC can take under advisement to discuss having a separate section on hermeneutics in future papers, or perhaps a separate general statement on the hermeneutics we employ.

It is true that in the format of answering six specific questions we did not structure the paper with introduction, body, and conclusion. Rather, there is a conclusion to each section, and to some appendices, such as Appendix 1.

### **3. Only purpose of answering 6 questions is to support conclusion of previous SAC paper with predisposition that FDG can be selected in same way as men. In other words biased**

SAC answer:

1. It was the GBC EC that requested the SAC to answer specific questions that were not so developed in the previous SAC paper on FDGs.
2. The previous SAC paper aside, it is now the current ISKCON law, in the form of GBC resolutions of 2005 and 2009, that state that women in ISKCON have to go through the same "no objection" process as men to be allowed to initiate.

Considering both these points, the SAC fully accepts the accusation that its current paper is biased in favor of ISKCON law and the stated request of the GBC EC.

Additionally, dismissal of the current paper as "biased" simply because it supports the previous SAC paper and ISKCON law may in itself indicate one's bias and predisposition – not just against FDGs or the SAC, but against the GBC that had passed the earlier resolution.

#### **4. Evidence of Mukta-carita is incorrect. It is not a historical statement, but joking among Krsna and gopis. Diksa guru of Vraja-vasis is Bhaguri Muni and for the Vrsnis it is Garga Muni**

SAC answer: Even though Mukta-carita is used in the paper as an illustration rather than a major pramana, this point has been used to challenge the integrity and competence of the SAC and thus merits a detailed response to the accusation that the references to women initiating in Mukta-carita are "not a historical statement".

Mukta-carita is a nested narrative. Raghunatha Dasa Goswami writes of Lord Krsna's conversation with Satyabhama in Dvaraka, in which Lord Krsna tells her about His earlier pearl pastime with the gopis in Vraja. There are three options here:

Option 1: Raghunatha Dasa Goswami documented an actual conversation between Lord Krsna and Satyabhama in Dvaraka, in which Lord Krsna spoke of the actual, historical pearl pastime.

Option 2: Raghunatha Dasa Goswami documented an actual conversation between Lord Krsna and Satyabhama in Dvaraka, in which Lord Krsna invented either the entire pearl pastime, which never happened in reality, or parts of it.

Option 3: Mukta-carita is a purely fictional narrative. There was actually no such conversation between Lord Krsna and Satyabhama in Dvaraka, nor the pearl pastime in Vraja.

Since our Gaudiya-Vaisnava siddhanta and Srila Prabhupada's teaching place strong emphasis on mukhya-vrtti (literal interpretation) over and above gauna-vrtti and laksana-vrtti (indirect or figurative interpretations), we naturally favor option 1 by accepting Lord Krsna's words to Satyabhama described by the Goswami as literal. In other words, we believe that there was an actual conversation between Lord Krsna and Satyabhama in Dvaraka, in which Lord Krsna spoke of the actual, historical pearl pastime. However, let us examine all the three options.

Option 1: We should note that, while most of Mukta-carita indeed consists of Lord Krsna's joking with the gopis, the early part of it contains a prelude to the humorous exchange. This prelude, being told by Lord Krsna to Satyabhama, is to be accepted literally. There the gopis:

- refer to Nandimukhi as an initiated disciple of Purnamasi: (*śrī-bhagavatī-pāda-padma-siddha-mantra-śiṣyā*, literally "a disciple into the siddha-mantra at the lotus feet of Sri Bhagavati, [i.e. Purnamasi].")
- express their intention to get initiated by Nandimukhi: (*-nāndīmukhī-sakāśāt siddha-mantram ekam ādāya katham na tathodyamaḥ kriyate?*, literally "having received the same siddha-mantra from Nandimukhi, why don't we endeavor for the same [result]?")

- and actually approach Nandimukhi with this request.

Therefore, if one accepts that Raghunatha Dasa Goswami's Mukta-carita describes actual, historical events in Krsna's pastimes in Vraja, then one has to accept that Purnamasi initiated Nandi-mukhi, that the gopis approached Nandi-mukhi for initiation, and that thus women initiating was an accepted social norm in Vraja. In other words, it is not only in jest that initiations from women are mentioned in Mukta-carita.

Moreover, there is little logical ground to dismiss later references to the possibility of initiation from women in the course of humorous exchange between Lord Krsna and the gopis as made in jest, unrelated or contrary to the accepted social norms in Vrndavana. By the same token, one may just as well dismiss Lord Krsna's numerous words of eulogy of or romantic interest in the gopis during the same exchange as spoken in jest only.

Therefore, rather than challenging Bhaguri-muni's position as a diksa-guru of Vrajavasis, these references, in or outside of the joking exchange, simply show that women also initiate in Vraja – albeit "not so many".

Option 2: If we assume that Lord Krsna in His historical conversation with Satyabhama simply invented the pearl pastime or its parts, we also have to admit that, in the absence of definitive statement to this effect by the sastra or acaryas, we have no means of verifying the correctness of our assumption. This leaves us with no conclusion other than that Lord Krsna chose to speak of women initiating as an accepted social norm in Vraja, for whatever reason, and that we have to accept His words as a normative dharma unless interpreted otherwise by guru, sadhus, or sastra.

Option 3: If we consider Mukta-carita a mere fictional narrative rather than a "historical statement", we are still led to assume that its references to women initiating simply indicate that Raghunatha Dasa Goswami did not see the function of diksa-guru as something wrong or non-Vedic for women. (As an aside, this is also evident from Raghunatha Dasa Goswami's exchanges with Jahnava Devi described in Bhakti-ratnakara (see Appendix 4: Bhakti-ratnakara on Jahnava Devi)

## **5. Constant extrapolation of diksa to Prabhupada's statements of siksa, being guru, and preaching**

SAC answer: It would be helpful to get examples of what is being seen in the SAC paper as inappropriate "extrapolation of diksa to statements of siksa", especially because:

- Prabhupada stated as a matter of principle, "Generally the siksa-guru later on becomes the diksa-guru." (SB 4.12.32 purp.) and "Generally a spiritual master who constantly instructs a disciple in spiritual science becomes his initiating spiritual master later on." (CC Adi 1.35 purp.). He then warns, quoting Srila Jiva Goswami, that there should be no "customary social and ecclesiastical

conventions" employed in this process of accepting one's guru.

- FDG-opponents are yet to explain in terms of Vaisnava-siddhanta rather than "customary social and ecclesiastical conventions" why Vaisnavis can be siksa-gurus but not diksa-gurus.
- Srila Prabhupada himself equated the order from his guru to "preach" with an order to make siksa- and diksa-disciples. Here he explains it: "Anne Jackson: Could you please tell me a little bit about your life and how you knew that you were the spiritual master for the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement? Prabhupada: My life is simple. I was householder. ... So my Guru Mahārāja ordered me that "Go and preach this cult in the western countries." So I left everything on the order of my Guru Mahārāja, and I am trying to execute the order. That's all.... When I was twenty-five years old I met him first. On the first meeting he ordered me to this."(Room Conversation with writer, Sandy Nixon – Philadelphia, July 13, 1975)
- In his book "Siksa outside ISKCON" Sivarama Swami himself makes the extrapolation by stating: "Those Vaisnavas who give guidance on the path are also siksa-gurus; among these, the one who gives the most regular guidance generally becomes the devotee's diksa-guru".
- It is peculiar that, in our debate with ritviks, we often quote the same statements by Srila Prabhupada encouraging all of his disciples to become gurus as a proof that ISKCON devotees can initiate, while ritviks try to dismiss those statements as being merely about "siksa-gurus". How do these same statements by Srila Prabhupada suddenly change their purport when applied to Vaisnavis?

## **6. Ignores that Prabhupada's statements on women in Varnasrama roles far outweighs statements on their spiritual roles, especially in later years**

SAC answer:

- The SAC would like to see the hard and specific data and research behind this "far outweighs" claim.
- It is not good hermeneutics to decide what should be stressed in ISKCON based on counting statements. In the Bhagavad-gita Kṛṣṇa uses the word bhakti 15 times (counting all grammatical forms of the word) and the word karma alone, without forms, 72 times. Fortunately, we do not have to stress karma over bhakti as the direction for ISKCON based on this counting logic.
- In many of his statements on varnasrama roles Srila Prabhupada immediately balances them with statements of spiritual equality and spiritual roles. Such is true

whether Prabhupada is talking or writing of women, sudras, mlecchas, etc.

## **7. Does not succeed in balancing need of Varṇāśrama and spiritual role, just belabors the latter**

SAC answer: The SAC notes that this comment is subjective with the use of the words "succeed" and "belabors" rather than pointing out any specific instances where the balance we explain between the two roles could be improved. There are detailed discussions in the SAC paper of how to balance the need for varnasrama and spiritual life in regards to women in general, and particularly in regards to women initiating disciples.

These discussions can be found in the paper primarily in the following locations (and to a lesser extent in other areas):

- All of Section 2
- Section 3, 2nd paragraph
- Section 3.1, the last 2/3 of the 1st paragraph and the 2nd paragraph
- All of Section 3.2
- Appendix 3
- Appendix 4

If the GBC desires, we are prepared to offer specific scenarios of how a woman could both initiate her disciples and act within varna and asrama roles in ISKCON.

## **8. Does not satisfactory address the "rare" phenomenon of FDGs**

SAC answer: We note that "satisfactorily" is a very subjective evaluation that may never be fulfilled for some participants of this discussion. However, our paper addressed the assertion of the rarity of FDGs at length in Section 6 as well as in Appendix 6. Some of the conclusions that can be drawn from the SAC's analysis and its subsequent discussion are as follows (please refer to the paper itself for a thorough and detailed understanding):

- Srila Prabhupada never used the word "rare" to describe women who give diksa.
- Srila Prabhupada said women diksa gurus in Gaudiya lines were "not so many", which is in strict accordance with the available historical records showing that in the Gaudiya-Vaisnava sampradaya women who give diksa are a minority, but not a rarity.
- Srila Prabhupada's statement "in very special case" contextually refers to women becoming acaryas in charge of sampradayas, rather than just regular diksa-gurus serving under the charge of an institution.
- The paper gives a variety of reasons for the observed minority of Vaisnavi diksa gurus in our sampradaya, but found no evidence that any Vaisnava sanga or institution ever restricted qualified and willing Vaisnavis from initiating their

disciples.

- Srila Prabhupada's "not so many" was an observation, not a restrictive injunction, as FDG-opponents prefer to interpret it. But even accepting their preference would still necessitate that Vaisnavi diksa-gurus in ISKCON go from "none" to "not so many".

**9. Suggestion: Wait and work out 50% of Prabhupada's mission, varnasrama, and when having done so then see how to balance spiritual equality of women with socially distinct roles which are part of our tradition, statement of scriptures and of Srila Prabhupada.**

SAC answer: We agree that Srila Prabhupada on a few occasions called establishing varnasrama-dharma the 50% of his mission that need to be fulfilled. However:

- Assuming that supporters of the above view accept Srila Prabhupada's instructions on varnasrama as equally applicable to all of his disciples, and not just to women, we could expect them to be consistent and to balance their own varna and asrama roles first. For sannyasis, this may imply having no disciples, no property, eating only the amount of food received after visiting randomly seven houses (see SB 11.18.18), etc. and for those of us born in mleccha or sudra families – to never receive second initiations, hold fire sacrifices, or worship the Deities in this lifetime.
- Srila Prabhupada never subordinated spiritual qualifications to the varnasrama ones. Quite the opposite, he emphasized that varnasrama is subservient to the preaching mission and so are varnasrama duties of his disciples: "Yes. But our, our position is that we are above varnasrama. But for management or ideal society, we are introducing this. We, so far we are concerned, Krsna conscious men, we are above varnasrama. But to show the people that we are not escaping, we can take part in any order of life. That is our position. ... [E]ven if we take to varnasrama, we do not belong to any... Just like Krsna says, maya srstam. "I have inaugurated." But Krsna has nothing to do with varnasrama. Similarly, if we act as varnasrama, still, we have nothing to do with the varnasrama." (Morning walk "Varnasrama College" – March 14, 1974, Vrndavana)
- Srila Prabhupada never indicated any plans to stall his preaching mission so his disciples could catch up with their varnasrama roles. Rather, he emphasized that it is by their preaching and individual spiritual practice that they become able to follow the rules of varnasrama externally.