

Reflections on the Current Debate

Regarding the activities of Śrīla Prabhupāda's female followers
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1. What evidence— pramāṇa—shall we use?

*tarko 'pratiṣṭhaḥ śrutayo vibhinnā/ nāsāv ṛṣir yasya mataṁ na bhinnam
dharmasya tattvaṁ nihitaṁ guhāyām/ mahājano yena gataḥ sa panthāḥ*

“Dry arguments are inconclusive. A great personality whose opinion does not differ from others is not considered great. Simply by studying the Vedas, which are variegated, one cannot come to the right path by which religious principles are understood. The solid truth of religious principles is hidden in the heart of an unadulterated, self-realized person. Consequently the śāstras confirm one should accept whatever progressive path the mahājanas advocate” (Mahābhārata, Vana-pārva 313.117).

Our evidence will be Śrīla Prabhupāda's teachings and example.

2. How does varṇāśrama apply?

“He [Kṛṣṇa] is not the maker of a tyrannical and unnatural caste system in which the faithless dictate one's position according to one's birth. Rather, He is the maker of a caste system that is applicable universally, is voluntary and natural, and is based on one's qualities and abilities” (MoG 2: Karma-yoga). “The ācāryas who advocate the daiva-varṇāśrama (the social order of cātur-varṇyam mentioned in Bhagavad-gītā) do not accept the proposition of āsura-varṇāśrama, which maintains that the social order of varṇa is indicated by birth” (Cc Madhya 3.6 purport). “In daiva-varṇāśrama there cannot be acknowledgement of social status according to birthright because in Bhagavad-gītā it is said that the determining considerations are guṇa and karma, one's qualities and work. It is this daiva-varṇāśrama that should be established all over the world to continue a perfect society for Kṛṣṇa consciousness. This may be astonishing to foolish critics, but it is one of the functions of a Kṛṣṇa conscious society” (SB 5.1.24 purport). “Real varṇāśrama-dharma is based on the factual quality one has attained, regardless of birth or heredity” (SSR 3).

The ultimate occupational duty—dharma—of all living beings is to eternally serve Kṛṣṇa without material motivation. Thus all devotees, regardless of gender, who are sincerely and seriously serving the Lord according to their unique qualities and work should be honored and encouraged. “Everyone should be allowed to render service to the Lord to the best of his ability, and everyone should appreciate the service of others. Such are the activities of Vaikuṅṭha. Since everyone is a servant, everyone is on the same platform and is allowed to serve the Lord according to his ability” (SB 7.5.12 purport).

“...in devotional service there is no discrimination between the lower and higher classes of people. In the material conception of life there are such divisions, but for a person engaged in the transcendental service of the Lord, there are not” (Bg 9.32)

purport). “So far your question regarding women, I have always accepted the service of women without any discrimination” (SPL to Gurudasa, 26 May, 1972).

Śrīla Prabhupāda offers qualified women, like qualified men, services commensurate with their ability and inclination.

3. What about protection for women?

Śrīla Prabhupāda imbued us with the desire to be all we could be and do all we could do for Kṛṣṇa. His calling impelled us to stretch beyond our boundaries; to acquire a “can do” mentality (“impossible is a word in a fool’s dictionary”); to repeatedly bring our consciousness to the highest, most protected platform of enthusiastic devotional service to the Supreme Lord, Sri Kṛṣṇa. Thus among the first group of disciples to return to India with Prabhupāda were strong and talented women who, by Prabhupāda’s request, led kirtanas and spoke before thousands, served the Deities and were part of Prabhupāda’s personal entourage, as they were in the West. By serving Kṛṣṇa according to her propensity, a woman is protected and fulfilled. Throughout the West such protected women pleased Śrīla Prabhupāda by distributing vast numbers of his books. “In Caitanya Mahāprabhu’s movement, everyone is preacher, whether man or woman it doesn’t matter” (SPL to Karandhara 6 October, 1973). When a woman asked, “When we are doing saṅkīrtana, I must be very aggressive, but when I come to the temple, then I’m supposed to be very humble.” Śrīla Prabhupāda replied, “A lamb at home, a lion in the chase” (room conversation, 13 July, 1975). Śrīla Prabhupāda’s female disciples sacrificed enormously and without material compensation to collect millions of dollars—the BBT funds that helped establish opulent Kṛṣṇa conscious centers in Bombay, Mayapur and Vrindavan.

A woman can be protected (as all women must be throughout their lives) and be a leader also. In Śrīla Prabhupāda’s words, “The child must be taken care of. That is good. Similarly, woman also. Just like old man like us, I am always taken care of... That is civilization. That is human society” (lecture SB 1.8.51, 13 May, 1973). If one accepts the principle that people who need protection should not be gurus, then women, old men, and brāhmaṇas, should not be gurus, but we see that there are examples of women gurus, brāhmaṇa gurus, and old men gurus. Being deserving of protection in society does not mean that one cannot perform the function of a guru.

Also, “If one becomes Kṛṣṇa conscious, then he (she) doesn't require husband. He (she) does not require. He... She knows that ‘Kṛṣṇa is my protector. Why shall I artificially seek after father or...?’ And what protection, for a few days either the father or the son or the husband may give? Real protection is Kṛṣṇa” (room conversation, January 7, 1977). Śrīla Prabhupāda says that a woman devotee can come to the understanding that her real protector is Kṛṣṇa, not her husband, father or son. Śrīla Prabhupāda’s Society should be able to recognize that.

4. Are women qualified?

“Caitanya Mahāprabhu has said that anyone who knows the science of Kṛṣṇa should be accepted as spiritual master, regardless of any material so-called qualifications, such

as rich or poor, man or woman, or brāhmaṇa or śūdra.” (SPL to Silavati Devi, 14 June, 1969) “We especially have to try to attract the educated young men and women in your country so that in future there will be many strong leaders to keep our Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement strong” (SPL to Govinda dasa, 7 April, 1973). “These women are not ordinary women. They are preachers. They are Vaiṣṇavas. By their association one becomes a Vaiṣṇava” (morning walk, 27 March, 1974).

“A devotee is no longer śūdra. We are creating brāhmaṇas. Just like these Europeans and Americans: according to Manu-saṁhitā, they are mlecchas, yavanas. But we are not keeping them mlecchas and yavanas. Just like these European and American boys. They are accepting the Vedic regulative principles: no illicit sex, no meat-eating, no intoxication, no gambling. So they are no more śūdras or caṇḍālas. They are brāhmaṇas... So it is said, *guṇa-karma-vibhāgaśaḥ* [Bg. 4.13], according to quality and work. When one is educated in the quality of brāhmaṇa, Vaiṣṇava, and he works like a brāhmaṇa, he is no longer śūdra or caṇḍāla or yavana. He is brāhmaṇa or Vaiṣṇava... Materially there must be distinction. But spiritually there is no distinction” (room conversation, 5 June 1974). Under the guidance of her spiritual master, a chaste, Kṛṣṇa conscious woman may render whatever service she’s qualified for, whether as a mother, a cook, a temple president, a GBC or a spiritual master. “*Vaiṣṇave jāti-buddhiḥ*. If anyone considers a Vaiṣṇava, a devotee of the Lord, in the categorical estimation of birth, then that is hellish consideration” (lecture, SB 6.1.41).

Professor O’Connell (University of Toronto): “Is it possible, Swamiji, for a woman to be a guru in the line of disciplic succession?”

Śrīla 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 a guru? But not so many. Actually one who has attained the perfection, she can become a guru... The qualification of the guru is that he must be fully cognizant of the science of Kṛṣṇa. Then he or she can become a guru. *Yeī Kṛṣṇa-tattva-veṭṭa, sei guru haya*. In the material world, is there any prohibition that a woman cannot become a professor? If she is qualified, she can become a 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 a guru” (room conversation, 18 June, 1976). Śrīla Prabhupāda’s directly says gender is not a disqualification for becoming a guru. Who are we to make it a disqualification?

Kṛṣṇa consciousness is a dynamic movement of spreading love of Godhead throughout the world and part of Śrīla Prabhupāda’s program is to engage men and women devotees in this attempt. “Since both the boys and the girls are being trained to become preachers, those girls are not ordinary girls but are as good as their brothers who are preaching Kṛṣṇa consciousness. Therefore, to engage both boys and girls in fully transcendental activities is a policy intended to spread the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement” (Cc Ādi-līla 7.31-32 purport). Śrīla Prabhupāda’s policy is that both qualified men and qualified women help him in his mission, including giving initiation. He says women preachers “are as good as their brothers.” The preaching services the brothers can do the sisters can do, including becoming guru, which is part of transcendental preaching activity. Why question Srila Prabhupada’s wisdom?

In Śrīla Prabhupāda’s presence some devotees tried to impose artificial restrictions on women and gr̥hasthas, but Śrīla Prabhupāda himself stopped this and sent the

leader of that attempt to preach in China. Now, in Śrīla Prabhupāda's absence, another influential group is trying to make us lose our clarity on this matter once again.

5. What's the benefit of allowing women to serve?

A Vaiṣṇava encourages others to be all they can be in Kṛṣṇa's service and such encouragement increases one's own Kṛṣṇa consciousness. Conversely, each time we discourage the Kṛṣṇa conscious efforts of a devotee we fail in our deepest responsibility to Kṛṣṇa and to ourselves. Our joy in seeing a Vaiṣṇavī doing the service she desires for the pleasure of the Lord demonstrates our willingness to relinquish petty and negative preoccupations. This beautiful, positive attitude lifts a heavy burden from our minds and hearts.

When devotees touch the magnificent spiritual possibilities within themselves, when they're clear that they want to excel in their service for Śrīla Prabhupāda's pleasure, by Kṛṣṇa's grace they will excel and we will all benefit. In Śrīla Prabhupāda's words, "our leaders shall be careful not to kill the spirit of enthusiastic service, which is individual and spontaneous and voluntary. They should try always to generate some atmosphere of fresh challenge to the devotees, so that they will agree enthusiastically to rise and meet it" (SPL to Karandhara, 22 December, 1972).

Allow all to grow in their areas of interest. Let's all blossom for Kṛṣṇa's pleasure. "No one should try to check a person, no matter what his present position is, from coming to the platform of a brāhmaṇa or a Vaiṣṇava" (SB 5.26.23 purport).

This upward mobility begins with our personal growth in humility, when our fear of others is exorcised by affection for them, when we move toward Kṛṣṇa together. "When either a man or a woman is advanced in spiritual consciousness, the bodily conception of life practically vanishes" (SB 6.18.42 purport). "I want that all of my spiritual sons and daughters will inherit this title of Bhaktivedanta, so that the family transcendental diploma will continue through the generations. Those possessing the title of Bhaktivedanta 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" (SPL to Hamsaduta, 3 December, 1968).

"I hope that all of you, men, women, boys and girls, become spiritual master" (Vyasa-puja Lecture, London, 22 August, 1973). "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, śūdra, sannyaśī, grhastha or whatever. If one simply understands this science, he can become a spiritual master... 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." (Cc Madhya 8.128 purport).

6. What's the difficulty?

While the principle that a devoted woman may do whatever service is suited for her may seem straightforward and clear, some hold that a woman's birth precludes her from doing certain services for the Lord regardless of her qualifications. Such thinking may be culturally based: traditionally in India, for example, women don't perform certain temple Deity services—a standard Śrīla Prabhupāda sometimes observed there. But often the thinking comes from the male ego, “the temperament of always wanting to be in a superior position” (SB 9.3.10 purport).

“The śāstra says that: ‘Accept everyone as śūdra.’ *Kalau śūdraḥ sambhava*. There is no more brāhmaṇa, kṣatriya or vaiśya. All śūdras” (lecture Bg 1.40, July 28, 1973).

“Guru must transfer his qualities to the student. How it is there that a man makes one person a disciple and he remains a śūdra? What is this nonsense? Can śūdra be initiated? No. No śūdra can be initiated... Immediately he becomes brāhmaṇa if he's actually initiated. If you are falsely initiated, he remains a śūdra and you remain a rascal. That's all. Why you should falsely initiate a person? If you cannot make him a brāhmaṇa and elevate him to the highest stage of devotional service, why should you cheat others? Initiation means making him dvijatvam. ... How an initiated person can remain a śūdra? This is going on. Therefore they are thinking that ‘These American, they are mleccas and yavana. How they can become sannyāsī?’ This is nonsense. How a sannyāsī can become a yavana? He must be elevated from the yavana position” (lecture Bg 9.2, 7 March, 1972).

Formerly, smārta-brāhmaṇas in India criticized Prabhupada for making Westerners sannyāsīs; now, ironically, some Western sannyāsīs and others are attempting to use the same smārta arguments Śrīla Prabhupāda defeated to try to restrict women's service.

Some Krishna conscious women gloriously express their bhakti through traditional services: cleaning, cooking, garland-making, caring for children. Other Krishna conscious women gloriously express their bhakti through speaking, singing, managing, leading. Srila Prabhupada captured and engaged all types of women in his transcendental net; every morning in every one of Srila Prabhupada's centers we hear the results of Prabhupada's broadminded Krishna consciousness as Yamuna Devi leads us in the Govindam prayers.

Conclusion

“For a chaste woman, service to the husband without duplicity is the best religious principle... And most importantly, a woman must take care of her children” (KB 29).

When women devotees who don't have a family or who have fulfilled their family duties serve Kṛṣṇa according to their propensity it is not pandering to the egalitarian fantasy of misguided devotees. Rather, caving in under the pressure of a small but relentless group of lobbyists who would restrict the services of women is interfering with Śrīla Prabhupāda's main mission: to spread Krishna consciousness throughout the world. To fulfill this mission, Śrīla Prabhupāda did not accept that every principle mentioned in the dharma śāstras was applicable: “Sanātana Gosvāmī wrote his Vaiṣṇava smṛti, Hari-bhakti-vilāsa, which was specifically meant for India. In those

days, India was more or less following the principle of smārta-vidhi. Śrīla Sanātana Gosvāmī had to keep pace with this, and his Hari-bhakti-vilāsa was compiled with this in mind” (Cc Madhya 23.105). (It’s documented that during Sanātana Gosvāmī’s time—sixteenth century India—women were gurus and leaders.)

Śrīla Prabhupāda selected Vaisnava principles that were helpful for spreading Krishna consciousness: “A Vaisnava is immediately purified, provided he follows the rules and regulations of his bona fide spiritual master. It is not necessary that the rules and regulations followed in India be exactly the same as those in Europe, America and other Western countries. Simply imitating without effect is called niyamāgraha” (Cc Madhya 23.105) To preach effectively without sacrificing essential principles, Śrīla Prabhupāda made adjustments in Indian roles for (and attitudes toward) men and women. For his followers to ignore this is for them to dishonor Śrīla Prabhupāda’s sacred legacy. “What we are doing is perfect by the grace of Lord Caitanya Mahāprabhu, for it is He who proposed to invent a way to capture those who strayed from Kṛṣṇa consciousness” (Cc Ādi 7.31–32 purport).

“In India all the ācāryas and their descendants later on acted only from the man’s side. Their wives were at home because that is the system from old times that women are not required to go out. But in Bhagavad-gītā we find that women are also equally competent like the men in the matter of Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement. Please therefore carry on these missionary activities, and prove it by practical example that there is no bar for anyone in the matter of preaching work for Kṛṣṇa consciousness” (SPL to Himavati, 20 December, 1969). “I am counting on you boys and girls to push on this movement and preach vigorously all over the world, and we shall be successful (SPL to Amogha, 29 January, 1973). “Prabhupāda was smiling and looking directly from one devotee to another. ‘I want each of you to go and start a center...’ ‘The girls also?’ Rukmini asked. ‘There is no harm,’ Prabhupāda said. ‘Kṛṣṇa does not make distinction—female dress or male dress’” (Prabhupāda by Satsvarupa dasa Goswami).

Guru-mukha-padma-vākya, cittete kariyā aikya: May our consciousness be purified by Śrīla Prabhupāda’s words, may we vanquish our conditioning and allow him to shape our understanding and attitude. “If you want to be guided, then take in every step the words of guru” (lecture SB 7.9.55, 10 April 1976). “Do not think otherwise. Whatever guru has said accept it, finally. *Āra nā kariha mane āsā.* Don’t divert from this” (lecture Bg 17.1-3, 4 July 1974). “We should become always a very obedient student to our guru. That is the qualification” (Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Disappearance Day lecture, 10 December 1976).

By curtailing the service of Śrīla Prabhupāda’s female followers we depart from Śrīla Prabhupāda’s instructions and example and thus effectively cripple ourselves. Rather, taking heart from Śrīla Prabhupāda, we can fully include and engage all his followers according to their individual propensities so that each one of them can become Kṛṣṇa conscious and give that priceless transcendental consciousness to others.