

In ISKCON

by Jagannatha,  
Krsnadasa

## On Chivalry And The Rights of Our Mother

One of the most redeeming qualities of a gentleman is chivalry, typified by religiousness, morality, courtesy, honour, courage, justice and readiness to help the weak. And who amongst us men in the West will allow themselves to be thought of as ungentlemanly? Dare I say none? However, everyday, tacitly, most men of the ISKCON Movement participate in an institution which perpetuates an ungentlemanly mentality; relegating the entire female population of the community to the back of the temple room.

Some will say, "Oh, you're disrupting Vedic culture!" or "That's the Vedic standard." But in my travels throughout the whole of India, north, south, east and west, I have never seen a shred of evidence to support this notion. At Udupi there is equal access to the Deity for men and women; at Tirupati; at Jagannatha Puri (though I haven't personally seen); at Trivandrum, equal access; at Srirangam, the same; at Dvaraka I have seen women allowed priority, as well as children; at Guruvayur, the tradition of equality for men and women is again upheld. Yet at the Krsna-Balarama Mandir, the representative stronghold of the Brahma-gaudiya-vaisnava sampraday we do something entirely different. Some years ago I asked one sannyasi at Mayapura, Bhakti Vidya-purna Swami, "Where did this policy originate? It's not Vedic, is it?" His Holiness replied, "No, not really. It comes from the Moslems." And I suddenly remembered seeing this in my travels in South East Asia: women are treated almost like possessions, without rights, and shunned to the periphery of the Mosque, out of sight, and -- in essence -- out of mind. The only cultural precedent I can find for this peculiar habit is not Vedic, not Indian, not even Western, but ... Islamic ... and not particularly worthy of being followed. So who is actually disrupting Vedic culture?

Nor have I seen any definitive sastraic statements supporting this pretence of corraling the fairer sex out of darsan's view, although I've sincerely sought it. Nothing from Srila Prabhupada's books, nothing from his lectures, nor from his letters. I've given up looking.

What I have found is a wealth of philosophical and personal statements from Srila Prabhupada and his books to the contrary. In a minute I'll share some of the more pertinent with you.

Others will complain that there isn't enough room and the geography of the temple is not well suited to having both the men and the women in the front. Yet in various temples around the world devotees remark that ecstatic kirtans regularly occur where there is such a division, and resident devotees can't conceive of it being otherwise. (Such is the case at New Mayapura, where the women have more of the temple room than the men.) On Harinama-sankirtana in the streets of London and other cities I've often experienced the most ecstatic kirtans walking two by two. During those times we're so enlivened and absorbed in the holy Name, no one who is not otherwise obsessed is worried about whether the women are on one side and the men on the other. In some temples in Italy, women are protected by being pushed to the front, along

with the men, where they can hear the kirtan as well, and the popular account is that this increases the pleasure of the passersby. Conversely I can't count the times I've been asked, "Hey, don't you have any women in your movement? Oh, why are they in the back?" as a sometimes cowering and timid huddle of women get shoved in the wake of the often oblivious brahmacaris... Another unconscious self-inflicted blow to our otherwise sincere attempts to share the holy Name with others.

Most people in the West outside of ISKCON will agree that denying the women and female children equal access to the Deities smacks of blatant chauvinism. Or do we think we're completely above the criticism of the secular world to ignore that? At this point can we afford to be? Wasn't it Srila Prabhupada's philosophy to adopt expedient normative social customs to avoid causing disturbances in the preaching? And in the context of modern social values, pushing women to the back, and hence a lower rung of society, is an archaic and destructive institution that I feel acts not to foster purity -- as is intended -- but serves merely to disrupt what could otherwise be a sanctified mood of love, comradery and friendship within the temple, without which there is no possibility of attracting new devotees.

"Separating men and women is disrupting a mood of purity?" some may ask. "We have to keep the brahmacaris and women separate." The brahmacaris are "the backbone" of ISKCON some have wrongly said, and therefore we have to separate them.\* Yes we all agree -- separation between men and women must be there, but during the kirtan separation does not mean forcing the women to stare at the backs of gyrating youths, who can also be seen as sense objects, some of whom seem to exhibit a distinct awareness of the presence of women. Separation does not perforce entail obscuring the ladies' view of Their Lordships. If I were in a woman's shoes I would feel slighted.

And so, I know, do many women, within and outside of ISKCON. For instance, my sister, Kirsten, who just completed her doctorate in plant biology and botany at the University of Texas at Austin, remarked some years back after visiting the Boston Temple, "I appreciate your philosophy and I agree with what you say, but your treatment of women makes it all seem a travesty. I don't mean to be rude, but I feel that women are equal to men, not in ability exactly, but in opportunity, and it seems as though you're denying the obvious by keeping up your policy of pushing the women to the back." Kirsten is married, a vegetarian, doesn't drink or smoke, and believes in reincarnation, karma and a personal Deity. She is a prime candidate for entering devotional service. But she won't come to the temple. Why? Here is another close to home example, from an acquaintance of mine in San Diego, Rebecca Hickox, a graduate from Harvard Law School, practicing attorney and full-time mother. She described to Krsna Kumari dasi, mentioned in a recent issue of Priti-Laksanam, that many of her professional female colleagues have expressed interest in Krsna consciousness, but "all of them are hesitant to come to the temple or to get involved because of the discrimination against women they see." In her letter to KK dasi of January 11, 1990 she writes, "The matter most often raised by outsiders is the question of why women stand at the back of the temple room during arotik.. A number of

visitors I have brought to the temple at various times (students, attorneys, my mother, my brother) and others who have talked about the movement with me have mentioned this phenomenon as something that troubles them about Krsna consciousness. The fact that women stand in the rear of the temple room is seen as an indication that women are discriminated against in the movement... Finally, fostering an artificial separation between men and women has not prevented devotees from falling down. Plenty of illicit affairs have taken place, even between devotees who regularly took their assigned places at the front or the back of the temple room." Krsna-kumari also mentions in this context another devotee, Allen Rider, an intelligent young man with whom I've spent several Sunday feasts talking in the past. Allen is a journalist for San Diego's popular Beach and Bay Press, and laments that his girlfriend no longer comes to the temple because of this discrimination. This is a brief sample, though in my eyes, devastating.

For those of us who are interested in increasing the preaching, doesn't this seem like a justified starting place?

Srila Prabhupada said, "For God there is no discrimination. Women, men have equal rights to become godly and go back home back to Godhead..."1 "It doesn't matter whether one is a woman or a mercantile class of man or a sudra. It doesn't matter... But Krsna is opening the path for everyone..."2 "The general spiritual progress of state and community depends on the chastity and faithfulness of its womanhood... Therefore both children and women require protection... Being engaged in various religious practices women will not be misled into adultery..."3 From these quotes it seems that the prime responsibility of the men and leaders of any society, including ISKCON is to protect the women by offering them the utmost absorption in spiritual activities. Hence it's my resolute conviction that the responsibility of the management in ISKCON is to provide for every individual -- irrespective of sex or class -- and protect them by enabling them to make as much spiritual advancement as possible, which necessarily includes having equal access to the mercy of the Lord. In the Fourth Canto, Srila Prabhupada writes, "It is said that when women are protected they remain an always auspicious source of energy to man."4

What values are we instilling our children? The boys grow up feeling that it's alright to herd their female peers to the rear. The Gurukula boys will carry this latent condescending attitude with them to the outside world in later years unless we redress it. (This goes against my grain as an aspiring gentleman, and everything that my parents and teachers taught me as a child.) Then the girls are unconsciously indoctrinated in a gradually demeaning self-esteem that acclimates them to viewing such abuse and disrespect as normative and acceptable. Modern Western psychologists and analysts term this as "formative codependency"; an often unconscious behavioural pattern that spawns a self-inflicted though artificial image of oneself as deserving abuse or warranting harsh and emotionally dysfunctional treatment. Most of us have experienced how one becomes habituated to such behaviour and the relationships where we stage it.

For the children who aren't on the spontaneous platform, to

to denied normal access to the Deities is a kind of violence. Most children don't come back to the temple to see Krsna in the daytime and so the morning kirtan is all they have to go on for the rest of the day, without japa. Must we force them to remain in the temple, obliged to stare at the back of twirling brahmacaris instead of their worshipful Lords? It's a disgrace. I wouldn't subject my children to. Is it any wonder why so many women leave the temple room then? Must we deprive our children the taste of service to Radha's and Krsna's lotus feet they so badly need and deserve? Have we the right to deny the Gurukula girls the proximity to the Deity, the memory of Whom will sustain their fertile brains throughout their fragile, vulnerable and formative years? How else will they grow strong as the pure souls we need them to be? If we disregard their needs, they won't help this grappling movement progress.

An alternative scenario resulting from this policy which is prevalent in the temple atmosphere, is men and women mutually ignoring each other. This is also pathological. As preachers, distributing books, meeting guests, chanting on Harinama-sankirtana, teaching school, managing families, etc., we can't simply ignore half of the community because they're in bodies of the opposite gender. We have to support each other, encourage each other, help each other, without overfamiliarity.

We hear that in a healthy society men need respect from their female counterparts, but they'll probably never get it from a population they insist upon systematically disrespecting.

Lord Kapiladeva tersely warns in the 29th Chapter of the third Canto, Bhagavatam, that those who fail to see the Supersoul in every living being, act out of envy for the bodies of others. They create false divisions and a mentally concocted, artificially separatist mentality that breeds false friends and false enemies which in turn, leads to an utterly disturbed mind. The Lord says, "Such a person can never please Me, despite opulent temple worship." If we're above the bodily concept, then please let's try to start showing it in practice. Give ourselves a chance. Then later in the fourth Canto, Chapter 3, text 21, Lord Siva describes to Sati that "One who is conducted by false ego and thus always distressed, both mentally and sensually, cannot tolerate the opulence of self-realized souls. Being unable to rise to the standard of self-realization, he envies such persons as much as demons envy the Supreme Personality of Godhead." One group of words used here is hrda-atura-indriyah, which literally translates to "enemies in the heart, springing from sensuality". Although this is referring to Daksa, a devotee, and may seem like a remote correlation, when we try to take away something from a devotee, big or small, young or old, male or female, take it as a sign of envy -- subtle or gross. And according Lord Siva, to envy a devotee is to ultimately to envy Krsna; param padam dvesti yathasura harim.

In the words of our local pandita, Rohininandana Prabhu, "There is a problem of male chauvinism in our Society, which I believe is a great stumbling block to our preaching. Before we can begin to rectify this problem, we must regret we have been party to it, and before we can feel regret, we must realize that this

problem actually exists."

As the title of my talk suggests, in keeping with Srila Prabhupada's teachings and the paradigm of sane society he offered us, isn't it time we reevaluate our conceptions of what it means to be a mother?

On a morning walk in Nairobi, 10/30/75, a devotee explained to Srila Prabhupada the attitude held by some men about chanting in the temple room when women are present:

Devotee: "What I mean to say is that he says that he does not want to chant with women in the temple room. I have seen this before.. He says, 'I do not want to chant in a room with women. I'd rather be away from the women.'"

Srila Prabhupada: "That means he has got distinction between men and women. He is not a pandita. Pandita sama darsinah. He is a fool. That's all. He is a fool. So what is the value of his word? He is a fool. He should always consider, 'There is a woman, that's all right. She is my mother.' That's all. Matrivat para daresu. Suppose you sit down with your mother and chant. What is the wrong? But if he is not so strong, then he should go to the forest. Why should he live in the Nairobi city? On the street there are so many women. He'll walk on the street closing the eyes? [Laughter] This is all rascaldom. They are all rascals. They are not devotees. Simply rascals."

Administering the shift in the UK from men and women on each side of the temple to women in the back after guru-puja, subtly changes my consciousness from one of seeing my Godsisters and aunts as my mother, deserving protection, fairness and equal access to the Lord, to one of derision, condescension and bodily consciousness. Switch. They're now women, with women's bodies, no longer my mother. For I'm sure I'm not alone in saying I would never send my mother to the back of the temple room. If I want to practice what I preach, pandita sama darsinah, where better place is there to start than in the morning, in the association of our family members and fellow soldiers in the temple room? When the brahmacharis go out to preach on the streets, don't they sometimes have to approach women and treat them carefully, listening to them, in a gentlemanly demeanor? And how many times have I seen the very same preachers come home to the temple to let doors slam in the women's faces, force them to sit on the dirty floor of the Harinama van while the men sit in comfortable seats, and relegate them to the unsafe position of the back of the Harinama party? How many times have I seen brahmacharis preach the tokenism of equality on the street, and then refuse to serve women when the opportunity arises in the temple, speak disparagingly about them or to them while ushering them to the back of the temple room? To me this is not what Srila Prabhupada wanted. It's nothing short of disgraceful.

One devotee recently said to me, "Could you do me a favor and tell that devotee that I have a name and I'm a person. He just waved to me like I was meat or an object or something and said 'Oh when you're finished, give the keys to that mataji.' I hate to be called mataji," she said. "It makes me feel like dirt!" How, after 12 years in the movement can this unfortunate lady associate two apparently diametric terms; meat and mataji? One may waive a

macho hand -- as <sup>We</sup> they often do, and say, "Oh, she's just disturbed. Got her married and she'll get over it." One may also say that this is purely reactionary and distended, an attitude engrained after years of bad conditioning. But how did she get there? And why the hatred for the word mataji? A full-time preacher, without any record of trouble or fall-down comes to equate meat with mataji. However sour the grapes may be, this represents to me a symptom of what I seem to often be hearing from many devotees, not only women; that we men don't have the faintest idea of what it means to honour our mothers. We give a dog a bad name and hang it; "lusty woman", "disturbed mataji" or "unmarried woman means unbalanced woman". This is one example of what happens when women don't feel protected. We inadvertently drive them crazy and we label them as such.

Viewing women in such a distorted and destructive way helps breed ill-will and instability in our families too. Is there any correlation between the haphazard and sometimes misogynous "training" our brahmacaris are fed with the appalling failure of our marriage institution? I'm convinced there is; directly. We would like to set the pattern for other religions to follow, but sadly, we're more to blame than the "karmis" upon whom we generously shower our self-righteous banter. Conceiving of women as our mother intones such respect, veneration and concern, that a brahmachari properly indoctrinated in this mood will naturally and without effort make his fellow devotee women feel appreciated, respected and comfortable; a condition necessary where even the average woman will exercise her normal virtues of humility, tenderness and service.

Srila Prabhupada said, "Protection of women maintains the chastity of society..."<sup>5</sup> How can we afford to disrespect our mother? It's social and spiritual suicide. "...even by insulting them one loses one's duration of life."<sup>6</sup> We're spiritually dependent upon the women in a variety of ways, therefore Vaisnava etiquette does not exclude them.

I needn't say that most of us in the West have never had any training or idea what it means to properly honour our mothers, so it's no wonder that we drag our carelessness -- and often scorn -- for our original mothers into our devotee relationships.

We men are always priding ourselves on how much more intelligent we are, and how many more times lusty the women are, how much more difficult it is to practice spiritual life in a woman's body, etc., etc. So therefore -- in following the codes of even mundane chivalry -- shouldn't the women be given even more priority for darsana? Shouldn't they be allowed first digs, considering their disadvantage? That is what I've seen in India, and not the other way around. The men will often stand to the back -- admiringly or mopingly, whichever the case may be -- while the women sit and chant together before the Deity, leading and responding with intense devotional song. I've seen this in several temples in Jaipur, namely Radha-Govinda Mandir and Radha-Gopinatha temple, as well as at the Dowji temple near Mathura, the main Varsana temple, and the Srinathaji temple in Nathdwar. I reiterate, nowhere outside of our ISKCON temples have I ever seen women pushed to the back. Not even in the Christian Churches, with

divisions between pews, which lend themselves quite well to segregation, do you see the women being shuffled anywhere (except perhaps first in line when receiving the sacrament, if you're Catholic). Are they on the bodily platform, or are we?

Here is some specific, direct historical evidence, in favor of this equality, quoted again from Priti-laksanam:

"K. dasi, who joined the movement in Denver in 1973, had some interesting experiences to relate... When she joined there was a very Krsna conscious mood at the Denver temple with men and women devotees working ver cooperatively and dedicatedly to spread Srila Prabhupada's mission. Men and women stood side by side during kirtana with an aisle separating them, women were on the schedule to offer mangala arotik, etc. She said that no one, to her knowledge, thought anything was wrong with these standards and that the women were chaste, not loud or frivolous. Kurusrestha Prabhu was temple president. Satsvarupa Maharaja at that time thought that the temple was the best example of a Krsna conscious temple in America and invited Srila Prabhupada to come, which he did. What happened after this is typical of what happened time after time in temples all across America between 1974 and 1975. This experience for many, many women in this movement was as big a mistake as placing big vyasanas for certain of Srila Prabhupada's disciples in temples around the world. Srila Prabhupada arrived with an entourage of GBC men, sannyasis, and other leaders. She said that upon entering the temple the leaders surrounding Srila Prabhupada immediately told the temple president that the women were supposed to stand in the back. She said that the mood in which the sannyasis did this was one of frustration, anger, and resentment, in a mood like keeping blacks in the back of a bus. The temple president's wife approached Srila Prabhupada and humbly complained that we are not Vedic women, we are not used to this. Srila Prabhupada said, "No. No. This is not necessary. the ladies do not have to stand in back." Srila Prabhupada instructed this to the leaders surrounding him and the ladies came back to the front of the altar to one side of the men. As soon as Srila Prabhupada left, the sannyasis who remained immediately ordered the temple president to put all the women in the back of the temple room. K.dasi said that Kurusrestha Prabhu did not want to do this, but did it anyway in the mood of respecting the order of "higher authorities." You can inquire from dozens of devotees living in temples across America at that time.. It was in this abrupt manner that leaders "introduced" the standard that women belong in the back of the temples. I cannot find any quotes or information anywhere that Srila Prabhupada wanted our women in the back..." K. dasi eventually became so discouraged that she left Denver temple and moved to the L.A. temple, where she served for the next seven years. In a famous letter to Ekayani dasi, December 3, 1972, Srila Prabhupada again emphatically squelches deviant attempts to banish women from complete access to the temple facilities: "I do not know why these things, inventions are going on. That is our only business, to invent something new programme? We have already got our Vaisnava standard. That is sufficient for Madhvacarya, Ramanujacarya, it was sufficient for Lord Caitanya, six Goswamis, for Bhaktivinode Thakura, for my Guru Maharaja Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati, for me, for all big, big saints and acaryas in our line -- why it shall be inadequate for my disciples so that you must manufacture something. That is not possible. Who

has introduced these things, that women cannot have clapping? If they become agitated then let the brahmacaris go to the forest, I have never introduced these things. The brahmacaris cannot remain in the presence of women in the temple, then they must go to the forest, not remaining in New York City, because New York there are so many women, so how they can avoid seeing? Best thing is to go to the forest for not seeing any women, if they become so easily agitated, but then no one will either see them and how our preaching work will go on?" If Srila Prabhupada was so stern and uncompromising about women chanting japa in the temple with men, I can assure you without a shadow of a doubt, that he would uphold the same standard of rights on the issue of women having darsana during kirtana.

Who has the prerogative to legislate and perpetuate a deviation from Srila Prabhupada's instructions so severe that devotees and guests -- male and female alike -- would avoid coming to the temple, leave kirtan early in disgust, and wind up emotionally soured and embittered for years? Srila Prabhupada said, "Our leaders should be careful not to kill the spirit of enthusiastic service which is individual and spontaneous and voluntary." Please, Prabhus, in all earnestness, think carefully about this issue and put yourself in the shoes of the women who feel this way.

Lastly, and leaving aside all of the politics, philosophy and historical precedents, Srila Prabhupada said "If we simply preach, then all difficulties will be resolved in due course of time." If we feel bothered by the presence of women next to us during our morning worship, remember they have to look at you too. We all have specific needs, but if we can become even marginally conscious of each other's needs and we learn to act upon respecting them, then there is no room for sectarianism, partisanship, separatism or envy.

Please forgive me for my pedantic and long-winded presentation. I'm sorry to speak so strongly self-righteously. I know I'm preaching to myself as much as to anyone else in this. I'm hoping you'll see through my faulty and bellicose words and objectively deliberate on the things I've laid before you.

Thank you for your patience. Hare Krsna.

\* The only "backbone of ISKCON" Srila Prabhupada ever referred to was the BTG.

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### Bibliography

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- 5) Bhagavatam (purport) 1.8.5
- 6) Ibid
- 7) Letter to Karandhara, Dec. 22nd, 1972
- 8) Letter to Tamala Krsna Goswami, January 21st, 1976