

February 14, 1988  
Ekadasi

Dear Pranada Prabhu,

Please accept my humble obeisances. All glories to Srila Prabhupada.

I really like your letter of January 17, 1988 concerning the role of women in ISKCON, and in particular, about their giving Srimad--Bhagavatam classes. Your ideas are very clearly expressed, and your points are well documented. It is hard to imagine an honest devotee not being moved by your letter to seriously consider helping to change things and encourage the authorities to include qualified women on Srimad-Bhagavatam schedules.

May I have your permission to circulate the letter? (I would like to send some copies to India with my husband for the GBC members to read.) Also, if you can bear with my lack of writing talent, I would like to share some thoughts I have on the subject. You can give me some feedback, so I can further refine them.

We have made many mistakes in conducting Srila Prabhupada's ISKCON. The mood now is toward rectification. And the rectification is to understand purely what Srila Prabhupada wanted--and to implement purely what Srila Prabhupada wanted. So we are doing this in many areas. The discrepancies in the role given women in ISKCON is not a small thing we can set aside until "more important" problems are solved. It is especially not a small issue to disobey the instructions of Srila Prabhupada when that disobedience offends half the Vaisnava population of the movement. And really what is at the heart of it is the only issue: our enemy Maya in her form of false ego and lust is preventing us from spreading love of Krsna with full strength.

It is not a matter of the men vs. the women and, now, the women vs. the men. It is a matter of Maya vs. Krsna consciousness. We are stunted in our growth: men, women, and children.

The devotee comes to the movement willing to admit that he is not God--Krsna is God. But influenced by Maya, he can try to establish himself as top devotee. It worries me: the "flowery words of the Vedas" can provide various quotations that if misunderstood can give our men the false impression of categorical superiority over all women devotees. What a handicap in trying to actually realize humility. Having eliminated all the women from the competition as top devotee, then one can feel strengthened to compete with the other men. This goes on, too-- "Whose disciple are you? Are you a Prabhupada disciple? How long have you been a devotee? What is your asrama? What is your varna?" Sort of, "How big a deal are you?"

I don't mean to suggest that all our ISKCON men suffer this illusion of categorical superiority over women; I don't mean to suggest that only our ISKCON men have difficulty with false ego. What concerns me is that we have unwritten laws and attitudes that are mixed in the training we give our devotees that act to negate our task of rooting out false ego. An unwary man can be trained to think he is superior to half the Vaisnavas--just for a start. And an unwary woman can be tricked into

Thinking herself unable to aspire for full, pure devotional service.

We must not be envious of one another. We must have faith that devotional service is completely spiritual and, as such, can expand unlimitedly. Another devotee's advancement will not impede my advancement. In fact, the more devotees are demonstrating and preaching pure devotional service without artificial limitations imposed by our conditioned perspective, then the more the spiritual energy will expand outward and outward and outward to the whole universe. There really can be an ecstatic Hare Krsna explosion!

This is the sankirtana movement. The yuga-dharma is sankirtana. We need to have every man, woman, and child enlivened to preach Krsna consciousness. Lord Caitanya, as the perfect devotee, is teaching us to feel lower than the straw in the street. Srimati Radharani is teaching us to help the other devotees serve Krsna. When we remove the obstacles to devotional service imposed on our women devotees, how can we not all benefit? When Srila Prabhupada's movement finally "gets itself together," and we begin to "take off" it will be breath-taking. I seriously think this "woman issue" is as big a boil as our misunderstanding of the guru issue.

How vulnerable to illicit sex we become if we view women as vehicles for exploitation, the serf class of devotees! It reminds me of the Christians who use the Bible's reference to man having "dominion" over the beasts as justification for eating them. By the misuse of the meaning of the word protection, we have justified abuse, exploitations, prejudice, and hording of various devotional activities from other devotees--women are simply sense objects to be used by men. And all too often this can mean gross illicit sex indulgence. In fact, it is my observation that when we have had instances of heavy enforcement of women being kept in their so-called place, it has been accompanied by illicit sex.

I think of the first ten years of ISKCON as our spiritual childhood. The "boys and girls" were all jumbled together because we didn't yet understand that materially we need to make distinction and carefully orchestrate male/female interaction patterned on a mutually respectful mother/son relationship. (I am not arguing for some casual, loose intermingling of the men and women in our Society. What I am talking about is being sure that we are all given equal access to this spiritual process.)

I think of the second ten years of ISKCON as our spiritual adolescence. The "off" position given to women in this movement could be forgiven in the name of our immaturity. Adolescence is typically a confused time concerning the male/female duality. And it is a painful period.

But now we must grow up! From within our movement and from without we are being forced to recognize the rights and responsibilities of the woman devotee to preach and work to spread Krsna consciousness with any and all of her God-given talents, according to Srila Prabhupada's instructions.

My hope is that the men and women of this movement will pray, discuss, and clarify the role of women in this movement and work to-

gether to facilitate that role.

"In human society all over the world there are millions and billions of men and women, and almost all of them are less intelligent because they have very little knowledge of spirit soul. Almost all of them have a wrong conception of life, for they identify themselves with the gross and subtle material bodies, which they are not, in fact." (Srimad-Bhagavatam 2.3.1, purport)

What can be done practically? We say that spiritually male and female are equal. Even in the purport to the infamous "the heart of a woman is like that of a fox" Bhagavatam verse where Srila Prabhupada quotes Canakya Pandita's advise, "Never place your faith in a woman or a politician," Srila Prabhupada asserts equality on the spiritual platform:

"Canakya Pandita has advised, visvaso maiva katavvah strisu raja kulesu ca: 'Never place your faith in a woman or a politician.' Unless elevated to spiritual consciousness, everyone is conditioned and fallen, what to speak of women, who are less intelligent than men. Women have been compared to sudras and vaisvas (striyo vaisvas tatha sudrah). On the spiritual platform, however, when one is elevated to the platform of Krsna consciousness, whether one is man, woman, sudra or whatever, everyone is equal." (Bhag. 9.14.36, purport) [underline added]

How can we demonstrate that we practice the spiritual equality we preach? It seems to me that we must show that in ISKCON the various devotional activities are available to everyone.

We teach someone he or she is not the body. He or she is spirit soul. And the soul is not inactive. So what does a spirit soul do? The spirit soul performs devotional service! We must be careful to facilitate devotional service. Lord Caitanya has broken into the storehouse of love of Godhead. And He is distributing love of Godhead freely. It has fallen on us to distribute devotional service, and we must not pilfer the goods and hoard them for ourselves like dishonest servants. We must practice devotional service and teach others. Women, as well as men, must be visibly hearing, chanting, and worshipping the Deity.

Devotees must engage in the nine processes of devotional service. In The Nectar of Devotion--especially Chapters Twelve and Thirteen--Srila Prabhupada discusses various devotional activities of the devotee. In the beginning of Chapter Thirteen, Srila Prabhupada writes, "Rupa Gosvami has stated that five kinds of devotional activities--namely residing in Mathura, worshiping the Deity of the Lord, reciting Srimad-Bhagavatam, serving a devotee and chanting the Hare Krsna mantra--are so potent that a small attachment for any one of these five items can arouse devotional ecstasy even in a neophyte." We should encourage all the devotees--men and women--to participate in these devotional activities.

As far as women giving Srimad-Bhagavatam classes. I agree this is a good first step toward dealing with the larger issue of the women's role in ISKCON. Srimad-Bhagavatam class--during the morning program--amongst the devotees is most special of all. Hearing nicely sparks the desire to preach, and preaching creates the necessity to hear nicely . . . the transcendental dialectic. I'm sure the possibility of having to prepare and deliver Srimad-Bhagavatam class will result in better reading and

hearing among the ladies. And I am sure there are ladies among us who can learn to give Srimad-Bhagavatam classes that will enlighten and enliven the devotees.

I'm afraid, however, that many qualified women may shy away from giving class, being intimidated by the stigma that women can't give class to give class. Of course, women are supposed to be shy. On the other hand, Prabhupada encouraged women to be bold preachers. Does giving Bhagavatam class imply that a women isn't shy? Giving Srimad-Bhagavatam class is a valuable facility to improve one's speaking ability and realization.

So, I think women should be encouraged to give Bhagavatam class. I have seen very shy girls--even young, shy Indian girls from Guyana and Trinidad, learn to successfully approach men and women on the streets and in the airport to give them Srimad-Bhagavatams and collect donations in return. And after being on the receiving end of devotees' sharing their realizations of devotional service and Srimad-Bhagavatam, it is only natural that the devotee women will want to return the favor, and can overcome the small obstacle of their feeling awkward about speaking.

This letter is getting long--and writing is not my medium (that's for sure). I would much prefer an opportunity for some friendly discussion and debate amongst the devotees.

But I do want to briefly add some ideas in response to the arguments against women giving class as raised by Jayadvaita Swami's students.

1. Women giving class would be contrary to varnasrama.

If we are going to successfully demonstrate varnasrama within our Society in order to give proper example for society in general, we must get straight the difference between our obligation to perform various spiritual activities like japa, Srimad-Bhagavatam class, worshipping the Deity, accepting and becoming initiated by a bona fide guru--and the various roles we can play based on our guna and karma. There is confusion about this. We must distinguish between what I will refer to as our Vaisnava activities and our varnasrama roles.

Exactly what roles women should play and whether or not they have their own varnas and asramas is open to discussion. I ran across a paper on this subject written by Urmila Prabhu from Detroit. I know there was a lot of discussion about this in Gita-nagari when my husband and Muralivadaka Prabhu conducted the "Varnasrama Town Meetings" there. So these things should be carefully worked out.

But how can someone seriously argue that in the name of demonstrating varnasrama, only those who are qualified by birth should give classes, worship the Deity, etc.? As you pointed out in your letter, if our spiritual life depended on birth, even most the men in our movement wouldn't be able to worship the Deity or give classes.

A devotee may rise early, chant, worship the Deity, perhaps give Srimad-Bhagavatam class, and then later in the day do carpentry work or art work, which are traditionally sudra activities--this is not a mixed message. As spirit souls we are all equal, and we are encouraged to perform Vaisnava activities. In fact, these practices will give us strength to perform our various roles in Krsna consciousness. We aren't

trying to recreate the caste system. Srila Prabhupada didn't go to all this trouble to make us into Hindus. We are aspiring to become devotees of Krsna--situated transcendently.

Even for a woman to properly demonstrate the role of chaste wife, she needs to chant sixteen good rounds, hear Srimad-Bhagavatam, and worship the Deity. Can you imagine how utterly tedious it would be to play wife and mother all day or all one's life without being Krsna conscious? And it hardly seems like a full-time career. Most grhastha men who have their household life well ordered are eager to minimize the household duties of their wives and engage them in direct Krsna conscious preaching activities.

I feel there is real confusion about what is Vedic, what is the women's role in varnasrama, what is Krsna consciousness.

We might begin an investigation of this issue with Srimad-Bhagavatam, Seventh Canto, Part Three, Chapter Eleven, verses 25-29. The chapter is titled "The Perfect Society: Four Social Classes." The verses I mention discuss women's role.

In Vrndavana 1976 Chandrika Prabhu gave me a list of eighteen qualities of a chaste woman. She told me that Srila Prabhupada gleaned this list from his purports of these particular verses soon after completing the Seventh Canto. He apparently told Rupa-vilasa Prabhu that the girls should be trained in these qualities. (1) Service, (2) Good disposition, (3) Dedicated, (4) dressing nicely, (5) cleanliness (personal), (6) housecleaning & decorating, (7) modest, (8) sense controlled, (9) truthful, (10) speak nicely, (11) affectionate according to time and circumstance, (12) not greedy, (13) satisfied in all circumstances, (14) expert in household affairs, (15) \*fully conversant with religious principles, (16) careful, (17) follow footprints of the goddess of fortune in serving her husband, and (18) not to follow a husband who is fallen.

\*Srila Prabhupada said this was the most important quality of a chaste woman.

This list is very nice because it saves us from having to speculate and concoct what it means to be chaste.

One wonders--given the present ISKCON misconception of what it means to be a chaste woman--if we would find Rukmini or Draupadi chaste. We hear how Rukmini helped Krsna fight the princes and Jarasandha, and how she drove the chariot as Krsna stole her away from Sisupala.

Do you recall the description of Draupadi knocking Jayadratha off the chariot when he tried to kidnap her?

Have you ever read that wonderful description from Mahabharata, Chapters 232 & 233 (Draupadi Satyabhama Sambhava Parva)? Draupadi is telling Satyabhama all that she is dealing with in running Yudhisthira's treasury and affairs. Incredible. Talk about women in management.

The main point is that we have to understand with a cool head what Srila Prabhupada is saying about varnasrama and our spiritual practices. We don't want to concoct anything, like Kirtanananda Swami's giving women sannyasa, which definitely violates the instructions of scripture

and further instruction from Prabhupada.

I agree with your argument that the quotations from Srila Prabhupada's letters in support of women giving class are all making philosophical points. They are not just specific instructions. It is interesting that at the Prabhupada disciple's meeting in New York City a year ago, New Vrindaban used a similar argument to refute using Srila Prabhupada's letters to support the argument that our recent zonal acarya system was not Srila Prabhupada's desire. They wanted to limit the discussion to what was in the books or lectures. The counter argument that prevailed was that his letters can function as sadhu (as in guru, sastra, and sadhu).

Thank you for your patience in listening to me. I hope we can have some further discussions soon.

Your servant,

*Saudamani dasi*

Saudamani-devi dasi