

The Roles of Vaishnavis in ISKCON

ISKCON Vaishnavi Ministry

Women's roles in ISKCON have been a subject of much confusion, contention, and polarizing debate in which we tend to ascribe the worst motives to those whose conclusions differ from our own. Even more troubling, we tend to characterize Śrīla Prabhupāda's teachings on this issue in absolute terms without considering the nuances of instructions he gave to different devotees at different times and in different circumstances.

At one extreme, devotees say that Śrīla Prabhupāda's instructions on women's roles were based on a social system that is no longer practical in modern society and that, under the principle of time, place, and circumstance, we can dispense with much of his teachings on men's and women's social roles. This position rests, in part, on the idea that traditional male/female social roles are disfavored in modern society and the cause of much exploitation of women. In order to attract intelligent, well-rounded people, the theory is that we must adapt the traditional male/female roles to something more like the roles in modern society.

At the other extreme, devotees argue that Śrīla Prabhupāda did not want women to have any role outside the home. This position rests on Śrīla Prabhupāda's instruction that women must be protected at every stage of life by their father, husband, or son, and by his instruction to institute *varṇāśrama dharma*. For example, proponents of this position would not allow women anywhere in ISKCON to perform temple deity worship, speak or lead *kirtan* in public, or have any management or leadership role. They argue that Śrīla Prabhupāda gave women a larger role in ISKCON as a temporary concession to their Western conditioning, that only the instructions in his books and not his letters and conversations should be considered in understanding the role of women, and that *varṇāśrama dharma* is reflected by a historical Indian society in which women did not leave their homes except to visit the temple or other women.

In the understanding of the Vaishnavi Ministry, both extremes are wrong and both are right to some degree. They are wrong in that they assume that Śrīla Prabhupāda had only one response to every situation. They are right in that they have each focused on some aspect of Śrīla Prabhupāda's teachings. To understand Prabhupāda's desire for the role of women in

ISKCON, however, these aspects need to be seen from the perspective of the entirety of his teachings on this issue – especially his pivotal statements.

Protection

Śrīla Prabhupāda was unapologetic and unequivocal in his statements that women need to be protected at all stages of their lives. Often, however, we make assumptions about what form that protection should take. There’s no evidence that Śrīla Prabhupāda intended “protection of women” to mean they could not perform Deity worship,ⁱ lead *kirtans*,ⁱⁱ speak in public,ⁱⁱⁱ live in temple ashrams,^{iv} or manage departments.^v To accept that understanding we would have to accept that Śrīla Prabhupāda failed to protect Malati Devi Dasi, Silavati Devi Dasi, Yamuna Devi Dasi, and many others when he engaged them in such activities.

It is unacceptable to assume that Śrīla Prabhupāda did not intend to do something he actually did, such as engage Vaishnavis in these services. Moreover, Śrīla Prabhupāda gave no indication that these engagements for women were temporary. Had he intended such a thing, he would have expressed that instruction in some way. But the opposite is true. When Vaishnavis wrote to Śrīla Prabhupāda inquiring about their roles, he encouraged them to participate in temple/spiritual activities and gave no indication that such participation should be temporary or limited.^{vi}

When he was informed that certain *brahmacharis* were feeling distracted by the presence of Vaisnavis in the temple room during *japa*, Śrīla Prabhupāda’s response was that the *brahmacharis*, not the Vaishnavis, should “go to the forest.”^{vii} Another time, Prabhupāda said that he wanted Vaishnavis to live in temple ashrams because they needed that protection.^{viii} He never indicated that *brahmacharini* ashrams or women’s presence in the temple were temporary measures.

In a letter to Malati Devi Dasi, Śrīla Prabhupāda, wrote that whoever was qualified, male or female, could give *Srimad Bhagavatam* class. Acknowledging differences between men and women, he defined the qualification for speaking in the temple as “how much one understands about Krsna and surrendering to the process.”^{ix} Had he intended this opportunity for women to speak as a temporary concession, why didn’t he indicate that? In

the clear absence of any such indication, it is dangerous to assume that we understand Prabhupāda's intention better than he himself did. We should neither put words into Śrīla Prabhupāda's mouth by assuming a hidden motive he never mentioned, nor take words out of his mouth by ignoring clear instructions on the implementation of women's social roles in our Society.^x

The Weight of Historical Social Practices

Śrīla Prabhupāda was willing to change tradition in order to shelter women. For example, both Śrīla Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati and Śrīla Prabhupāda gave *dīkṣā* initiation to women. Further, Śrīla Prabhupāda gave *brāhmaṇa* initiation to women. Both practices constitute a change from tradition. Neither Śrīla Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati nor Śrīla Prabhupāda ever indicated that the practice of initiating women was temporary or somehow a lesser initiation than that given to men.

Giving initiation is deeply significant spiritual practice that creates an eternal relationship. In changing tradition in this way, Śrīla Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati and Śrīla Prabhupāda also made a statement about the weight we should give historical social practices in determining proper roles for women in ISKCON. In other words, it is clear that our *parampara* is not bound by social custom in regards to the treatment and status of anyone in society, including women. (Lord Caitanya, a *brāhmaṇa*, embraced and was instructed by Ramananda Raya, who was considered a *śūdra* – equally maverick, you could say, as Prabhupāda giving women second initiation.)

Thus, the argument that something has historically been the custom is not definitive on this issue. In Śrīla Prabhupāda's words, "In India all the acaryas 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-gita we find that women are also equally competent like the men in the matter of Krishna 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 Krishna Consciousness." Letter to Himavati — London 20 December, 1969

Varṇāśrama

Some argue that *varṇāśrama dharma* means women have no roles outside the home. This is an assumption. In fact, women in our tradition have always had larger roles that take them beyond the home. In *Kṛṣṇa-līlā*, there are descriptions of the *gopīs* engaging in commerce by traveling to Mathura to sell their milk products. The fruit seller who traded Kṛṣṇa fruit for a handful of grains was a woman engaged in the economic life of the village. Draupadi and other *kṣatriya* queens managed logistics for large households and even armies! Some women lived as ascetics and others are mentioned in the *Srīmad-Bhagavatam* as “expert in transcendental and Vedic knowledge.”^{xi}

Śrīla Prabhupāda told a story praising the chastity of a particular woman he remembered from his college days. This woman was a street sweeper who routinely worked surrounded by men. However, she conducted herself with such grace and care as to be remembered by Śrīla Prabhupāda many years later. He did not indicate that it was wrong for her to be working outside the home or in the company of men, but cited her as one example of how such a thing could be done.

Some argue that under the tenets of *varṇāśrama dharma*, it is improper for any woman to give instruction to a man. In fact, virtually every man begins his life by taking instruction from a woman. The mother is the first guru. As men in our society are told to see all women as mother, there is no barrier to taking instruction from a qualified woman.^{xii}

Historically, women in our tradition have engaged in such activity. Kuntī’s instructions carried so much weight with her sons that they broke tradition when all five brothers married Draupadi. Even though Kuntī’s instruction was given based on a misunderstanding (“share whatever you have found”), her sons placed such importance on her instructions that they agreed to share a wife. The prayers of Queen Kuntī are included in *Srīmad-Bhagavatam*. Clearly, there is no barrier to anyone in taking instruction from a qualified woman.^{xiii}

Jahnava Mata, Lord Nityananda’s wife, was the head of His disciples after His departure and also initiated disciples of her own. Not only did she give spiritual instruction, she acted as the spiritual and managerial head of all of Lord Nityananda’s disciples. Gangamata Goswamini was initiated in Lord Caitanya’s line and also became an initiating guru.

When Haridas Thakur converted the prostitute through his pure chanting, he accepted her as a disciple and engaged her in sharing spiritual knowledge with others. Without doubt, the qualification to give spiritual instruction is not based on the body. The idea that women are somehow disqualified from spiritual leadership is not supported by our tradition, our scriptures, or Śrīla Prabhupāda’s instructions.^{xiv}

There’s no doubt that Śrīla Prabhupāda noted the differences between the sexes and gave his disciples instructions based on those differences. He was strict in how he expected his female disciples to dress, for instance, requiring a degree of modesty that he did not require of his male disciples. When he traveled with his disciples in India, he was sometimes personally attentive to the protection of his female disciples, having them travel with him to programs and stay in the same home or ashram, while he expected his male disciples to make do.

It seems that Śrīla Prabhupāda expected that most of the leaders/managers in ISKCON would be men. In appointing temple presidents, BBT managers, GBC members, and project members, the number of men appointed greatly exceeded the number of women appointed or approached regarding appointment. One might conclude that Śrīla Prabhupāda envisioned a society in which a female leader was not common, but was possible.

In arguing for limited roles for women, devotees quote Śrīla Prabhupāda’s request that we institute *varṇāśrama dharma*. However, there is no statement of Śrīla Prabhupāda’s indicating that *varṇāśrama dharma* excludes women from leadership or management. In fact, the opposite is true. “I am so glad to learn that our London Temple is very, very well managed under your supervision. Kindly continue this standard of Temple management—that will make me very happy.” Letter to Yamuna — Calcutta 16 September, 1970.

Beyond *Varṇāśrama*

Varṇāśrama dharma is a social system designed to give society’s members the best possible opportunity for spiritual advancement. When the bhakti-yoga tradition is combined with *varṇāśrama dharma* the result is called *daiva-varṇāśrama*, “the transcendental system of four social orders and four spiritual orders.” (SB 5.1.24 purport) Prabhupāda writes, “One of the objectives of the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement is to establish this *daiva-varṇāśrama*, but

not to encourage so-called *varṇāśrama* without scientifically organized endeavor by human society.” (SB 7.14.10 purport) The distinction between so-called *varṇāśrama dharma* and *daiva-varṇāśrama dharma* is profound. Under *varṇāśrama dharma*, only members of certain *varnas* can engage in scriptural study and temple worship. *Śūdras* were not allowed to study the *Vedas* or be *pūjārīs*, according to the traditions of *varṇāśrama dharma*. So-called *varṇāśrama* is a caste system based on birth. *Daiva-varṇāśrama* is based not on birth but on one’s qualities and activities. In Śrīla Prabhupāda’s powerful and clear words, “The *ācāryas* who advocate the *daiva-varṇāśrama* (the social order of *cātur-varṇyam* mentioned in *Bhagavad-gītā*) do not accept the proposition of *āśura-varṇāśrama*, which maintains that the social order of *varṇa* is indicated by birth.” Cc Madhya 3.6 purport

Daiva-varṇāśrama dharma is based on the understanding that spiritual life and spiritual advancement and engagement are open to everyone regardless of birth. No one in our ISKCON society would ever think of saying that a man born in a *śūdra* family could not study Śrīla Prabhupāda’s books or engage in Deity worship or manage a *yatra*. Similarly, Śrīla Prabhupāda makes it clear that women can also have responsible positions in his ISKCON society.^{xv} Thus, if we decide that a particular service is not available to women, it is only for social reasons, not spiritual ones.

Conclusion

In *daiva-varṇāśrama*, the social system that Śrīla Prabhupāda and Lord Kṛṣṇa advocate, one’s occupation is not determined by one’s birth but by one’s activities and qualities (Bg 4.13). Prabhupāda says: “In *daiva-varṇāśrama* there cannot be acknowledgement of social status according to birthright because in *Bhagavad-gīta* it is said that the determining considerations are *guna* 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.” (SB 5.1.24 purport)

The question before ISKCON today is: Is *daiva-varṇāśrama* only for men?

Our considered understanding, based on Śrīla Prabhupāda’s teachings, is that *daiva-varṇāśrama* is for all members of Prabhupāda’s society. Thus:

1. Prabhupāda wants to establish *daiva-varṇāśrama*,

2. *daiva-varṇāśrama* is not based on one's birth but on one's qualities and activities, and
3. *daiva-varṇāśrama* is intended for all members of society, both male and female.

If these three statements are true, then it follows that a woman's position in society should be according to her qualities and activities.

For many, if not most, women, this will mean that she is a wife and mother. But this is not all she can be. She may be a wife, a mother, and a temple president. She can give Bhagavatam class. Or, if she is so inclined, she may chart a more renounced path, which would allow us to understand why Śrīla Prabhupāda also made statements such as:

Prabhupāda: If one can remain without marriage, that is the first class.

Rupanuga: Women also?

Prabhupāda: Women also. What is the use of this material husband? Make Kṛṣṇa husband. Kṛṣṇa's prepared to become everything -- love Him as husband, love Him as son, love Him as friend. (Room Conversation -- July 6, 1976, Washington D.C.)

If we accept the principle of *daiva-varṇāśrama*, if we follow Srila Prabhupada's example in engaging Vaishnavis, we find that women can be wives, mothers, leaders, teachers, worshipers, gurus, and/or whatever else according to their qualities and activities, not their birth.^{xvi} Everyone is an individual. To successfully arouse each person's dormant Kṛṣṇa consciousness, we must accommodate and encourage each person's individual expression of Kṛṣṇa consciousness. This will benefit both the individual and our ISKCON society as a whole.

REFERENCES:

ⁱ a) Deity worship means to be very, very clean. You should try to bathe twice daily. The Deities should never be approached without having bathed first and changed to clean cloths after passing stool, etc. Keep teeth brushed after each meal, fingernails clean and trim. Be sure that your hands are clean before touching anything on the altar or the Deities. And cleanse the Deity room, altar and floor daily thoroughly. Shine the various Aratrik paraphernalia after Aratrik. This is described in the

booklet for pujaris written by Silavati Dasi. The idea is summit cleanliness—that will satisfy Kṛṣṇa. Letter to: Rukmini — Los Angeles 20 March, 1970

b) I am very glad also to know that you are engaged as Pujari there. Try to learn this art of Arcana very nicely. You can consult in this connection Himavati, Yamuna and also Silavati. I wish that all our girl devotees be expert in the matter of Arcana and cooking. Letter to: Kancanbala — Los Angeles 20 April, 1970

c) I am glad to learn that the Deities are being cared for there in Chicago so nicely by your good self. I personally gave instruction to Silavati how to care for the Deities properly when I was in Los Angeles and you were trained up by her. So I am confident that everything is going on nicely. Proper Deity worship, with all attention to cleanliness, is of the utmost importance. If you can please the Deity by your sincere service, then your temple will flourish. To be able to personally serve the Deity is a great privilege and such a person is very fortunate indeed. So you continue in this way and Kṛṣṇa will surely bless you. Letter to: Hladini — Surat 29 December, 1970

d) Please especially see that the Deity worship is going nicely. You are an experienced lady, and you can teach especially the girls there to cook nicely for the Deity, to prepare flower garlands nicely for the Deity, to clean and dress the Deity nicely. You organize this to the first class standard, as I have seen they are doing in Los Angeles and in London. Then people will be automatically attracted. You know how to do these things, and they must take instruction from you. And, you can let me know how things are going on there. Letter to: Shaktimati — Bombay 18 August, 1975

ⁱⁱ All along you have been hearing the recording of Yamuna devi and now you want to change. It is not ordinary singing, it is concert, many people are singing, so it is not bad. Just like Sankirtana, many voices are there, men and women, so it is the same thing, sankirtana. I approve of it. Here in Kṛṣṇa Balarama Temple we are hearing the same recording every morning, so if it is good here why not there? Letter to: Jayasacinandana — Vrindaban 12 December, 1975

ⁱⁱⁱ So far as girls or boys lecturing in the morning, that doesn't make any difference. Either girl or boy devotees may deliver lecture if they choose to do. We have no such distinction of bodily designations, male or female. Kṛṣṇa Consciousness is on the spiritual platform. As such, anyone who is a devotee of the Lord, following in this line of disciplic succession, can deliver lecture, on the teachings of Bhagavad-gita, Srimad-Bhagavatam, etc. Letter to: Syama — Seattle 21 October, 1968

^{iv} I have received report from Brāhmaṇanda Swami that you are still living outside the temple. This is not good, and I would request you to immediately return to the temple. And they must receive you nicely. They are your spiritual sons and daughters, so Mother and children must live together in the temple. Letter to: Shaktimati — Bombay 18 August, 1975

^v a) Shakti mati is an elderly woman and can do important work with the cultured Indian society, and she also speaks Swahili. She must be given an important position as a manager. She can work under Brāhmaṇanda Swami. Letter to: Cyavana: — Dallas 29 July, 1975

b) THE ARTISTS whose work so beautifully graces our pages are, to begin with, Jadurani Devi Dasi, directress of the Art Department. BTG #13 The Artists, June 1967

c) Mrs. Wax: Could a woman be a temple president?

Prabhupāda: Yes, why not? Room Conversation with Mr. & Mrs. Wax -- July 5, 1975, Chicago (In this conversation, Srila Prabhupada makes clear that the need of a woman to be protected by husband, father, or son does not preclude a leadership role.)

^{vi} Regarding the problem of how to be aggressive on Sankirtana and submissive in the temple, my request to you is that you should go on being aggressive on Sankirtana. Letter to: Jagaddhatri, Pasupati, Sailogata, Pamela — Dallas 30 July, 1975

^{vii} 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

Madhvacharya, Ramanujacharya, it was sufficient for Lord Caitanya, six Gosvamis, for Bhaktivinoda 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 they must manufacture something? That is not possible. Who has introduced these things, that women cannot have chanting japa in the temple, they cannot perform the arati and so many things? 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 may go to the forest, not remaining in New York City, because in 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? Letter to: Ekayani — Bombay 3 December, 1972

^{viii} So the problem is there, the women must have a husband to give protection. Of course, if the women can remain unmarried, and if there is suitable arrangement for the temple to protect them, just like in the Christian Church there is nunnery for systematic program of engaging the ladies and protecting them, that is also nice. Letter to: Madhukara — Bombay 4 January, 1973

^{ix} So you please continue your devotional service, cooking etc, and you can also keep giving Bhagavatam class if you like. Women in our movement can also preach very nicely. Actually male and female bodies, these are just outward designations. Lord Caitanya said that whether one is brāhmaṇa or whatever he may be if he knows the science of Kṛṣṇa then he is to be accepted as guru. So one who gives class, he must read and study regularly and study the purport and realize it. Don't add anything or concoct anything, then he can preach very nicely. The qualification for leading class is how much one understands about Kṛṣṇa and surrendering to the process. Not whether one is male or female. Of course women, generally speaking are less intelligent, better she has heard nicely then she will speak nicely. Letter to: Malati — Bombay 25 December, 1974

^x So far your question regarding women, I have always accepted the service of women without any discrimination. Letter to: Gurudasa — Los Angeles 26 May, 1972

^{xi} Svadhā, who was offered to the Pitās, begot two daughters named Vayunā and Dhārīṇī, both of whom were impersonalists and were expert in transcendental and Vedic knowledge. SB 4.1.64

^{xii} The actual system is that the husband is Spiritual Master to his wife, but if the wife can bring her husband into practicing this process, then it is all right that the husband accepts wife as Spiritual Master. Caitanya Mahāprabhu has said that anyone who knows the science of Kṛṣṇa, that person 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. So if you can show the women of the community how to help their husbands and children to perfect their home life, and all aspects of life, in Kṛṣṇa Consciousness by chanting, aratrik ceremonies, and eating Kṛṣṇa prasadam, then you will improve the conditions of the neighboring communities to an incalculable extent. So try for this as far as possible. Letter to: Silavati — New Vrindaban 14 June, 1969 [This principle is also established in Kṛṣṇa-līlā: the pastimes of the wives of the brāhmaṇas and the wives of Kaliya.]

^{xiii} a) If you have got sufficient devotees to take care of the Deities as you have seen how in the Los Angeles Temple, take instruction from Yamuna and Silavati how they are worshiping and the installation procedure is given on a separate sheet. Letter to: Jagadisa — Calcutta 17 September, 1970

b) Regarding Deity worship, Silavati and Yamuna Devi may be considered expert, so if some new hands come and take their help, that is a good proposition. Letter to: Karandhara — Calcutta 19 September, 1970

c) I am glad to hear that you are taking up the program of deity worship very seriously. This is required. So everything should be first class as you have got full facility, just to the standard of Los Angeles. In Los Angeles I personally advised them in all the different aspects of deity worship, so you

may consult, especially with Silavati Prabhu (now in Dallas) and do the needful. Letter to: Sri Govinda — Calcutta 31 January, 1973

^{xiv} a) [Prabhupāda encouraged his women disciples to preach:] Regarding your preaching work in the schools, colleges, and universities, try to attract the students, they are our great future hope and they will take up this matter very quickly because the students are not very much contaminated. Letter to: Kancanbala — Los Angeles 20 April, 1970

b) It is very good that you and the other girls are preaching in school to your class mates. This will bring the greatest benefit not only to them but also it will help you to progress more and more in your devotional service. Letter to: Lilasukha — Los Angeles 17 December, 1968

c) [Prabhupāda also encouraged his women disciples to teach:] Satyabhama Dasi is in charge of educating the children in New Vrindaban, and she is very qualified to do this because she is educated and works very nicely with the children. Letter to: Silavati— New Vrindaban 14 June, 1969

d) Prabhupāda: But by training, by knowledge, one can be elevated. That is gurukula. So these are the general principles. Now arrange.

Jyotirmāyī: I was thinking about that, that because the girls are trained like brahmacārīnis also in the gurukula, they should be also kept very, very simple, just like the little boys, brahmacārīs.

Prabhupāda: No, our life is simple. We don't want luxury. We don't want luxury, but as we are accustomed in so many ways, as far as possible. But life should be very simple. To increase unnecessary things unnecessarily, that is material life.

Jyotirmāyī: I was thinking in that way—simple clothes, no jewels, just like the boys, simple...

Prabhupāda: Don't say "no." But give a taste for the good, then it will be automatically "no." Room Conversation -- July 31, 1976, New Māyāpur

^{xv} Prof. O'Connell: Is it possible, Swāmijī, 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. Interview with Professors O'Connell, Motilal and Shivaram -- June 18, 1976, Toronto

^{xvi} We are Vaisnavas. We are not concerned with male or female position in life. That is simply bodily concept of life. It is not spiritual. Whether one is male or female, it doesn't matter, simply chant Hare Kṛṣṇa and follow the four regulative principles and your life will be perfect. Letter to: Jennifer — Mexico City 15 February, 1975