

What about Srila Prabhupada's Books?

A parampara critique of "Women in ISKCON in
Prabhupada's Times"

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An Alternative Account of the History of Gender Relations in ISKCON

In 1997, Mother Jyotirmayi dasi, a pre-1970s disciple of Srila Prabhupada, published a paper titled “Women in ISKCON in Prabhupada’s Times,” wherein she argues that the occupational roles and social status women had in ISKCON up to 1974 was the standard Srila Prabhupada wanted. She describes the equal status women held with men in ISKCON before 1974, as she and some others experienced it; how after 1974 that equality diminished; why she thinks the introduction of social and occupational inequality was bad for ISKCON in general; and why she thinks it harmed women in particular. Consequently, she argues that deviation from that standard caused great spiritual difficulty for many. “Having known to a certain extent the movement from almost its beginning (from 1969), a number of the first devotees and Srila Prabhupada personally,” she says, “I feel a responsibility to share this experience with other, newer, devotees in order to help correct the faults and give ISKCON back its original, wonderful nature.” Hence she advocates a return of ISKCON’s social relations between its men and women to its pre-1974 state.¹

One will note however that Jyotirmayi’s timeline of diminishing social equality between men and women in ISKCON coincides with the time at which Srila Prabhupada started giving more and more emphasis to varnasrama-dharma. As Ravindra Svarupa Prabhu notes,

It is also clear that by 1974, Prabhupada had changed his mind about instituting the varnasrama-system. One major reason for his doing so is clearly disclosed in this [February 14,] 1977 conversation concerning a sannyasi who had fallen down from his celibacy vows²:

Prabhupada: Just like our [name withheld]. He was not fit for sannyasa but he was given sannyasa. And five women he was attached, and he disclosed. Therefore varnasrama-dharma is required. Simply show-bottle will not do. So the varnasrama-dharma should be introduced all over the world, and -

Satsvarupa: Introduced starting with ISKCON community?

¹ Jyotirmayi’s paper is one of several papers written by a number of senior women in ISKCON and which advocate gender equality in most areas of ISKCON’s society. Of these papers, Jyotirmayi’s was by far the most influential in terms of inspiring others to demand pro-gender-equal policies within ISKCON or directly inspired the creation of such policies. In a paper by Radha devi dasi titled “Participation, Protection and Patriarchy: An International Model for the Role of Women in ISKCON” (1997), she says, “Jyotirmayi devi dasi described thoroughly in her paper, ‘Women in ISKCON in Shri Prabhupada’s Times,’ all of these misconceptions about women and explained through Shri Prabhupada’s own writings exactly why they are misconceptions. Sudharma dasi in her paper to the GBC for the 2000 meetings refers to Jyotirmayi’s paper as having documented the history and extent of abuse to women in the middle to late 1970s. Academics outside of ISKCON have also lent their support to the effort to bring about pro-gender-equal policies within ISKCON, and in doing so have cited Jyotirmayi’s paper frequently. E. Burke Rochford, Jr, in his paper “Prabhupada Centennial Survey: A Summary of the Final Report” cites Jyotirmayi’s paper five times and says, “I recommend that ISKCON leaders immediately move to restore the rights and responsibilities afforded women by Srila Prabhupada. Men should be educated accordingly. (A good start for everyone would be to read the articles by Jyotirmayi devi dasi 1997, and Radha devi dasi 1998.)” Later, Rochford writes a paper titled “The Politics of Gender Within the Hare Krishna Movement” (CESNUR 2006) and cites Jyotirmayi’s paper 12 times. Other academics have quoted her in their work as well. What is presented here is small sample of the extent of the influence of her paper.

² “ISKCON and Varnasrama-Dharma: A Mission Unfulfilled”, 1998, ISKCON Communications Journal, vol 7, no. 1, June 1999. <http://content.iskcon.org/icj/7_1/71rsd.html>.

Prabhupada: Yes. Yes. Brahmanas, ksatriyas. There must be regular education.

And well before 1974, failed marriages were also a source of great social disturbance. In early correspondence Srila Prabhupada spoke proudly of married disciples who were “doing very nicely in London” and elsewhere.³ But signs were also there that his Western disciples would find staying in marriage difficult. In a 1967 letter to Krishna Devi, he says, “I do not approve anyone's separation who are married by me,” and he further warns her, “If this is not followed, I will not take part in anyone's marriage in the future.”⁴ And by 1972, he says he will no longer sanction marriages. “I am so much disgusted by this troublesome business of marriage, because nearly every day I receive some complaint from husband or wife, and practically this is not my business as sannyasi to be marriage counsellor, so henceforward I am not sanctioning any more marriages. . . .”⁵ If “mutual respect” and “brotherhood between men and women” had actually characterized relations between the men and women back then, then why by 1972 did Srila Prabhupada say he was “disgusted” with his disciples’ failing marriages and say he would no longer sanction them? Relations between men and women in ISKCON’s early days were not as sober as Jyotirmayi suggests.

Also coinciding with Jyotirmayi’s timeline are letters in which Srila Prabhupada emphasizes varnasrama and admonishes disciples for not following it, as in this oft-quoted letter to Madhukara (Jan 4, 1973):

The varnasrama-dharma system is scientifically arranged by Krsna to provide facility for delivering the fallen souls back to home, back to Godhead. And if we make a mockery of this system by whimsically disrupting the order, that we must consider. That will not be a very good example if so many young boys and girls so casually become married and then go away from each other, and the wife is little unhappy, the husband is neglecting her in so many ways, like that. If we set this example, then how the thing will go on properly?

As with his February 14, 1977, conversation, we see a similar theme: varnasrama is there to help us to go back to the spiritual world; it is not opposed to devotional service. As Ravindra Svarupa Prabhu suggests, if there was a change in ISKCON’s social system from 1974 onwards, then Srila Prabhupada’s increasing advocacy of varnasrama around that time in response to the difficulties his disciples were having would explain it.

But Ravindra Svarupa Prabhu may be wrong about Srila Prabhupada changing his mind; there is substantial evidence that shows he always wanted it. In the 1972 MacMillan edition of *Bhagavad-gita As It Is*, a book he wrote with a Western audience in mind, he does not spare his readers from sharp criticism of women’s equality. “Now, in the *Manu-samhita*, it is clearly stated that a woman should not be given freedom. That does not mean that women are to be kept as slaves, but they are like children. Children are not given freedom, but that does not mean that they are kept as slaves,” says Srila Prabhupada.⁶ “The demons have now neglected such injunctions, and they think that women should be given as much freedom as men. However, this has not improved the social condition of the world.” That

³ Letter to Hayagriva, 8 Nov. 1968.

⁴ Letter to Krishna Devi 29 Nov 1967.

⁵ Letter to Kirtiraja 28 Feb 1972.

⁶ *Bhagavad-gita As It Is*, 16.7 (MacMillan, 1972).

he would make *Manu-smriti* as the basis of his critique of modern society shows he wanted varnasrama. The important question then is not *if* he wanted it in ISKCON but *when*.

Srila Prabhupada's own commentary on the *Srimad-Bhagavatam* also shows that he thought varnasrama was good for the people outside of India. In his purport to *Srimad-Bhagavatam* verse 1.10.16, which describes the royal ladies of the Kurus getting up onto the roof of their palace with "affection and shyness" to shower flowers on Lord Sri Krishna, Srila Prabhupada discusses the essential role of shyness in society. "Shyness is a check to the unrestricted mixing." And then he relates this to the general problem of male-female attraction as the force that keeps us bound in illusion and discusses the need to organize society to minimize this attraction. It is notable that he uses this example to illustrate a general, universal principle, not something subjective or limited to the people of India. He thought varnasrama should be the standard of society throughout the world.

In light of this, the significance of 1974 as a turning point in Srila Prabhupada's increased advocacy of varnasrama is an indication that he thought introducing it no longer presented a risk in the form of rules and regulations too strict for Western newcomers to immediately follow. Instead, by that time, his disciples' continued lack of conformity to varnasrama principles had become the new, existential risk to his mission. As per his February 14, 1977, conversation, he expressed concern that without varnasrama, his disciples' practice of Krishna consciousness would become "sahajiya," something "show-bottle."

Therefore 1974 was not, as Mother Jyotirmayi describes it, the start of a society-wide campaign to malign women. Instead, 1974 was the beginning of a concerted effort lead by Srila Prabhupada himself to help his disciples adopt the daivi-varnasrama culture within his own institution. It was the time to introduce higher standards to his disciples, who by 1974 were clearly still struggling to control their sex desires.

Explaining the Post-1974 Mistreatment of Women in ISKCON

Jyotirmayi however says the post-1974 social policies caused the mistreatment experienced by women from that time forward. "Instead of the simple separation between men and women that Prabhupada wanted, a real segregation was taking place," and ascribes to the "real segregation" a litany of ill effects: women were considered "stupid and incapable and became subject to gross mockery" and "only as 'women' in the most pejorative sense"; "adultery and illicit connections, which were excuses to mistreat women devotees, increased instead of decreased"; "wickedness, meanness and impoliteness appeared"; etc.

However, we find none of these negative characteristics are associated with the varnasrama societies described in shastras, which were far more segregated than ISKCON ever had been. Commenting on Srimati Sita Thakurani's visit to the house of Sri Jagannatha Misra, Srila Prabhupada explains that a respectable woman in Lord Caitanya's time could not be seen in public, *asurya-pashya*. "In the oriental culture this system was very much prevalent and was strictly observed by respectable ladies, both Hindu and Muslim," says Srila Prabhupada. "We have actual experience in our childhood that our mother

would not go next door to her house to observe an invitation by walking; she would go in either a carriage or a palanquin carried by four men.”⁷

Despite the high level of segregation between men and women in Lord Caitanya’s time, women were not considered “stupid and incapable”, nor were they “subject to gross mockery”; nor were they considered “‘women’ in the most pejorative sense”; nor did “adultery and illicit connections” increase as a result of segregation. This shows that segregation cannot be the cause of the abuse that women suffered in ISKCON. Otherwise, we would have to believe that Srimati Sita Thakurani, Srimati Sachidevi, and the women of their time generally were also abused—more so than any of ISKCON’s women ever were. But that is clearly untrue.

However, the *shastras* offer another explanation for the abuse: *varna-sankara*, a society of people who are born of illicit connection between men and women. “The entire American nation has tried to advance in material opulence without striving to produce ideal human beings. The result is that Americans are now regretting the wholesale criminality of American society and are wondering how America has become so lawless and unmanageable,” says Srila Prabhupada.⁸ “The men produced in such a society are less than fourth class. They are the unwanted population known as *varna-sankara*, and as stated in *Bhagavad-gita*, an increase of *varna-sankara* population creates a hellish society. This is the society in which Americans now find themselves.”

And this is the society that Srila Prabhupada drew his first disciples from. Despite the training in *sad-acara* his disciples received from him and despite chanting the Hare Krishna *mahamantra*, his disciples nonetheless struggled to overcome their lingering *varna-sankara* nature. Obviously, with first- and second-initiations, the *varna-sankara* nature of many his disciples did not entirely disappear. And sometimes due to inattention in spiritual life, offense, or insincerity, that nature reasserted itself with full force. Thus the abuses suffered by women in ISKCON resemble the same kinds of abuses suffered by women at large in Western society. Indeed, feminists in mainstream American and European societies for more than 100 years have decried some of these very abuses in their own culture. The only difference (and a superficial one at that) is that disciples who abused women or condoned it also tried to bend the *shastras* or Srila Prabhupada’s statements to justify what they were doing.⁹ Nevertheless, the cause for the abuse of women in ISKCON is the same as the cause for the abuse of women in Western society at large: *varna-sankara*, not segregation.¹⁰

⁷ *Sri Caitanya-caritamrita* Adi-lila 13.114

⁸ *Srimad-Bhagavatam* 6.7.12 purport.

⁹ Srila Prabhupada has informed us that such bending of the meaning of the Lord’s or the acharyas’ words to suit one’s own purposes is called *mayavada-bhashya*. Hence, impersonalism is also operative as a cause for abuse, and it is strongly connected to impure consciousness (*avishudha buddhaya*). See the Preface and Introduction to Srila Prabhupada’s *Bhagavad-gita As It Is* for Srila Prabhupada’s comments on *mayavada-bhashya*. And also see *Srimad-Bhagavatam* 10.2.32.

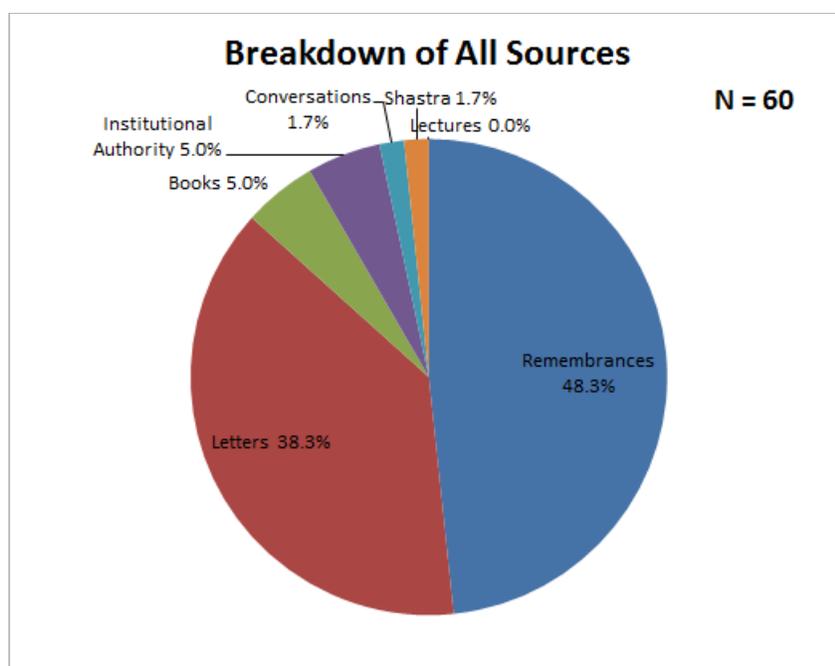
¹⁰ Because India is trying to also become materially advanced like the West without educating its people in the goal of life, the intermingling of men and women and the consequent abuse of women are becoming prominent there as well.

Srila Prabhupada's Authority

As compared with Mother Jyotirmayi's paper, this paper offers a different narrative explanation for the change in women's roles and status in ISKCON before and after 1974 and offers an alternative causal explanation for their abuse. Jyotirmayi asserts that the segregation of men and women in their social and occupational duties is the cause of the abuse of women and that Srila Prabhupada wanted social and occupational equality between men and women in ISKCON. However, this paper asserts that *varna-sankara* are the cause of the abuse of women, which is perpetuated by lack of segregation between men and women, and Srila Prabhupada therefore wanted his disciples to implement a stronger segregation between men and women than there had been before 1974.

While this paper relies primarily on statements from his books and lectures, Jyotirmayi's relies primarily on the eyewitness testimony of unrecorded personal encounters with Srila Prabhupada and on select, published letters. Out of the 60 references in her essay, 29 of the references come from personal, unrecorded anecdotes and 23 are from published letters. Together, they make up 86.7% of her sources. Others sources include the sanction of Jyotirmayi's thesis by three senior GBC members ("Institutional Authority" in the below chart), leaving only three references from Srila Prabhupada's books, one conversation, a Sanskrit verse ("Shastra"), and no references from lectures or classes. Less than 10% of her pramanas (8.4%) come from primary sources, which include Srila Prabhupada's books, lectures, or conversations.

Although personal testimony is not without merit, one might ask why Jyotirmayi gives so little emphasis to Srila Prabhupada's books. She anticipates this objection and responds by discounting their relevance. "Our subject here deals with the social application of Krishna Conscious principles, not with philosophical knowledge," she says. "Therefore many of the arguments given here do not come from Prabhupada's books but from conversations between Srila Prabhupada and his disciples in daily encounters, most of which of course did not get recorded." And while she admits that "many devotees do not trust these 'Prabhupada said'" statements, the strongest evidence she puts forward in favor of her emphasis on "Prabhupada said" is yet another "Prabhupada said." She quotes Mother Himavati, who says Prabhupada said, "No, what I say in talks also, many things I say are not in my books." This is how she justifies her use of personal remembrances as her primary evidence.



Breakdown of All Sources Used in Jyotirmayi's Paper			
Sources	Count	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Remembrances	29	48.3%	48.3%
Letters	23	38.3%	86.7%
Institutional Authority	3	5.0%	91.7%
Books	3	5.0%	96.7%
Conversations	1	1.7%	98.3%
Shastra	1	1.7%	100.0%
Lectures	0	0.0%	100.0%
Total	60	100.0%	

Breakdown of Sources in Remembrances			
Source	Count	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Others Remembrances	16	55.2%	55.2%
Jyotirmayis Remembrances	13	44.8%	100.0%
Total	29	100.0%	

But Srila Prabhupada himself cautioned his disciples against these Prabhupada said. In a letter to Omkara Dasi, he says, "Unless it is there from me in writing, there are so many things that 'Prabhupada said.'"¹¹ Srila Prabhupada himself gives more importance to his recorded instructions over his unrecorded ones. But Jyotirmayi does the opposite; she gives more importance to his unrecorded instructions over his recorded ones.

She also relies heavily on select, published letters from Srila Prabhupada. She says, "My other stories, which are irrefutable, are from Srila Prabhupada's letters." The problem here is that while the content of the letters themselves are irrefutable, the lessons we draw from them might not be. In this regard Srutakirti Prabhu recalls a personal encounter with Srila Prabhupada that illustrates this problem.

Srila Prabhupada repeatedly instructed that in a Krsna conscious marriage there is no divorce. This was based on the authority of Vedic injunctions, and he intended his own disciples to strictly follow the rule. One time, however, Srila Prabhupada received a written request by a disciple for permission to divorce his wife and marry another. In his reply, Srila Prabhupada somewhat reluctantly gave his permission. Srila Prabhupada's servant at that time, Srutakirti, was bewildered by Srila Prabhupada's action in this case, and he waited for an opportunity to inquire. Srila Prabhupada can do anything he wants, thought Srutakirti, but I can't understand why he would do this.

Finally, in the evening, while massaging Srila Prabhupada in his bed, Srutakirti asked, "Srila Prabhupada, this devotee who is asking about the divorce?"

Srila Prabhupada replied that he had told him he could do it.

"Yes, I know," said Srutakirti. "But I was wondering. You always say that divorce is against the Vedic society. There can never be any divorce."

¹¹ Letter 2 Sep. 1975.

Prabhupada replied that in "your society" these things are accepted.

"But in Western society," said Srutakirti, "they also accept meat-eating and intoxication, so why aren't any of these things allowed?"

Srila Prabhupada then replied that whether he gave permission or not, the disciple in question was going to get a divorce. Prabhupada explained that if he had told his disciple no and the disciple had gone ahead and done it anyway, the offense would have been greater. Srila Prabhupada said that he had given permission since he knew the man was going to do it anyway. In this way, the offense was not so great.

Srutakirti immediately appreciated that Srila Prabhupada knew just what to do in each individual case for the benefit of his disciple. Srila Prabhupada demonstrated that he wanted to deal with his disciples in sensitive and particular ways. This even applied to the case when a disciple would fall down or go away from devotional service.¹²

As Srila Prabhupada's letters are for the most part addressed to a specific person, they were often tailored to the recipient's willingness to accept good instruction. Without adequate background information, one is prone to misunderstand his intent. Srila Prabhupada's letters, like his conversations should therefore be understood in light of his books and lectures. They help us come to the correct conclusion when trying to understand a communication intended for a specific person or group of persons.

Some of Srila Prabhupada's letters unambiguously dispute Mother Jyotirmayi's central claims. She says that men and women in ISKCON in Srila Prabhupada's time had full equality. "The women devotees in ISKCON had exactly the same spiritual activities, the same tasks, the same possibilities to progress spiritually and they were entitled to the same respect. At that time everything was done according to the abilities and the spiritual advancement of a person and not according to sex. Prabhupada did not make any distinction." However, in one letter Srila Prabhupada tells Mothers Yamuna and Dinatarine that "cow protection is not possible for women."

The thing is cow protection is not possible for women. You can keep two or three cows, but on larger scale it is not possible. You should not try to take care of more. It is not women's business. Women's business is getting milk and making milk preparations. On the whole larger scale is not to be attempted by women. Manage a small asram, but don't try bigger scale, then you require the help of men.

Don't try manual exertion, then again there is mixture and that is not desired. Simply keep yourself aloof from men—chanting, many more times as possible, read books, worship the deity. I am very much pleased with this girl Svati—she has adopted this white dress. She must not be attractive at all. A widow is forbidden to use ornaments, nice sari, decoration, combing the hair nicely. These are forbidden for the woman who is not with husband.¹³

First, Srila Prabhupada says "cow protection is not possible for women." Second, he says why: they would require the help of men; "then again there is mixture and that is not desired." Finally, the principle of avoiding association with men is reiterated: "Simply keep yourself aloof from men." This shows that Jyotirmayi's method for selecting which letters or which parts of letters to quote is biased.

¹² Srutakirti dasa, interview.

¹³ Letter dated Feb. 21, 1976, Murphy, Oregon.

The same can be said of the few (literally three) times Jyotirmayi cites Srila Prabhupada's books. The statements she picks inadequately represent the range of statements about women and equality made by Srila Prabhupada. As already discussed, most of his statements about women and equality were specifically critical of modern sentiments. "In Kali-yuga, people are extremely liberal, but mixing with women and talking with them as equals actually constitutes an uncivilized way of life."¹⁴ Such statements are far more numerous than ones about equality.¹⁵ Yet these statements never inform Jyotirmayi's argument, and neither does she deal with them.

Even her second-hand sources are similarly biased. One disciple of Srila Prabhupada has this recollection:

There were four Mayapur festivals in the Divine presence of the founder Acharya. Why not a single instance of women giving lecture during any four of them 1974, 1975, 1976 and 1977? I don't remember any other instances of a woman giving a *Bhagavatam* lecture during my whole Krsna conscious life with Srila Prabhupada's personal presence from 1972 till 1977. No less than three hundred days. That doesn't mean there never was an instance when a woman might have given a lecture. But it is like a needle in the haystack.¹⁶

Such testimony exists, but Jyotirmayi cites none of it. It is likely that she knows of such stories but as a policy does not record them.¹⁷

From this analysis of the frequency of the types of sources she uses, it is seen that she privileges second-hand sources (stories told by others about Srila Prabhupada) over first-hand sources (Srila Prabhupada's books, lectures, conversations and letters). The second-hand sources (48%) are cited more than any other kind of evidence. The next largest category cited are Srila Prabhupada's letters (38%), and these were selected by her primarily on the basis of their utility in supporting her argument. Letters relevant to her subject but which support a different conclusion are excluded. The same can be said of passages in Srila Prabhupada's books (5%). It is not an understatement to say that the vast majority of statements in Srila Prabhupada's books concerning women and social equality challenge Jyotirmayi's thesis. It is understandable that she would rely the least on the source that contradicts her thesis the most.

A Better Hermeneutic

At the very least, it should be clear that the way Jyotirmayi and some others approach Srila Prabhupada as an authority is quite different from the way others, like the author of this paper, approach him. How does one know which way is better or if neither are better at all? In this regard, some definite, explicitly

¹⁴ *Srimad-Bhagavatam* 7.12.8 purport.

¹⁵ "Eighty percent of all statements that Bhaktivedanta Swami makes about women in the six works investigated are negative statements, in the sense that they involve restrictions, list bad qualities, group women in socially inferior classes, or treat them as sex objects that have to be avoided." (Ekkhard Lorenz, "The Guru, Mayavadins, and Women", *The Hare Krishna Movement*, ed. Ediwon F. Bryant, Maria L. Ekstrand (Columbia U. Press: New York, 2004) 122.

¹⁶ Jashomatinandana das, Email, April 2014.

¹⁷ Jyotirmayi: "My information is coming from a notebook in which, all along the years, I noted the anecdotes related to me by devotees who lived closely with Prabhupada or by devotees who received these stories from these first disciples."

stated principles, or rules and guides of interpretation (hermeneutic, mimamsa in the Vedic tradition), are needed to help us understand Srila Prabhupada the way he wanted his words to be understood.¹⁸

Because of the non-difference between the book Bhagavata and the devotee Bhagavata, Srila Prabhupada's statements in any other context or other personal or private instructions are best understood in a way that conforms to his statements in his books. "A devotee Bhagavata is as good as the book Bhagavata because the devotee Bhagavata leads his life in terms of the book Bhagavata and the book Bhagavata is full of information about the Personality of Godhead and His pure devotees, who are also Bhagavatas. Bhagavata book and person are identical."¹⁹ Thus an understanding that demonstrates a closeness, a conformity, to his instructions as he has presented them in his books and in conformity with the shastras gives us the clearest understanding of the meaning he wanted to convey—the "purport" of the shastras themselves. His statements should not be interpreted in a way that makes him appear to be against the conclusions of the shastras or renders his statements meaningless.

But if one tries to understand Srila Prabhupada's instructions in a way that departs appreciably from his books, then one obtains an imaginary representation of Srila Prabhupada's intent in much the same way the Mayavadis produce imaginary meanings from Krishna's words. Srila Prabhupada gives this example:

The spirit of *Bhagavad-gita* is mentioned in *Bhagavad-gita* itself. It is just like this: If we want to take a particular medicine, then we have to follow the directions written on the label. We cannot take the medicine according to our own whim or the direction of a friend. It must be taken according to the directions on the label or the directions given by a physician. Similarly, *Bhagavad-gita* should be taken or accepted as it is directed by the speaker Himself.

Both Lord Krishna and Srila Prabhupada are persons. Hence, to approach the spirit of the *Bhagavad-gita* and to approach the spirit of Srila Prabhupada's instructions, one must approach both similarly. One should "read Srila Prabhupada" the way he tells us to read *Bhagavad-gita*—"as it is."

To revisit Srutakirti Prabhu's story about Prabhupada's letter granting permission to a disciple who wanted to divorce his wife to marry another, if that letter had been published like so many others, one could cite it in favor of a policy for men to freely divorce existing wives in order to remarry.²⁰ But as Srutakirti Prabhu points out, that is not in the spirit of what Srila Prabhupada taught. It was an instruction for a particular disciple, not something to be followed generally. Thus although Srutakirti Prabhu had the advantage of being able to inquire from Srila Prabhupada in person, with little difficulty one can still come to a similar conclusion provided one is conversant with the content of Srila Prabhupada's books.

Srila Prabhupada perfectly understood the points he made, but we often don't. In geometry, one can draw unlimited lines through a single point. But if there are two points, only one line can be drawn through them. Similarly, because of our own imperfections we require many sources to arrive at the correct understanding about something in shastra or something Srila Prabhupada said or did.

¹⁸ Definition of "hermeneutic", Merriam-Webster Dictionary (online) 27 Oct. 2015 <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hermeneutic>>.

¹⁹ *Srimad-Bhagavatam* 1.2.18 purport.

²⁰ A similar thing happened in ISKCON around Srila Prabhupada's July 9th letter of 1977.

Therefore Srila Prabhupada said,

Srila Narottama dasa Thakura says, sadhu-sastra-guru-vakya, cittete kariya aikya. One should accept a thing as genuine by studying the words of saintly people, the spiritual master and the sastra. The actual center is the sastra, the revealed scripture. If a spiritual master does not speak according to the revealed scripture, he is not to be accepted. Similarly, if a saintly person does not speak according to the sastra, he is not a saintly person. The sastra is the center for all.²¹

That is why we must also take advantage of hearing from other sources, such as his recorded lectures (which should enjoy a status near to that of his books, since he is speaking from the Vyasasana), letters, recorded conversations, unrecorded encounters retold by those who had his personal association, the personal realizations of Srila Prabhupada's sincere followers, the words of other acharyas who may belong to other bona fide sampradayas, and so forth. These are there to help us grasp the spirit, the purport, of what Lord Krishna and His devotees are telling us.

Nevertheless, as Srila Prabhupada points out, of all these sources, "sastra is the center of all"; they have a hierarchy and we must respect that. Otherwise, we create false equivalencies whose purposes will often be to nullify or dismiss something he said in favor of some other idea disapproved of by the Lord or His devotees.

Since the devotee Bhagavata lives his life according to the book Bhagavata, and because Srila Prabhupada himself gave so much importance to his own books, comprehending the spirit of Srila Prabhupada's instructions requires that we understand them in a way that is consistent with his books. With this criterion we can positively understand who has or has not grasped the spirit of Srila Prabhupada's teachings.

A Hermeneutic Motivated by Gender Equality

In her paper, Mother Jyotirmayi gives more importance to what people remember of their personal, unrecorded encounters with Srila Prabhupada than she does his books. Yet as a senior disciple of Srila Prabhupada and former BBT editor, she is well aware that he gave more authority to his own statements in his books than he gave to these "Prabhupada said's". If there were more statements from his books that could have possibly supported the argument she wanted to make, she would have used them, because that would have given more weight to her argument. And she knows that. But she still made her argument despite knowing that the great majority of statements in his books and which are related to her subject support a very different conclusion. So her choice to not include more statements from his books was deliberate. It was not a choice made by accident or out of ignorance. Hence, the title of this paper, "What about Srila Prabhupada's books?" Why did she go as far as she did to discount them?

The answer is that many in our movement remain deeply attached to the secular Western idea of gender equality. They cannot believe that Srila Prabhupada did not also believe in it. And when they encounter statements that contradict their strongly held beliefs, they viscerally if not explicitly look for some way to dismiss those statements, to "bracket" them. Some devotees feel so strongly about gender

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equality that if they did not resort to such a deliberate strategy of selection and rejection guided by their sentiments, they would leave Srila Prabhupada and devotional service entirely. Some have said so, others have done so.

These people are literally fighting for their spiritual lives. They are fighting within themselves to keep whatever faith they have from being completely extinguished. However, as is often the case with people whose existences are threatened, they sometimes resort to extreme measures that have the unintended consequence of hastening their demise. Just as a would-be rescuer of a drowning man sometimes gets overwhelmed by the strength of the drowning man and also ends up drowning, those struggling to rescue their own faith by embracing a partial faithlessness in Srila Prabhupada very soon become completely faithless.

Mother Jyotirmayi reached this point when she said that Srila Prabhupada “saw that following the traditional Vedic definition [of womanhood] would be completely anachronistic and impede our movement.” Although she does not mention any particular definition of womanhood from the Vedas or Vedic literature like *Manu-smriti* or *Srimad-Bhagavatam*, the very declaration that such definitions are anachronistic is automatically an offense. It is *sruti-sastra-nindanam*, blasphemy of the Vedas or literature in pursuance of the Vedic version. This is the fourth of the *nama-aparadhas* identified in the *Padma Purana*. The Vedas are eternal, so if a definition is indeed Vedic, it can never be anachronistic. But to nonetheless consider it anachronistic is to consider Vedic literature a product of *maya*, which it most definitely is not. By declaring the Vedas to be anachronistic, uncountable statements in our scriptures become impossible to believe in, much as how tugging on a single thread in a knitted garment causes the whole garment to unravel.

If the Vedic definition of womanhood is completely anachronistic, as Jyotirmayi says, then what are we to make of this definition given in the *Srimad-Bhagavatam*? “To render service to the husband, to be always favorably disposed toward the husband, to be equally well disposed toward the husband’s relatives and friends, and to follow the vows of the husband—these are the four principles to be followed by women described as chaste.”²² In the purport Srila Prabhupada says, “A woman’s education should be conducted along the lines indicated in this verse.” But if women are not required to follow these principles any longer because they are “completely anachronistic” and “impede our movement,”²³ then Srila Prabhupada is wrong about the kind of education women are supposed to get. We cannot trust anything Srila Prabhupada says in his purports any longer because we know he sometimes gets it wrong. Srila Prabhupada is thus stripped of his authority regardless of whatever lip service is given him.

Moreover, by declaring any part of Vedic literature “completely anachronistic” one disputes the validity of Vedic literature and our entire sampradaya. Why did the sages at Naimisharanya headed by Saunaka Rishi ask Suta Goswami to “please select the essence of all these scriptures and explain it for the good of all living beings”?²⁴ Suta Goswami, and Sukadeva Goswami before him, must have failed here because

²² *Srimad-Bhagavatam* 7.11.25.

²³ An argument often given not to follow this is that it is Kali-yuga and the men today are hardly qualified to be husbands.

²⁴ *Srimad-Bhagavatam* 1.1.11.

they selected a “completely anachronistic” definition of womanhood for the Bhagavatam. “This Bhagavata Purana is as brilliant as the sun, and it has arisen just after the departure of Lord Krsna to His own abode, accompanied by religion, knowledge, etc. Persons who have lost their vision due to the dense darkness of ignorance in the Age of Kali shall get light from this Purana.”²⁵ Also untrue, because the Bhagavatam sometimes gives outdated Vedic definitions of womanhood. Lord Caitanya called the *Srimad-Bhagavatam amala-puranam*, the “spotless Purana”, but that’s not true either, since we now know the “spotless Purana” is not so spotless after all. And now that we also know that the Lord Himself sometimes commits errors, what scope is there to place any trust in anything spoken by the Lord or by servants like Srila Prabhupada? None. Either in precept or in practice the loss of faith is complete. Whatever is left that resembles faith is an illusion of faith, a pretense.²⁶

In this way, many devotees in our movement have wrecked their faith completely by trying to accommodate the teachings of Srila Prabhupada with the idea of gender equality. For them, the central problem is that the methods for understanding spiritual topics prescribed by Srila Prabhupada do not produce the conclusions they seek concerning women.

the problem is . . . that the conservatives have Prabhupada on their side. Prabhupada explicitly states that women should not be given any managerial position. It is even in the *Lilamrita* [Prabhupada’s biography]. He says umpteen times that the *Manusamhita* is the authority where women are concerned. He says (patronizingly, I may add) that women are to be contented with ornaments and that will keep them quiet. He may have said other things at other times, but in his books, in the lawbooks that are to stand for 10,000 years, that is what he said. Now what hermeneutical tool will free us from what Prabhupada said? (Internet text 1998)²⁷

The “hermeneutical tool” sought by some to free them from what Srila Prabhupada said has taken the form of the methods Jyotirmayi employed in her paper: elevate the authority of second-hand sources (stories) about Srila Prabhupada, select statements from primary and secondary sources only when they agree with your thesis, and delegitimize the authority of Srila Prabhupada’s books. That has been the hermeneutic template for many pro-gender-equality essays in ISKCON since then, and the motivation for employing this hermeneutic is deep attachment to Western notions of gender equality.

Resurgence of Interest in Daivi Varnasrama-Dharma

Despite the influence Mother Jyotirmayi’s paper has had on ISKCON policy makers, it has become more controversial over time, not less. Pro-gender-equal status policies put in place from 1998 onwards have either not delivered as promised or have been spectacular failures. This of course has raised questions and public concerns about the original thinking that motivated these policies.

²⁵ *Srimad-Bhagavatam* 1.3.43.

²⁶ This complete collapse of faith from partial faith demonstrates the truth of these two verses from *Manu-smriti*: “All those traditions (smriti) and those despicable systems of philosophy, which are not based on the Veda, produce no reward after death; for they are declared to be founded on Darkness. [v.12.95.] All those (doctrines), differing from the (Veda), which spring up and (soon) perish, are worthless and false, because they are of modern date. [v.12.96.]”

²⁷ E Burke Rochford, Jr, *Hare Krishna Transformed* (2007) 146.

Two of the three institutional authorities Mother Jyotirmayi cites by name in her paper as support for her thesis have either admitted publicly to having indulged in illicit sex or have left ISKCON entirely after it was discovered that they were indulging in illicit sex. Also, a number of the women who had been outspoken in favor of gender-equal policies later became involved in illicit sexual affairs themselves, some of which were high-profile. As a consequence they became quieter in their advocacy if they did not entirely become persona non grata. The pro-gender-equal social policies were supposed to make such occurrences less frequent. Instead, they have had the effect of thinning the ranks of supporters, which is the kind of outcome predicted by the shastras. As Srila Prabhupada says,

The material sex life is but a perverted reflection of the original fact. The original fact is in the Absolute Truth, and thus the Absolute Truth cannot be impersonal. It is not possible to be impersonal and contain pure sex life. Consequently, the impersonalist philosophers have given indirect impetus to the abominable mundane sex life because they have overstressed the impersonality of the ultimate truth. Consequently, man without information of the actual spiritual form of sex has accepted perverted material sex life as the all in all.²⁸

Also, policies to promote women in positions of leadership have done little for either ISKCON or for women in general other than enriching the institutional careers of a few women. The expectation was that by seeing more women in positions of leadership non-Indian people outside of ISKCON would like us more and join us in greater numbers. But the bump in recruitment never happened. Europe and America are still struggling to maintain centers and attract newcomers outside of the Indian community.²⁹ And despite promoting women in management positions, secular Western elites still don't like us, and they say so.³⁰

And perhaps most significantly, many of the problems that ISKCON has had regarding the treatment of women disappeared simply because married couples left the ashrams in great numbers to live on their own. Problems like adultery did not disappear. They just went with the householders when they left the ashram.

²⁸ *Srimad-Bhagavatam* 1.1.1.

²⁹ "The Changing Faces of God: The Hinduisation of the Hare Krishna Movement", Ch. 3, Barker, Eileen, ed. *Ashgate Inform Series on Minority Religions and Spiritual Movements : Revisionism and Diversification in New Religious Movements*. Brookfield, VT, USA: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2013. ProQuest ebrary. Web. 24 October 2015. page 33.

³⁰ To get a sense of how far they think we have to go to finally shed the stigma of being sexist, this statement by Anna S. King, a long-time academic observer of ISKCON from the U.K., is telling: "This leads us to consider ISKCON's radically ambivalent attitudes to the material world, to women and to human sexuality. Male and female sensuality are represented in many ways. Some representations affect women adversely and are male-centered, others are tender and celebratory. Prabhupada himself teaches a dualism of body/soul and of gender. He considers sexuality and spirituality as conflicting opposites, lust as disordered desire. Sexual desire is a metaphor for longing for God but also a powerful subversion of that longing. Self-restraint is the dominant virtue in sexual ethics, together with a body-rejecting model of sexuality. ISKCON spirituality therefore presupposes a cultural system that denies, displaces, and sublimates sexualities. Beyond the veil of rasa puritan (and misogynist) values are hidden. While these may appear to offer points of reference in a postmodern world, they also imply that gender inequality is divinely revealed." (From "Theologizing Radha", *The Hare Krishna Movement: Forty Years of Chant and Change*, 2007, ed. Graham Dwyer and Richard J. Cole (London: I.B. Tauris) page 224.

For example, some ISKCON leaders have recently complained that divorce rates for (non-Indian) initiated devotees are higher than that of outsiders.³¹ However, Rochford reports (using data from the early 1990s) that one-third of survey respondents reported being divorced but that this figure is probably underestimated.³² Nonetheless, he concludes that

As we have seen, Prabhupada's disciples, and those of his guru successors, only became further entangled in the outside culture during the 1980s and 1990s. As Prabhupada predicted, the absence of a functioning movement culture left ISKCON and its membership vulnerable to the influence of mainstream North American culture.

This situation has not changed appreciably, if at all.

Thus more and more devotees today suspect that Jyotirmayi and others have misstated the problems faced by ISKCON's women as being a lack of career options or, for example, not having the opportunity to bump into men while circumambulating Tulasi Devi.³³ Instead, the actual problems are a lack of sense control that arises from close association with non-devotees, frequent social contact between men and women, and lingering *varna-sankara* conditioning, none of which have anything to do with glass ceilings.³⁴

In light of the lackluster outcomes of the pro-gender-equality policies in ISKCON, there is renewed interest in varnasrama-dharma as the social approach we should be adopting, as Srila Prabhupada stipulated in his conversation of February 14, 1977. Over the past few years especially there has been a shift in thinking about varnasrama from it being an exclusively farm-based economic solution to a broader social solution that spans both urban and rural communities and makes reducing sex desire its central objective.³⁵

So these regulative principles are there. So what is, what is the big plan behind these regulative principles? The big plan is: here is the attraction, *pumsah striya mithuni-bhavam etam* to cut down this attraction between male and female. This is the big plan. Otherwise there is no need of the varnasrama.³⁶

Thus more devotees are reconsidering the status of statements such as this one from *Srimad-Bhagavatam* (9.19.17): "One should not sit on the same seat with one's mother, sister or daughter, for the senses are so strong that even though one is very advanced in knowledge, he may be attracted by sex." This verse also appears word-for-word in *Manu-samhita* 2.215.

³¹ Mahatma das: "We have a higher divorce rate in Iskcon than in the outside society." "Husband as Guru" 26 May 2014, *Dandavats*, 25 Oct 2015 <<http://www.dandavats.com/?p=12637>>.

³² Rochford, "Family Formation, Culture and Change in the Hare Krishna Movement" *ISKCON Communications Journal*, Vol 5. No. 2 Dec. 1997, accessed 25 Oct 2015 <http://content.iskcon.org/icj/5_2/5_2rochford.html> and <http://content.iskcon.org/icj/5_2/5_2rochfordfoot.html#7>.

³³ Jyotirmayi: "During Tulasi worship in the temple room, there should be as in the past only one Tulasi for everyone, both men and women devotees."

³⁴ The rise of Ritvikism came about after Srila Prabhupada's disappearance as a reaction to the large numbers of ISKCON leaders who were unable to control their senses.

³⁵ A recent example is a presentation titled "About Varnasrama and the Need to Establish it in ISKCON" to the North American GBC on August 18 by HH Sivarama Swami. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TehQlZKbGXg&feature=youtu.be>>.

³⁶ Lecture, *Srimad-Bhagavatam* 5.5.8, Vrindavan Oct 30, 1976.

Indeed, varnasrama-dharma has broad application. According to the U.S. Department of Justice's National Sex Offender Public Website, family members perpetrate 30% of all child sexual assault and someone known to the child like a neighbor or family friend commit 60% of child sexual assault, leaving the remaining 10% perpetrated by strangers.³⁷ Moreover, the site reports that 82% of all victims are female. Perhaps these Vedic principles for keeping men and women apart are not "completely anachronistic" after all?

The reason these principles are not outdated is that irrespective of which age one lives in (Satva, Treta, Dvapara, or Kali) *sex attraction always has been and always will be the superlative material force that keeps us in illusion*. This does not change from age to age. Hence, if the *karmis* were to organize their society around these principles, they could eliminate 80% of their child sexual abuse cases (as could ISKCON), since 80% of the victims are female. And they could eliminate quite a few other problems, like adultery or the abuse of adult women.

Lust increases with proximity (fire melts butter), and from lust comes anger, and from anger wrath. Policies that support equality between the genders bring men and women closer together, and they consequently perpetuate the abuse of women and perpetuate the creation of *varna-sankara*, who add further misery to everyone's lives. Preventing abuse means keeping men and women apart. For a civilized society, there is no alternative to this social arrangement, as mandated by the daivi-varnasrama system.

Conclusion

The importance of this paper is that for the first time in ISKCON, the mistreatment experienced by some of ISKCON's women since ISKCON's beginning is explained primarily in terms of the teachings found in Srila Prabhupada's books. All other works before this have attempted to explain their mistreatment primarily in terms of what they remember of their personal dealings with Srila Prabhupada, with little to no input from his books, and Jyotirmayi's paper "Women in ISKCON in Srila Prabhupada's Times" is an outstanding example of this. It is found that on topics related to women, emphasizing the authority of people's memories of their unrecorded encounters with Srila Prabhupada at the expense of the authority of Srila Prabhupada's books is motivated by a deep attachment to Western ideas of gender equality, which in turn leads to a faithlessness that results in the complete repudiation of the authority of shastra and Srila Prabhupada. The distinct advantage of an explanation based on Srila Prabhupada's books is that it avoids the problem of becoming faithless, because the causal explanation closely conforms to shastra and Srila Prabhupada's purports. Moreover, it offers practical guidance that has application not only for ISKCON's members but for the people suffering in the world at large.³⁸

³⁷ "Raising Awareness About Sexual Abuse: Facts and Statistics" accessed on 7 Nov 2015
<<https://www.nsopw.gov/en/Education/FactsStatistics>>.

³⁸ For further discussion of these matters, please see Sri Bhakti Vikasa Swami's book *Women, Masters or Mothers*. More information about the book can be found at: <http://bvks.com>
<http://www.bvks.com/books/women_masters_or_mothers>.