

Women in ISKCON in Prabhupada's Times

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Historical Report: From about 1965 up to 1974, when Srila Prabhupada had to get less and less involved in temple management because of translating work and the tremendous increase of disciples and temples, the women devotees' situation changed very little from what Srila Prabhupada had originally established. From 1974 their situation started to significantly deteriorate and got worse very fast until it reached its paroxysm before Srila Prabhupada's departure.

When Prabhupada decided to accept women in the movement, he did so according to the reasoning he himself quotes in the Chaitanya Charitamrta, M.L., Ch. 23 purport of verse 105: "To broadcast the cult of Krishna Consciousness, one has to learn the possibility of renunciation in terms of country, time and candidate.....He must avoid the principle of niyamagraha, that is, he should not try to perform the impossible. What is possible in one country may not be possible in another. The acarya's duty is to accept the essence of devotional service. There may be a little change here and a little change there as far as yukta-vairagya (proper renunciation) is concerned...The essence of devotional service must be taken into consideration, and not the outward paraphernalia... A Vaishnava is immediately purified, provided he follows the rules and regulations of his bonafide spiritual master. It is not necessary that the rules and regulations followed in India be exactly the same as those in Europe, America and other Western countries. Simply imitating without effect is called niyamagraha. Not following the regulative principles but instead living extravagantly is also called niyamagraha... We should not follow regulative principles without an effect, nor should we fail to accept the regulative principles. What is required is a special technique according to country, time and candidate...."

Srila Prabhupada followed this reasoning concerning not only the acceptance of women in the ashramas but also lots of other subject matters, such as the practice of renunciation, which is being dealt with in the quotation, preaching methods, only a partial introduction of Vedic culture, Deity worship, etc.... Everything that he introduced or did not introduce was deeply thought about and very carefully and

logically analyzed. When he was asked, several years later, if he would have preferred to establish the movement differently, he answered that if it were to be done again he would do it exactly the same way.

Despite the fact that he had been criticized several times in India because of all the changes he was introducing, Srila Prabhupada kept them and justified his position regarding the women devotees once more in the Chaitanya Charitamrta A.L. ch. 7, purport of verses 32 and 38. "An acarya who comes for the service of the Lord cannot be expected to conform to a stereotype, for he must find the ways and means by which Krishna Consciousness may be spread. Sometimes jealous persons criticize the Krishna Consciousness movement because it engages equally both boys and girls in distribution of love of Godhead. Not knowing that boys and girls in countries like Europe and America mix very freely, these fools and rascals criticize the boys and girls in Krishna Consciousness for intermingling. But these rascals should consider that one cannot suddenly change a community's social customs. However, since both boys and girls are being trained to become preachers those girls are not ordinary girls but are as good as their brothers who are preaching Krishna Consciousness. Therefore to engage both boys and girls in fully transcendental activities is a policy intended to spread the Krishna Consciousness movement... The results of this are wonderful. Both men and women are preaching the gospel of Lord Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and Lord Krishna with redoubled strength... Therefore it is a principle that a preacher must strictly follow the rules and regulations laid down in the shastras yet at the same time devise a means by which the preaching work to reclaim the fallen may go with full force."

By accepting women in the temples and giving them the brahmacharini status, Prabhupada was not pretending: he gave them all the same rights and duties of the brahmacharis in the guru's ashrama. The same thing applied when he gave them Brahman initiation. The women devotees 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.

* Women, as well as men, accompanied Prabhupada when he was traveling and served him as secretaries, as did Arundhati, or served him personally as did Janaki. *

Women led kirtana's: Jamuna, Kausalya, Lilavati were amongst the best. * They gave classes and public lectures. The most renowned was Jadurani who was endowed with great erudition. * Women were in charge of the Deities and performed public aratis. Jamuna, Shilavati, Rukmini, and Mandakini were the most famous. * Men and women circumambulated Tulasi together without mixing, forming a circle separated in two halves, one half for the men, the other half for the women. * Women paid dandavats to Prabhupada. * Women offered garlands to Prabhupada personally or to his picture. * Women performed aratis to Prabhupada's picture on his vyasasana during Guru-puja. * Women devotees were on one side of the temple room, men devotees on the other side, during kirtanas as well as classes and japa. * During Guru-puja, men and women offered flowers simultaneously to Prabhupada, forming two lines, and women as well as men paid their obeisance 's in front of the vyasasana. * When Srila Prabhupada was personally present, women as well as men could stand next to him. * During Harinamas (called at that time sankirtanas), Prabhupada had asked that the women stand between two groups of men, one in front and one behind so that they could be protected. * Women wrote articles in magazines. Prabhupada personally asked Bibhavati who had been a journalist previously, to do so. * As far as the service of temple president was concerned, Srila Prabhupada included husband and wife; he recommended that they be father and mother of the devotees they were in charge of. * Women were doing things in front of Srila Prabhupada himself that later on they were forbidden to do: Jamuna was leading kirtans in front of him, Himavati gave public conferences, Jyotirmayi and Rukmini performed arati in front of him. * Women had access to important responsibilities: Jadurani was in charge of the BBT (Bhaktivedanta Book Trust) painting department, Jamuna or Govinda dasi were proposed as the GBC (Governing Body Commissioners) by Prabhupada, Kausalya organized pandals, Varanasi was temple commander, Jyotirmayi BBT chief translator, etc. * The grhasta status was very respected. Prabhupada was very proud of his couples who were opening temples together. * Men and women chanted japa together in the temple room during the morning program.

The positive results of the way Prabhupada was relating to his women disciples will be presented later on, opposed to the negative results of the decisions taken later on by the leaders, which are going to be discussed now.

After the first six years of the movement, at the beginning of the 1970's, a first

change took place, which of course was not contested by anyone. Instead of being mixed in the temple room without any distinction of sex, men and women devotees were separated and were placed on each side of the temple room. In 1973 a second change happened, not very important either, but it was foreboding lots of other changes which were going to follow faster and faster and cause lots of harm to the movement - women devotees were forbidden to do dandavat.

Everything began in America and was imported in France only gradually from around 1974. There, a note on the temple room door said that women devotees were forbidden to lead kirtans or to give class. Then they were forbidden to circumambulate Tulasi with men devotees, could not chant japa in the temple room, had to stay behind the men in the temple during kirtans, classes, Harinama. Each of their important responsibilities were removed, as well as their right to offer aratis to Prabhupada. They were no longer authorized to offer public arati (mangala and sundara arati) to the murtis, to go on the altar and get close to the murtis. They could not pay obeisances in front of the vyasasana anymore. They had to offer flowers after the men, and later only after Guru-puja was over, etc., etc. Simultaneously with the status of the women, the status of the married men was seriously depreciated, and female children became a matter of shame.

As those new decisions were adopted, and instead of the simple separation between men and women that Prabhupada wanted, a real segregation was taking place, the women devotees went to see Prabhupada to tell him about it and each time he asked that the standard that he had established remain the same. Two times Jyotirmayi asked Prabhupada about her giving classes, once verbally, another time in a letter; each time Prabhupada told her that it was perfectly all right. Then Prabhupada left his body and there was no one to appeal to any longer concerning this subject and others, even more serious.

Then the effects of those restraints started to really upset the lives of some of the women devotees. Shilavati for example, the most qualified pujari of the movement at that time, had her service removed and was forbidden to go on with the service in which she had put all her heart and soul for so many years. Jyotirmayi also had her responsibility for the BBT removed and today, more than 20 years later, she has to correct all the mistakes that have been made when she could not supervise the work anymore. There are so many other examples. On the whole these unfortunate

effects swept away the wonderful spirit established by Prabhupada. Questioned by Gurudas about the difference of atmosphere between the first years and the subsequent ones, Srila Prabhupada answered with regret: "Yes, before it was a family."

* Instead of brotherhood between men and women devotees, aggressiveness, suspicion and fear appeared. * Instead of caring for one another, there was nothing but indifference. * Instead of mutual respect, there was contempt of the men for the women and of women amongst themselves. * Instead of admiration for someone because of his/her material and spiritual abilities, it was only according to the title and the position. * Submission to the male authorities became blind and fanatical, tinged with "sexuality" (creation of "groupies" and feminine "fan clubs.") * Instead of being considered full-fledged devotees, women were considered only as "women" in the most pejorative sense. * Women were not considered Brahmanas anymore (except for the puja when this service was given back to them.) * Women devotees did not consider men as sons anymore and men did not behave with women as mothers but as enemies. * Instead of kindness, gentleness, and courtesy amongst men and women devotees, wickedness, meanness and impoliteness appeared. * Instead of sane and constructive criticisms aiming at progressing, we could see a faultfinding mentality with an unhealthy purpose. * Women were not recognized for their services, but often men received the credit for them. * Instead of being accepted and utilized, women's talents were discredited and rejected if they did not match the new standard. * The idea came up not to give academic education to the girls, but fortunately Prabhupada did not allow that to happen. * Women were considered stupid and incapable and became subject to gross mockery. * Only those who could collect were appreciated. * Instead of being seen as spirit souls and godsisters, they were only considered as sex objects to be rejected and avoided. * Adultery and illicit connections, which were excuses to mistreat women devotees, increased instead of decreased. * Instead of being admired by other women, and example to follow, a goal to reach, intelligent and dynamic women became subject to scorn and malicious talks from other women. * Spiritual practices of women weakened, enthusiasm went down, and services suffered. * New devotee women, lacking outstanding examples to follow, did not get anymore the motivation that leads to great achievements, to the great detriment of Srila Prabhupada's mission. * Lots of women lost the spirit of Prabhupada's mission. * According to their own personality, women either indulged in an easygoing situation or lived in frustration

and discouragement.

It was more difficult for those who had known ISKCON at the beginning when it was led by the kind but firm hand of Prabhupada, or those who had purely followed his example, and for those who were in charge of important services. * For most of the women who had not known the movement at the beginning and not met Srila Prabhupada personally, these detrimental psychological effects appeared without their being conscious of it because they did not know anything else and had no other frame of reference. * Belittled in such a way, lots of women lost confidence in themselves and in their material and spiritual abilities, accepted being deprived of their human dignity and played the part that was expected from them, being brainless, ignorant, and unproductive. * Exceptionally active and intelligent women, who were numerous in the beginning, no longer joined the movement, and women's conditions in our temples became subject to very bad press for our movement. *

Prabhupada's movement, so much in need of arms and heads to accomplish his mission, thus lost a good amount of its strength because on one side the potency of the women in the temple decreased and on the other side fewer women joined the movement. * The marriages also suffered as a consequence of this new mentality because women were considered nothing else but an object for sensual desires and not as spiritual personalities anymore: relations between spouses got worse and worse, deprived of the affection and mutual respect required for the good harmony of a couple. * Women having been put down, so was the married man, and internal quarrels between grhastas, brahmacaris, and sannyasis started. * Children were of course last on the list of priorities and were very neglected.

It may seem that I depict a very dark picture here, but everything can be confirmed with lots of examples. However, we have to consider that those events were more or less acute according to the temple, the country, and the leader's personality. Most of those abuses took place in America; France was less touched. Moreover, women devotees performing sankirtan (book distribution) in France suffered a lot less because their situation was always privileged and protected because of their service. This was not the case in America, where unbelievable abuses took place. Moreover, even if ISKCON was deviating from the original teachings regarding this aspect and others, it kept its other qualities: it was still Lord Chaitanya's movement and the path leading to Krishna, and those imperfections did not stop sincere women from

knowing great spiritual joys and progress despite all obstacles. Fortunately the position of women has improved over the years.