

## Misogyny in the Guise of Siddhanta

Our ācāryas have always stressed the principle of sama-darśinah (seeing everyone’s spiritual essence with equal regard). As such, Bhāgavata-dharma, which advocates ahaitukī and apratihātā bhakti unto Śrī Vrajendranandana, is open to all jīvas irrespective of their varṇa, liṅga, rāṣṭrīyatā or bhāṣā. However, ironically, we frequently observe a blatant transgression of this very principle within several prominent institutions and devotional communities. In this article, we shall address one of the most important manifestations of this deviation: the ego-driven subjugation of Vaiṣṇavīs.

vidyā-vinaya-sampanne  
brāhmaṇe gavi hastini  
śuni caiva śva-pāke ca  
paṇḍitāḥ sama-darśinah

“The humble sages, by virtue of true knowledge, see with equal vision a learned and gentle brāhmaṇa, a cow, an elephant, a dog, and a dog-eater.” (Bhagavad-gītā 5.18)

As established in this verse of Śrīmad Bhagavad-gītā, those who are situated in genuine knowledge perceive all living beings with equal vision, recognizing their essential spiritual identity beyond external bodily designations. Such equal vision arises only from true knowledge. But what constitutes this “true knowledge”? The Gītā itself answers this question: vedaiś ca sarvair aham eva vedyah, “By all the Vedas, I alone am to be known.” (Bhagavad-gītā 15.15)

Furthermore, the same Gītā-śāstra declares that this realization of the Supreme Lord is attained only through the process of bhakti: bhaktyā mām abhijānāti yāvān yaś cāsmi tattvataḥ, “Only by devotional service can one understand Me as I am.” (Bhagavad-gītā 18.55) Thus, according to Śrīmad Bhagavad-gītā, devotion is not merely a sentimental practice but the very means by which true spiritual knowledge arises.

Being followers of Śrī Gaurasundara in the line of Śrīla Prabhupāda Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Gosvāmī Ṭhākura, our conception of bhakti is concisely expressed in a celebrated verse from the pramāṇa-cūḍāmaṇi Śrīmad Bhāgavatam (1.2.6):

sa vai puṁsām paro dharmo  
yato bhaktir adhokṣaje  
ahaituky apratihātā  
yayātmā suprasīdati

“The supreme occupation for all humanity is that by which loving devotional service unto the transcendent Lord is attained. Such devotional service must be unmotivated and uninterrupted in order to completely satisfy the self.”

The Bhāgavata thus clearly establishes that bhakti is both universal and unrestricted: ahaitukī (free from ulterior motives) and apratihātā (unobstructed by any external condition).

Consequently, within a society that claims allegiance to Bhāgavata-dharma, discrimination or restriction of one's opportunity for devotional service on the basis of bodily designations such as gender stands in direct contradiction to the siddhānta established by the revealed scriptures.

However, despite these clear saiddhāntika foundations, a peculiar phenomenon can be observed in several portions of our devotional community. Many are of the opinion that female devotees are somehow "lower" than their male counterparts. Instead of simply acknowledging the psychophysical differences between the male and female bodies, they hastily arrive at the unwarranted conclusion that Vaiṣṇavīs are inherently less intelligent, less capable of philosophical understanding, or unsuitable for higher forms of devotional service.

Such assertions, however, are neither supported by śāstra nor by the historical reality of our own tradition. On the contrary, the presence of numerous highly learned and spiritually exalted Vaiṣṇavīs throughout the history of Vaiṣṇavism has long since falsified these assumptions. The Gauḍīya sampradāya itself bears witness to this through the examples of great Vaiṣṇavīs such as Śrīmatī Jāhnavā Devī, who guided the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava community after the disappearance of Śrī Nityānanda Prabhu, and other revered Vaiṣṇavīs whose devotion, scholarship, and spiritual realization commanded the respect of the entire bhakta-samāja. Even from a broader standpoint, there are many women who have proven their worth in highly intellectual posts involving various branches of science, mathematics and philosophy. Hence, such universal assumptions simply do not hold water.

Very recently, we also heard a prominent leader of a certain organization confidently say on camera: "The purpose of a woman's body is to bear a child. They should learn to cook and clean. Kṛṣṇa classifies women equal to śūdras: labor class. And so those who oppose this, what kind of Vaiṣṇavas are they?"

There are several fundamental problems with the statement made on camera. We shall examine these claims in a point-wise manner.

1. "The purpose of a woman's body is to bear a child."

No Gauḍīya śāstra validates this claim. On the contrary, the Śrīmad Bhāgavatam (1.2.6) clearly establishes that the highest purpose of all jīvas is engagement in the service of Śrī Hari. Thus, the ultimate purpose of the human body is engagement in bhakti.

Childbearing may certainly be chosen by a consenting couple within gṛhastha life, but it cannot be declared the primary purpose of a woman's body without contradicting the very theological foundation of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, which places devotion to Śrī Hari above all other duties.

The purpose of the human body has been beautifully described by Śrī Nalakūvara and Śrī Maṇigrīva in Śrīmad Bhāgavatam (10.10.38):

vāṇī guṇānukathane śravaṇau kathāyām  
hastau ca karmasu manas tava pādayor naḥ  
smṛtyām śiras tava nivāsa-jagat-praṇāme

dr̥ṣṭiḥ satām darśane 'stu bhavat-tanūnām

“Henceforward, may our speech describe Your pastimes, may our ears hear Your glories, may our hands and senses engage in actions pleasing to You, and may our minds always remember Your lotus feet. May our heads offer obeisances to everything within this world, knowing all things to be Your energies, and may our eyes behold the forms of Your devotees.”

From this and many other verses throughout the Śrīmad Bhāgavatam, it becomes evident that the true purpose of the human body is the engagement of all its faculties in the service (sevā) of Śrī Bhagavān and His devotees. Raising a devotional child may certainly constitute a beautiful form of devotional service within gṛhastha life. However, to declare childbearing as the primary purpose of a woman’s body reduces women to mere instruments of reproduction and ignores their full capacity for devotional service, spiritual realization, and intellectual contribution. Such a reductionist view is neither supported by śāstra nor by the historical reality of the Gauḍīya sampradāya.

2. “They should learn to cook and clean.”

Certainly. Cooking for the Lord and cleaning His temple are highly exalted forms of devotional service. However, such services are by no means restricted to Vaiṣṇavīs alone. Vaiṣṇavas themselves should eagerly learn and volunteer for these services. Cooking offerings for the Lord and maintaining the cleanliness of His temple are sacred acts of sevā open to all devotees irrespective of gender. To designate such services as the particular duty of a specific gender inadvertently diminishes their transcendental nature. Within the framework of bhakti, the value of a service does not arise from the bodily identity of the performer but from the sincerity with which it is offered unto the Lord.

Even from a practical standpoint, the ability to cook and maintain cleanliness is an essential life skill for any individual. When such skills are confined to a single gender, others become unnecessarily dependent upon them for their maintenance. In contemporary society, such dependency is neither practical nor desirable. Therefore, these skills should be cultivated by all devotees as part of responsible and self-sufficient living.

3. “Kṛṣṇa classifies women equal to śūdras: labor class.”

This statement is incorrect because there is no universal instruction by Śrī Bhagavān declaring women to be equivalent to the labor class. A verse that is sometimes cited in support of this claim is from the Bhagavad-gītā (9.32):

mām hi pārtha vyapāśritya  
ye 'pi syuḥ pāpa-yonayaḥ  
striyo vaiśyās tathā śūdrās  
te 'pi yānti parām gatim

The commonly circulated translation published by the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust reads: “O son of Pṛthā, those who take shelter in Me, though they be of lower birth—women, vaiśyas [merchants] and śūdras [workers]—can attain the supreme destination.”

However, this translation depends heavily on a punctuation that makes it appear as though *pāpa yoni* (“sinful birth”) directly refers to women, *vaiśyas* and *śūdras*. Grammatically, this interpretation is not necessary. The verse can equally be understood as referring to two distinct groups: those who may be of sinful birth, and women, *vaiśyas*, and *śūdras*. All of them are included in the assurance that taking shelter of *Bhagavān* grants the supreme destination.

In this regard, Śrīla Bhaktivedānta Nārāyaṇa Gosvāmī Mahārāja explains: “What you have explained is totally wrong... Because the editors have no realization, they later changed the punctuation and wording in such a way that it appears as though women are of sinful birth or inferior. You should know the truth. If you want to understand properly, read his original books.”

Thus, rather than classifying women as belonging to a “labor class,” this verse actually expands the inclusivity of *bhakti*. Śrī Kṛṣṇa’s statement emphasizes that even those whom society may consider disadvantaged are fully eligible to attain the supreme destination by taking shelter of *Him*.

Within devotional literature, we frequently encounter narratives in which a practitioner engaged in advanced stages of *sādhana* experiences a fall due to lust upon encountering a woman. Such examples are often cited in sermons and lectures within our community. However, it is important to understand the actual purpose of these narratives in *śāstra*.

Their primary intent is not to portray women as the cause of spiritual downfall, but to caution the *sādhaka* about the dangers of uncontrolled lust and unresolved *anarthas* within one’s own heart. These accounts serve as reminders that until the heart is purified, even a practitioner who has made significant progress must remain vigilant against the subtle workings of material desire.

Unfortunately, these examples are sometimes presented in a way that shifts the focus away from internal purification and places it instead upon the presence of women themselves. In this way, the narrative gradually transforms from a warning about one’s own *anarthas* into a warning against *Vaiṣṇavīs*.

Such an interpretation is deeply problematic. The danger described in these narratives does not lie in the *jīva* inhabiting a female body, but in the impurities present within the consciousness of the practitioner. Lust does not arise because a woman exists; it arises because the conditioned mind projects its own *anarthas* onto external objects.

If the tendency toward lust remains unpurified, merely avoiding the association of women cannot solve the problem. The root of the difficulty lies within the practitioner’s own heart.

When these narratives are misapplied to suggest that women themselves are the source of danger, women are reduced to objects of temptation rather than recognized as individual *jīvas* engaged in devotion. In the context of a devotional society, this becomes especially troubling when the women in question are *Vaiṣṇavīs*—devotees who are themselves striving for service to Śrī *Bhagavān*.

The true lesson of these scriptural examples, therefore, is not that women are to be feared, but that the sādḥaka must diligently purify the anarthas within his own heart in order to make genuine progress in bhakti.

It must also be clarified that this discussion does not in any way advocate loose or frivolous sense-gratificatory relations between Vaiṣṇavas and Vaiṣṇavīs. The principles of restraint, purity, and appropriate conduct between the genders, as emphasized by our ācāryas, remain essential for the healthy functioning of a devotional society.

In light of our present discussion, it is also important that we cite our contemporary ācāryas to further substantiate our point. Śrīla Bhaktivedānta Nārāyaṇa Mahārāja in Murwillumbah, Australia on February 16, 2002 says, “I want that all my daughters and children should speak like this - very boldly - jumping like lions and roaring like lions on the head of an elephant. [Then, pointing to other ladies in the audience, he continued:] You, and you, and you. I don’t want [now speaking in the tone of a shy kitty cat:] mew, mew, mew.”

Śrīla Bhaktivedānta Svāmī Prabhupāda in many letters to his male and female disciples has always stressed on the importance of Vaiṣṇavīs in the movement: “I am very glad to know that you are engaged as pujari there. Try to learn this art of arcana very nicely... I wish that all our girl devotees be expert in the matter of arcana...” (letter to Kanchanbala, 1970). “You have good writing capacity, and good artistic ability. Now devote your life to chanting Hare Krishna and if possible write articles on Krishna Consciousness, as many as possible with your own paintings and send it for publication to Back to Godhead.” (letter to Govinda Dasi, 1974). “So far your question regarding women, I have always accepted the service of women without any discrimination, so I have no objection if Yamuna devi contributes her ideas on this construction project. Nothing should be done without group consultation.” (letter to Guru Das, 1972).

Our ācāryas have never operated on the defective principle of gender subjugation, and neither must we. Those who attempt to cloak misogyny in the language of Vaiṣṇava humility or scriptural fidelity would do well to examine whether they are truly following the conclusions of the ācāryas or merely projecting their own conditioned prejudices upon the tradition. To demean Vaiṣṇavīs while claiming allegiance to the Gauḍīya siddhānta is not a sign of spiritual depth; it is a clear symptom of misunderstanding both the philosophy and the spirit of bhakti.

Indeed, the history of the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava sampradāya itself decisively refutes such attitudes. The tradition reverentially remembers exalted Vaiṣṇavīs such as Śrīmatī Jāhnavā Devī, Śrīmatī Gaṅgā Mātā Gosvāminī, Śrīmatī Sītā Ṭhākuraṇī and Śrīmatī Hemalatā Ṭhākuraṇī. These examples are not anomalies, rather they are integral parts of our living tradition.

If our devotional communities are to remain faithful to the vision of the pūrvācāryas, certain corrective steps are necessary. First and foremost, devotees must engage in careful study of Gauḍīya siddhānta rather than relying upon cultural assumptions or inherited social prejudices. Misogynistic attitudes frequently arise where genuine philosophical understanding is absent.

Secondly, the devotional contributions of Vaiṣṇavīs—whether in scholarship, preaching,

administration, kīrtana, or temple service—must be acknowledged and respected without prejudice.

Thirdly, preachers and teachers must exercise responsibility when presenting scriptural narratives concerning lust and renunciation. Such examples should be explained in their proper saiddhāntika context: as warnings against the uncontrolled mind and its anarthas rather than misused to portray women themselves as the source of spiritual danger.

Only by adopting such measures can the devotional community remain aligned with the inclusive and spiritually profound vision of the Gauḍīya ācāryas, who recognized every jīva, irrespective of bodily designation, as a potential servant of Śrī Kṛṣṇa and worthy of respect within the bhakta-samāja.