

The Final Order

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The Evidence

Anyone who knew Srila Prabhupada would often note his meticulous nature. His fastidious attention to every detail of his devotional service was one of Srila Prabhupada's most distinguishing characteristics; and for those who served him closely, was profound evidence of his deep love and devotion to Lord Sri Krishna. His whole life was dedicated to carrying out the order of his spiritual master, Srila Bhaktisiddhanta, and in that duty he was uncannily vigilant. He left nothing to chance, always correcting, guiding and chastising his disciples in his effort to establish ISKCON. His mission was his life and soul. It would certainly have been entirely out of character for Srila Prabhupada to leave an important issue, such as the future of initiation in his cherished society, up in the air, ambiguous, or in any way open to debate or speculation. This is particularly so in light of what happened to his own spiritual master's mission, which, as he would often point out, was destroyed largely through the operation of an unauthorised guru system. Bearing this in mind, let us begin with facts that no-one disputes:

On July 9th 1977, four months before his physical departure, Srila Prabhupada set up a system of initiations employing the use of "ritviks", or "representatives of the acarya". Srila Prabhupada instructed that this "officiating acarya" system was to be instituted immediately, and run from that time onwards, or "henceforward" - (please see Appendices). This management directive, which was sent to all Governing Body Commissioners and Temple Presidents of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, instructed that from that time on new disciples would be given spiritual names and have their beads and gayatri mantras from the 11 named ritviks. The ritviks were to act on Srila Prabhupada's behalf, new initiates all becoming disciples of Srila Prabhupada. Srila Prabhupada thus handed over to the ritviks total power of attorney over who could receive initiation, he made it clear that from that time onwards he was no longer to be consulted. (for further details of a ritvik's duties, please see the section entitled "What is a Ritvik?" in Appendices)

Immediately after Srila Prabhupada's physical departure, on November 14th 1977, the GBC suspended this ritvik system. By Gaura Purnima 1978, the 11 ritviks had assumed the roles of zonal acarya diksa gurus, initiating disciples on their own behalf. Their mandate for doing so was an alleged order from Srila Prabhupada that they alone were to succeed him as initiating acaryas. Some years later this zonalacarya system was itself challenged and replaced, not by the restoration of the ritvik system, but by the addition of dozens more gurus, along with an elaborate system of checks and balances to deal with those that deviated. The rationale for this change being that the order to become guru was not, as we had first been told, only applicable to the 11, but was a general instruction for anyone who strictly followed, and received a two-thirds majority vote from the GBC body.

The above account is not a political opinion, it is historical fact, accepted by everyone, including the GBC. As mentioned above, the July 9th letter was sent to all GBC's and Temple Presidents, and remains to this day the only signed instruction on the future of initiation Srila Prabhupada ever issued to the whole Society. Commenting on the July 9th order, HH Jayadvaita Swami recently wrote:

"Its authority is beyond question [...] Clearly, this letter establishes a ritvik-guru system." (Jayadvaita Swami "Where the ritvik People are Wrong" 1996)

The source of the controversy arises from two modifications, which were subsequently superimposed over this otherwise clear and authoritative directive

Modification a) : That the appointment of representatives or ritviks was only temporary, specifically to be terminated on the departure of Srila Prabhupada.

Modification b) : Having ceased their representational function, the ritviks would automatically become diksa gurus, initiating persons as their own disciples, not Srila Prabhupada's .

The reforms to the zonal acarya system, which took place around 1987, kept intact these two assumptions. The same assumptions, in fact, that underpinned the very system it replaced. We refer to a) and b) above as modifications since neither statement appears in the July 9th letter itself, nor in any policy document issued by Srila Prabhupada subsequent to this order.

The GBC's paper, GII, clearly upholds the above mentioned modifications:

"When Srila Prabhupada was asked who would initiate after his physical departure he stated he would

"recommend" and give his "order" to some of his disciples who would initiate on his behalf during his lifetime and afterwards as "regular gurus", whose disciples would be Srila Prabhupada's grand-disciples." (GII, p.14)

Over the years increasing numbers of devotees have began questioning the legitimacy of these basic assumptions. For many, they have never been properly substantiated, and hence an uneasy sense of doubt and mistrust has grown both within and outside the Society. At present, books, papers, E-Mailouts and Internet Web Sites offer almost daily updates on ISKCON and its allegedly deviant guru system. Anything, which can bring about some sort of resolution to this controversy has got to be positive for anyone who truly cares about Srila Prabhupada's Movement.

One point everyone is agreed on is that Srila Prabhupada is the ultimate authority for all members of ISKCON, so whatever his intended order was, it is our duty to carry it out. Another point of agreement is that the only signed policy statement on the future of initiation, which was sent to all the Society's leaders, was the July 9th order.

It is significant to note that in GII the existence of the July 9th letter is not even acknowledged, even though this is the only place where the original eleven "acaryas" are actually mentioned. This omission is puzzling, especially given that GII is supposed to offer the "final siddhanta" on the entire issue. Let us then look closely at the July 9th order to see if there is indeed anything that supports assumptions a) and b) above:

The Order Itself

As previously mentioned, the July 9th order states that the ritvik system should be followed "henceforward". The specific word used, "henceforward", only has one meaning, viz. "from now onwards". This is both according to Srila Prabhupada's own previous usage of the word and the meaning ascribed to it by the English Language. Unlike other words, the word "henceforward" is unambiguous since it only possesses one dictionary definition. On the other 86 occasions that we find on Folio where Srila Prabhupada has used the word "henceforward", nobody raised even the possibility that the word could mean anything other than "from now onwards". "From now onwards" does not mean "from now onwards until I depart". It simply means "from now onwards". There is no mention in the letter that the system should stop on Srila Prabhupada's departure, neither does it state that the system was to only be operational during his presence. Furthermore the argument that the whole ritvik system "hangs" on one word - "henceforward" - is untenable, since even if we take the word out of the letter, nothing has changed. One still has a system set up by Srila Prabhupada four months before his departure, with no subsequent instruction to terminate it. Without such a counter instruction, this letter must be seen as Srila Prabhupada's final instruction on initiation, and should therefore be followed.

Supporting Instructions

There were other statements made by Srila Prabhupada, and his secretary, in the days following the July 9th letter, which clearly indicate that the ritvik system was intended to continue without cessation:

"...the process for initiation to be followed in the future." (July 11th, 1977)

"...continue to become ritvik and act on my charge." (July 19th, 1977)

"...continue to become ritvik and act on my behalf." (July 31st, 1977)

(please see Appendices)

In these documents we find words such as "continue" and "future" which along with the word "henceforward" all point to the permanency of the ritvik system. There is no statement from Srila Prabhupada that even hints that this system was to terminate on his departure.

Subsequent Instructions

Once the ritvik system was up and running, Srila Prabhupada never issued a subsequent order to stop it, nor did he ever state that it should be disbanded on his departure. Perhaps aware that such a thing may mistakenly or otherwise occur, he put in the beginning of his final will that the "system of management" in place within ISKCON must continue and could not be changed - an instruction left intact by a codicil added just nine days before his departure. Surely this would have been the perfect opportunity to disband the ritvik system had that been his intention. That the use of ritviks to give initiates' names was a "system of management" can be illustrated by the following:

In 1975 one of the preliminary GBC resolutions sanctioned that the "GBC would have sole responsibility for managerial affairs". Below are some of the "managerial" issues the GBC dealt with that year:

"In order to receive first initiation, one must have been a full time member for six months. For second initiation there should be at least another one year after the first initiation." (GBC Resolution No. 9, March 25th, 1975)

"Method of initiating Sannyasis." (GBC Resolution No. 2, March 27th, 1975)

These resolutions were personally approved by Srila Prabhupada. They demonstrate conclusively that the methodology for conducting initiations was deemed a "system of management". If the whole methodology for conducting initiations is considered a "system of management" by Srila Prabhupada, then one element of initiation, viz. the use of ritviks to give spiritual names, has to fall under the same terms of reference.

Thus changing the ritvik system of initiation was in direct violation of Srila Prabhupada's final Will. Another instruction in Srila Prabhupada's Will which indicates the intended longevity of the ritvik system, is where it states that the executive directors for his permanent properties in India could only be selected from amongst Srila Prabhupada's "initiated disciples":

"...a successor director or directors may be appointed by the remaining directors, provided the new director is my initiated disciple..."

(Srila Prabhupada's Declaration of Will, June 4th, 1977)

This is something that could only occur if a ritvik system of initiation remained in place after Srila Prabhupada's departure, since otherwise the pool of potential directors would eventually dry up. Furthermore, every time Srila Prabhupada spoke of initiations after July 9th he simply reconfirmed the ritvik system. He never gave any hint that the system should stop on his departure or that there were gurus, waiting in the sidelines, ready to take on the role of diksa. Thus, at least as far as direct evidence is concerned, there appears to be nothing to support assumptions a) and b) referred to above. As stated, these assumptions - that the ritvik system should have stopped at departure and that the ritviks must then become diksa gurus - form the very basis of ISKCON's current guru system. If they prove to be invalid then there will certainly need to be a radical re-think by the GBC.

The above sets the scene. The instruction itself, supporting instructions and subsequent instructions only support the continuation of the ritvik system. It is admitted by all concerned that Srila Prabhupada did not give any order to terminate the ritvik system on his physical departure. It is further accepted by all concerned that Srila Prabhupada did set up the ritvik system to operate from July 9th onwards. Thus we have a situation whereby the acarya:

1) has given a clear instruction to follow a ritvik system.

2) has not given an instruction to stop following the ritvik system upon his physical departure.

Consequently, for a disciple to stop following this order, with any degree of legitimacy, demands he provide some solid grounds for doing so. The only thing that Srila Prabhupada actually told us to do was to follow the ritvik system. He never told us to stop following it, or that one could only follow it in his physical presence. The onus of proof will naturally fall on those who wish to terminate any system put in place by our acarya, and left to run henceforward. This is an obvious point; one can not just stop following the order of the guru whimsically:

"...the process is that you cannot change the order of the spiritual master." (C.c. Adi 7.76-81, Lecture, 2/2/67, San Francisco)

A disciple does not need to justify continuing to follow a direct order from the guru, especially when he has been told to continue following it. That is axiomatic - this is what the word "disciple" means:

"When one becomes disciple, he cannot disobey the order of the spiritual master." (Srila Prabhupada Bg. Lecture, 11/2/75, Mexico)

Since there is no direct evidence stating that the ritvik system should have been abandoned on Srila Prabhupada's physical departure, the case for abandoning it could therefore only be based on indirect evidence. Indirect evidence may arise out of special circumstances surrounding the literal direct instruction. These extenuating circumstances, should they exist, may be used to provide grounds for interpreting the literal instruction. We will now examine the circumstances surrounding the July 9th order, to see if such modifying circumstances might indeed have been present, and whether there is inferentially anything to support assumptions a) and b).