Achieving Harmonization Through Synthesis

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Part 1: Understanding general and specific instructions

In Vedantic hermeneutics, the standard for establishing *siddhānta* has always been the mutual coherence of *guru*, *sādhu*, and *śāstra*—with *śāstra* acting as the objective touchstone. As Śrīla Prabhupāda explicitly writes in his purports to *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 4.21.28–29:

> *"Sādhu, śāstra and guru: one has to adjust the instructions of the spiritual master through the shastras and sadhus... A bona fide spiritual master does not say anything which is not mentioned in the authorized scriptures."*

When we depart from this threefold reconciliation and adopt an interpretive model where isolated conversational remarks or letters are held to unilaterally supersede the Vedic corpus, we dismantle our entire epistemological foundation.

We have already observed the hazards of this flawed hermeneutic within our movement: it is the identical interpretive flaw underlying the *ṛtvik* position, which isolates an administrative communication (the July 9th letter) and elevates it above canonical *śāstra* and years of *paramparā* precedent. Once we concede the principle that an isolated institutional or conversational statement can overturn established *śāstric vidhi*, we forfeit any principled, systematic framework to refute such deviations, because statements made in casual conversations are almost always stripped away from their context. True coherence demands applying consistent hermeneutical standards across all institutional questions.

In classical *vākya-śāstra*—the science of interpreting words and statements found in Vedic texts—the established method for reconciling broad declarations with restrictive instructions is the *sāmānya-viśeṣa-nyāya*—where a general rule (*sāmānya-vidhi*) is contextualized and delimited by specific injunctions (*viśeṣa-vidhi*).

A standard example appears in the *Bhagavad-gītā*: in 9.27, Kṛṣṇa speaks broadly (*yat karoṣi yad aśnāsi...*—"offer whatever you eat"), yet no thoughtful practitioner uses that general statement to claim meat or intoxicants may be offered, because 9.26 specifically delineates the categories that can be offered (*patraṁ puṣpaṁ phalaṁ toyam*). The specific instruction clarifies the parameters of the general truth without denying its spirit. Another example is found in *Bhagavad-gītā* 3.16, where Kṛṣṇa mentions that one who does not follow the cycle of sacrifice

established in the Vedas lives a life full of sin. This verse is spoken by Kṛṣṇa in the context of appeasing the demigods for various necessities of life. After reading this, one might infer that they are permitted to perform the *Aśvamedha-yajña*, as it is considered the highest form of sacrifice. However, we find specific scriptural prohibitions which Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja Gosvāmī personally quoted in the *Caitanya-caritāmṛta* (*Ādi* 17.164) from the *Brahma-vaivarta Purāṇa*, which prohibit these major sacrifices in the age of Kali.

In the same way, *CC Madhya* 8.128 establishes the general principle: spiritual qualification transcends bodily designations (*varṇa* and *āśrama*), meaning that anyone who knows the science of Kṛṣṇa is qualified to guide others and act as a guru, whether *śikṣā*- or *dīkṣā guru*—a point no one disputes. In the purport to this verse, Śrīla Prabhupāda specifically mentions the word *dīkṣā* being applied to *śūdras*, noting that *śūdras* may give *dīkṣā* as there is no absolute barrier of *varṇa*. However, in the same purport, he also notes that *"the spiritual master who initiates* ***according to the regulations of the śāstras*** *is called the dīkṣā-guru."* Taking these points together, we understand that *śūdras* may give *śikṣā* and *dīkṣā*, according to the regulations of scripture. The *Pāñcarātra* (specifically the *Bhāradvāja-saṁhitā*) allows *śūdras* to give *dīkṣā* when they have attained the platform of *siddha*. Rāmānanda Rāya himself was qualified to be *dīkṣā-guru,* because he was a *pratyakṣitātma-nāthaḥ*—someone who could see the Lord directly. Hence, there is no contradiction between Śrīla Prabhupāda's purport and the canonical scriptures.

Also, with regard to women, Śrīla Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa in his *Vaiṣṇavānandinī* commentary on *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 1.13.15 cites the same *pāñcarātra-śāstra.*

> "And so, though Vidura was younger [to Dhṛtarāṣṭra and] though he was a *śūdra* [by birth], because he was Dharmarāja himself, he had directly realized the Supreme Lord; therefore, he instructed Dhṛtarāṣṭra. It is for this reason that the *Bhāradvāja-saṁhitā* forbids women, *śūdras* and the like [from becoming gurus] and allows women, *śūdras* and the like who have directly realized the Supreme Truth [to become gurus]."[i]

In the case of women also, *śāstra* gives the criteria by which women can become guru.

Dismissing texts like the *Bhāradvāja-saṁhitā*—which is itself cited by Śrīla Prabhupāda on numerous occasions, alongside Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura and Śrīla Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa (including the exact prohibitory verses regarding women giving *dīkṣā*)—disregards how deeply rooted our lineage is in the *Pāñcarātra* tradition. The *pañca-saṁskāra* procedures and initiation standards followed in the line of Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura

derive directly from *Pāñcarātrika* literature (such as the *Nārada-pañcarātra* and related *saṁhitās* cited by Śrīla Prabhupāda).

The concern held by many thoughtful Vaiṣṇavas regarding institutionalizing *dīkṣā* given by non-*siddha* women is not driven by bad faith, stalling tactics, or animus, but by fidelity to the warning of Śrī Rūpa Gosvāmī, cited repeatedly by Śrīla Prabhupāda (*Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu* 1.2.101):

śruti-smṛti-purāṇādi-pañcarātra-vidhiṁ vinā
aikāntikī harer bhaktir utpātāyaiva kalpate

> *"Devotional service that ignores authorized Vedic literatures like the Śruti, Smṛti, Purāṇas, and the **Pañcarātra-vidhi** creates only disturbance in society." (emphasis ours)*

Harmonizing institutional policy with classical *śāstric* mandates is not an attempt to diminish Śrīla Prabhupāda's authority; it is the exact practice of fidelity to *śāstra* that he instructed his followers to uphold.

Two objections naturally arise here: first, in a conversation Śrīla Prabhupāda had with a visiting professor from Toronto in 1976, when specifically asked whether women can become guru, Prabhupāda answered in the affirmative and specifically quoting the above-mentioned CC Madhya 8.128 verse. Using the rules of inference, one may conclude that since the purport to the verse talks about initiation, Prabhupada conceded that women may give initiation. Second, one might rightfully object that if the *Bhāradvāja-saṁhitā* also prohibits *sādhaka-śūdras* from becoming initiating spiritual masters, how is it that in ISKCON, *sādhaka* men from *śūdra* or *mleccha* backgrounds are permitted to initiate? These questions will be addressed in subsequent papers.

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[i] *tathā ca viduraḥ kaniṣṭho 'pi. śūdro 'pi sākṣād-dharma-rājatvena pratyakṣī-kṛta-pareśāt tasya tad-upadeṣṭṛtvam iti. ata eva bhāradvāja-saṁhitāyāṁ strī-śūdrādīnāṁ tan niṣidhya sākṣātkṛta-para-tattvānāṁ teṣāṁ tad āha,* https://iisb.co.in/2021/11/29/baladeva-vidyabhusana-on-sb-1-13-15/ Accessed on 6 Nov. 2026.