

Prabhupada Myths

If not for Bhaktivedānta Swāmī Prabhupāda I don't know how almost any of us would have been favorably exposed to Krishna, especially not through the prema-drenched eyes of Śrī Caitanya. To not be deeply and forever grateful to him for this would be embarrassing. But what is "gratitude"? And how does it relate to flaws that might exist in a person to whom we are grateful?

Just mentioning the word "flaw" after saying "Prabhupāda" evokes alarm and distaste in most of his followers, who deeply cherish a belief that, "he is perfect, flawless."

Does gratitude demand that we refuse to see any flaw in a person? I don't think so. I believe gratitude should make us *overlook* a person's flaws. The difference between "not seeing" and "overlooking" may seem very small, but is extremely significant.

Śrī Rūpa says:

*jane cej jāta-bhāve 'pi vaiguṇyam iva
dṛśyate
kāryā thathāpi nāsūyā kṛtārthaḥ
sarvathaiva saḥ
- Brs 1.4.59*

**Maybe we see what seems to be a flaw
in someone with true bhakti.
We should never hate them for it.**

He supports this with a reference from
Nārasimha Purāṇa:

*bhagavati ca harāv ananya-cetā
bhṛṣmalino 'pi virājate manuṅyaḥ
na hi śaśa-kaluṅac chaviḥ kadācit
timira-parābhavatām-upaiti candraḥ*

**A heart brimming
with true love for Bhagavān
is brilliant.
The moon's brilliance**

**is not humiliated by dark craters,
nor can dark spots in such a heart
overshadow it's glory.**

The human mind evaluates people and things like a balance. We put the things we like about a person on one side, and the things we dislike on the other. The lower one side of the balance hangs, the more intensely we like or dislike the person.

Not every like or dislike has equal weight. "I don't like his shirt" is not weighty, but "he is a a murderer" is. Śrī Rūpa points out that "this person is full of genuine love" is the weightiest item of all. No amount of dislikes heaped on the other side of the scale could outweigh it. Thus, it is *not* that we can't find flaws in a loving person. The point is that the significance of a person's love (*bhakti*) counter-balances and even outweighs them.

This is the difference between *not seeing* flaws vs. *overlooking* flaws, and this

difference is extremely important, especially if the person in question is a role-model (“*ācārya*”), like Prabhupāda. If a follower cannot differentiate flaws from virtues, they will emulate their role-model’s flaws. In fact, we emulate flaws with much *more* zeal and success than we emulate virtues, because we are much more conversant with them.

Thus, and with tragic irony, the apparently devotional and faithful concept of a “Flawless Prabhupāda” is the very thing that doomed ISKCON to disasters.

Therefore I do not feel ungrateful by dispelling a few myths about him.

Myth 1a: **Prabhupada was a Scholar**

Prabhupāda graduated from a four-year university study. Does this qualify one to be described as a “scholar”?

Myth 1b: **Prabhupada was a**

Sanskrit Scholar

Certainly he was conversant enough with Sanskrit to utilize it extensively, and to represent Bengali-translated works in English. Does this qualify one to be described as a "Sanskrit scholar"?

Such a title unusually implies extended formal study (up to twelve years).

Prabhupāda only studied the language for some portion of his university.

Most importantly, Sanskrit scholars precisely explain concepts by reference to grammatical syntax. Prabhupāda never did so, except when summarily paraphrasing a previous expert's commentary.

Myth 1c: Prabhupada was a Gaudīya Scholar

Certainly he had enough knowledge of Gaudīya Vaiṣṇava philosophy and practice to be able to spark a great deal of worldwide interest in it. This is indeed

remarkable, but does it warrant describing someone as a “scholar” in this field?

The term “scholar” implies that one has attended schools. Prabhupāda, however, did not receive systematic or formal education from his guru (who himself also did not receive a traditional Gauḍīya education).

Most importantly, a Gauḍīya Scholar should be fluent in the document that defined the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava school: Śrī Jīva’s Sandarbha. Prabhupāda, however, seems not to have studied this text at all, evidenced from his lack of references to it, and occasional significant contradictions of its key philosophical elements.

Myth 1d: **Prabhupada was Omniscient**

The logic is, “Krishna is the source of everything. Prabhupāda knows Krishna. Therefore Prabhupāda knows everything.”

Embracing this logic, his followers consider him the highest authority on *any* topic, be it astronomy, archaeology, biology, nutrition, sociology, parenting, marriage, sexuality... *anything*. Prabhupada allowed and even encouraged this concept; speaking on any and all topics as if he *really was* the most learned and experienced authority in each and every field.

This seems to be a terrifyingly significant character flaw: lack of humility - but perhaps he noticed that his naive followers wanted a supreme omniscient hero and he played role "to increase their faith"? If so, *this* was his mistake. A guru must uproot, not nourish, naivety in students. Faith not based on fact is illusory and detrimental.

Myth 2: Prabhupada would have fixed ISKCON's problems - like child abuse, domestic violence, and sexism - if only he was better

informed about them.

It is a leader's *responsibility* to know what is going on amongst their followers. If Prabhupāda really was under-informed about ISKCON's tragic problems, then *that* was his flaw.

The children in ISKCON boarding schools consistently and copiously suffered horrifying tragedies of abuse, assault and rape. How could this *not* come to the attention of the man who set up that system, unless that man simply *did not care* enough about those children to sufficiently monitor their welfare?

Unless he was literally blind, it would be impossible to imagine that Prabhupāda didn't notice all his female students being pushed into the back of the room and out into the hallways, that he somehow didn't realize that no woman was singing any kīrtan or conducting any "classes" or sitting in any position of management.

Prabhupāda was not blind, but he did nothing at all to improve the role and treatment of women in ISKCON. The conclusion can only be that he didn't care, or found nothing wrong with it.

Worse than being complicit, it can easily be said that he *promoted* sexism via his clear, constant denigration of women and families. Domestic violence and child abuse can also be traced directly to his abundant female-negative and family-negative teachings.

Myth 3: Prabhupāda Would Never have Approved of "Zonal Acaryas."

As the story was told by those who benefited from telling it, Prabhupāda did indeed design this system. On the other hand, many doubt the tale, with good reasons. Nonetheless, the way Prabhupāda ran ISKCON while he was alive was very similar to the way the zonal-ācāryas ran it after he died. For example:

Prabhupāda was non-cooperative with his peers ("Godbrothers"), generally forbidding his followers from any contact with them. Emulating this, his "newly appointed gurus" were very non-cooperative with one another, generally trying to isolate and insulate their zones.

Prabhupāda rejected his guru's GBC and institution to start his own independent organization. Emulating this, his newly appointed gurus defied the GBC and tried to establish autonomy.

Zonal ācāryas were very competitive with each other, destroying themselves and the individuals in their zones in the effort to be seen as the most successful guru. Perhaps they were emulating Prabhupāda's stress on measurable accomplishments - usually at the expense and sacrifice of the health, welfare, and spiritual development of the individual?

Myth 4: Prabhupāda Wanted to Spread Krishna Consciousness.

It may be more accurate to say he wanted to spread the International Society for Krishna Consciousness.

If he wanted to prove he could preach, hold festivals, write and sell books, and open temples all over the world - he indeed succeeded superbly. If he wanted to make anyone Krishna conscious, his success is more doubtful.

If his main priority were making individuals Krishna conscious, his behavior would have been much different. He would have slowed down and focused on individuals. He never did. Instead he behaved exactly like a man who desires measurable accomplishments and is willing to sacrifice and risk anything and anyone for it.

Myth 5: Prabhupada was not

Ordinary

Obviously, Prabhupāda was an extraordinary person who accomplished extraordinary things, in ways excelling his followers, peers, and predecessors. This, however, does not mean he was not also a human being with a human background - including flaws.

There are probably two undeniable points in which Prabhupāda was significantly different from his followers: (1) he was born as an Indian Vaiṣṇava. (2) He was old. Aside from this, he was in some ways quite similar to his followers.

He went to school - "regular" Western schools. As a youth he was involved in politics and activism - supporting Gandhi and the struggle for Indian independence. As a young adult, he had a regular job - running a pharmacy in Allahabad. He married and had five children...

Neglecting the pharmacy to focus on preaching, profits dwindled and money became scarce. His family was unhappy with this, and conflicts ensued. Eventually, frustrated by their unwillingness to sacrifice for his causes, and unwilling to sacrifice his ambitions for their needs, he abandoned them all, a wife and five children - one of whom was mentally handicapped and some of whom were still unmarried. He called this abandonment, "vanaprastha."

Conclusion

The general narrative in explaining ISKCON's sordid history is, "Prabhupāda was great, but his followers destroyed his work." I have presented an opposite proposal. "Prabhupāda had un-admitted flaws. His followers destroyed his efforts by emulating them."

When the leader states, "women enjoy rape," should we be shocked when the followers mistreat women? When he

himself abandoned his wife and children and consistently teaches that women, children, and family are undesirable impediments to spiritual progress, should we be shocked about how most ISKCON families turned out; or that no one cared enough about children to make sure they were safe?

It is surprising that ISKCON gurus tend to be anti-intellectual and unreasonably arrogant? Didn't their role model defy experts and present himself as the top authority in every field, including those he barely knew anything about?

Is the zonal-ācārya fiasco really such a surprise? Wasn't ISKCON's founder-ācārya uncooperative with his godbrothers, and with the GBC of his Guru's institution?

Should we be shocked when ISKCON merges so much New Age mumbo-jumbo, Conspiracy obsessions, and Judeo-Christian presumptions into its philosophy

that it becomes hard to tell if they have Vaiṣṇava dharma or not? What else should we expect from people who follow leaders who are not formally and traditionally educated? How are they supposed to keep a tradition intact, when they don't know exactly what their tradition is?

If we need someone to inspire our enthusiasm for Krishna consciousness in general, Prabhupāda may well be an excellent exemplar. However, if we need to comprehend how Gauḍīya concepts work in light of various modern sciences - we should recognize that he was in fact *not* an expert in any of those fields. Even if we need decisive clarification on what a key Gauḍīya concept or practice really means, or how it relates to other Vedic systems of thought - we might often wind up confused by his equivocal replies, because he was *not* actually educated to the extent required to deal with such things.

Someone who is not used to hearing a

negative word uttered in reference to Prabhupāda will be shocked with me, and probably assume I hate the man. On the contrary, I am grateful to him and appreciate how much I have benefitted from the efforts he made. It is *because* of that gratitude that I am compelled to point out the mistakes that continue to undermine the full blossoming of his efforts.

Prabhupāda had flaws and faults, but that is not the problem. The problem is that he did not acknowledge them, and his followers refuse to. Until they can do so, however, they are doomed to emulate them.