

An Analysis of Ritvik Movement within ISKCON

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Ritviks refer to devotees of an ISKCON sect, which itself is a sect of the Vaisnava religion. They are a dissident group who are dissatisfied with the outcome of the ISKCON religious organization, in particular with the results of its membership loss associated with the scandalous activities of the initiating gurus, religious teachers who initiate followers into the sect and guide their spiritual, and in many cases, material lives. The organization has recruited some thousands of members into the sect since its founding in 1966 by Abhay Caranaravinda Bhaktivedanta Swami. However, a great many have left the sect, many as a result of its organization's gurus having left themselves, leaving their followers to pick up the pieces after having surrendered their hearts, lives and material possessions to them since the death of Bhaktivedanta Swami. Many of the gurus left the religion in scandal, leaving deep scars of disillusionment to its members. As a result, many of the surviving members have resorted to the religion's growing sectarian view of ritvik.

Ritvik thought is a reaction to what the members have sensed to be a slow deterioration of the religion founded by Bhaktivedanta Swami caused by ISKCON initiating gurus stepping down from their position, commonly known as 'falling down'. The ritvik perspective is that Bhaktivedanta Swami did not authorize eleven of his senior disciples to take the position of gurus after his death, contrary to a letter that was written and presented to the members of ISKCON after his death. The ritviks claim that Bhaktivedanta Swami's real intention was to appoint those eleven disciples of his to perform initiation rites to the newcomers who would then become the direct disciples of Bhaktivedanta Swami, and not disciples of the ritvik, the officiating priest performing the initiation ceremony. The original term of the word 'ritvik' is found within the Vedas regarding a type of priest involved in sacrificial ceremonies who officiates it and conducts it on behalf of the sponsor, patron or others who are meant to benefit from the results of the sacrifice. Most likely, those sacrifices were outside of the domain of pure devotional service (bhakti), but were rather intended for materialistic acquisitions and prosperity (karma kanda). ISKCON verily attempts to demonstrate its adherence to Vedic practices in its promoting itself to both the Western and Indian world. This is partly due in order to acquire worldwide acceptance and recognition as a genuine religion, as opposed to being labeled a sect or cult, the latter a view seen by many westerners. Public skepticism poses a challenge to ISKCON while in host countries of the western world of the Judeo-Christian society. The concept of total surrender to a human being who acts as guru is quite alien and appears cultish to people of the West. As a religious parallel, this concept was also difficult to swallow for members of the Christian faith who broke off to

form the Protestant churches in regards to priest, bishops and popes of the Roman Catholic Church. The term 'ritvik' has now become to mean one who believes that ISKCON gurus are wrongfully claiming disciples to be their own and that Bhaktivedanta Swami alone is qualified and authorized to accept disciples. According to this view, the process by which Bhaktivedanta Swami would accept disciples after his death is through an initiation ceremony conducted by a ritvik. This system is predicted by ritviks to last ten thousand years.

The ritviks try to present their case by reminding members of ISKCON of the human fallibility of ISKCON gurus: the ones who have fallen away and the ones who still have status, but who live pretentious and extravagant lives as renunciates, or sannyasis. Ritviks rehash scandalous stories again and again about the corruption of the ISKCON gurus, at times with extra added sensationalism. The number of fallen gurus is indeed somewhat staggering, somewhere numbering about 20, if not more, within 27 years of its unique history. The mechanism employed by ritviks is of exposing the scandalous lives of ISKCON gurus within literature and websites, similar to Hollywood gossip magazines. By this means, they hope to contrast a mortal ISKCON guru with that of Bhaktivedanta Swami whom they revere as one who is spotlessly pure, full of knowledge, infallible and perfect in every respect. They believe that an ISKCON devotee is *not* empowered to become guru and if they try to, tragedy awaits them. The long list of fallen gurus proves their point, like Biblical writing on the wall. The fall down of nine of the original eleven gurus, as well as the tragic death of Tamal Krsna Goswami, perhaps ritviks' most hated guru, has increased their convictions. Alongside of this notion is rhetorical deification of Bhaktivedanta Swami whose status has become an isolated phenomenon. As symptomatic of a sect, ritvik members believe they are the true followers of Bhaktivedanta Swami. They feel blessed by Bhaktivedanta Swami and persuaded that others are devoid of his grace due to following the ISKCON gurus and the GBC, ISKCON global managers who maintain the presented guru system involving new gurus elected and approved. Consequently, ritviks are in contention with the gurus of ISKCON and their followers.

An obvious problem with the ritvik system is how well it will fare hundreds of years into the future when its members are still initiating on behalf of Bhaktivedanta Swami. According to them however, his physical presence is not an issue. According to their belief, he is present in his *vani*, his instructions, as well as his statue in the temple. Nevertheless, how well it will work with Bhaktivedanta Swami as a mythological icon within the minds of his followers in the hundreds and thousands of years to follow will remain to be seen. Equally problematic is the ISKCON GBC system of guru election. The GBC elects a guru so that members can seek initiation in the religion through them, becoming their disciples. Unfortunately, it is a defective system since many of the ones

elected have not passed the test of time. The rationale behind this control system is meant as a measure to try to protect its members of the institution from unqualified gurus. The GBC determines who is fit and not fit to initiate. In theory it sounds pragmatic, but it has failed since so many of them have not maintained their roles effectively and in turn have irreversibly damaged the faith of thousands of members over the years. Consequently, ISKCON finds itself in a damn if you do, damn if you don't situation.

Is there any instance within the history of the Gaudiya Vaisnava religion of a ritvik guru system? It is observed that throughout any presentation on the subject matter ritviks fail to provide any documentation or biographical accounts based on authoritative literature to substantiate their claims. What they consider authoritative are the few patched together quotations from Bhaktivedanta Swami on other issues that are not connected to the subject. On a whole, Bhaktivedanta Swami's statements may be authoritative to ISKCON Vaisnavas, but not to the whole of the Gaudiya Vaisnava Sampradaya, as we will discuss later. Perhaps, that is the reason why they avoid consulting any of the bhakti scriptures written by the acaryas, or look into how other Gaudiya Vaisnavas conduct the guru/disciple issue. The bhakti scriptures are primarily the ancient Srimad Bhagavata, the enormous amount of literature written by the Six Goswamis, Krsnadas Kaviraja Goswami, Narottama Das Thakur, Visvanatha Cakravarti Thakur and Baladeva Vidyabhusana.

As demonstrated through biographical accounts of the great Vaisnava saints and the literature they have produced over the last five hundred years, traditional Gaudiya Vaisnavas maintain strictly the system of guru pranali, that is, reverence and worship of the disciplic line of diksa gurus. The guru who initiates a disciple in the tradition bestows upon the disciple sacred and secret mantras, Tulasi neck beads, Deities, tilak of the sampradaya, the maha mantra and a sadhaka name. Along with those sacred items the guru reveals his spiritual lineage (parampara) to the disciple which becomes the eternal family the disciple has joined through initiation. The disciplic lineage is one that can be traced back to an eternal associate of Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu as the root of the disciplic succession. The various lines of disciplic lineages are called parivars. Some prominent branches of the Sri Caitanya tree are the Nityananda parivar, Adwaita parivar, Gadadhara parivar and Narottama Das Thakur parivar. Krsnadas Kaviraja Goswami describes in Caitanya Caritamrta the various branches of the Sri Caitanya tree. Narottama Das Thakur writes in Prarthana that the devotee associates who descended along with Lord Gauranga to assist in His transcendental play five hundred years ago are *nitya siddha*, eternal companions. Kavikarnapur, a great recipient of Lord Gauranga's mercy, composed a book entitled, 'A Lamplight into the Associates of Gaura' which reveals the identities of the associates of Lord Caitanya in their role as eternal companions of Krsna in the eternal Vrndavan pastimes. Krsnadas Kaviraja

writes in the Caitanya Caritamṛta that the eternal Vaisnava companions of Lord Gaurāṅga assisted Him in the distribution of transcendental love for Kṛṣṇa. Some of them started guru disciplic and family lineages to further this propagation for the future generations of souls in this present age. Today the Gaudiya Vaisnava tradition is still a vibrant and thriving religious culture with centers in Navadvīpa, Jagannātha Puri, Vr̄ndāvan, Rādhā Kunda, around Govardhana Hill and other holy sites throughout Vraja. The conclusions regarding how the desire for bhakti (*bhakti lata bija*—the seed of devotion) appears within the heart of an ordinary soul of this material world is due to the grace of a Vaisnava, either in this life or past life. It is said that the purpose of pilgrimage is not merely to take holy baths, but to meet saints. There is no better place where one can obtain mercy of the Lord's devotees as in a holy place.

The traditional teachings on the principle of guru is that when a devotee becomes accomplished in his/her bhajan, worship, and devotional practice the power of guru descends unto him/her from the form of the Lord who is the aggregate of all guru, situated eternally in the transcendental kingdom of God. The guru in this world becomes a localized aspect of the eternal guru principle to benefit the people of this world. Guru is a form of God that bestows mercy upon the souls of this material world. That does not mean that a guru becomes and/or is God. It means that in the function of teaching bhakti (guru) becomes manifest within a devotee in order to show mercy to a soul. A guru may or may not be scholar, or an expert in the literatures of bhakti. What is important is the correct fundamental understandings and principles of devotion derived from the teachings of Six Goswamis, the principle followers of Sri Caitanya, and his level of adherence and fixation on bhajan, or devotional worship to Mahāprabhu and Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa. A great soul (mahatma) always exhibits the quality of humility, tolerance, friendliness, non-jealousness and freedom from anger, not just on occasions. According to Rupa Goswami's small work entitled, 'Nectar of Instruction', a great soul is one who is devoid of the inclination to criticize others. He thinks everyone is good and he is not. It should be noted that charisma, or a photogenic persona has nothing to do with qualities of a guru. In the Gaudiya Vaisnava tradition a guru could either be a married man, woman, or renunciate (babaji) [sannyas is not part of the Gaudiya Vaisnava tradition]. A great soul qualified to take students demonstrates by practical example absorption in devotional service like, chanting 64 or more rounds of japa of the holy name, meditation on the eternal pastimes of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa, Deity worship, a vow to live in holy places and daily visitation of holy sites.

The post of gurus is not an elected process in the Gaudiya Vaisnava tradition. Vaisnavas are asked by aspirants for devotional life to become a disciple and receive *dikṣa*, initiation. There are no committees to decide whether or not someone is qualified. It is up to individual discretion to

ascertain who is a fit guru. Therefore, it is common for aspirants of bhakti to seek advice from other Vaisnavas within a community where and who are good standing Vaisnavas qualified to accept students. When a candidate and prospective guru meet they study one another. Gurus examine the aspirant's seriousness and level of understanding of bhakti through questions and comprehension. It is equally the duty of the aspirant to also observe the qualities, spiritual commitment to worship, and knowledge of the guru before making a decision to seek initiation.

One who receives initiation in the tradition becomes the disciple of the one who gives the initiation. He becomes his diksa guru, or mantra guru. Although there is what is called a siksa guru or instructing guru, the primary relationship is with the diksa guru. One who accepts initiation from his diksa guru and then rejects him to seek advice from other Vaisnavas incurs the 3rd offence in chanting the holy name. If the ritvik system was something traditionally followed in Gaudiya Vaisnavism then think how many present day disciples of Lord Caitanya, Lord Nityananda, Rupa Goswami, or Narottama Das Thakur would there be? Why become a disciple of Bhaktivedanta Swami when one can be a disciple of God Himself, or one of His eternal companions? It would seem paradoxical if one can become a disciple of Bhaktivedanta Swami hundreds of years after his death and not one of Sri Caitanya, or Rupa Goswami.

The word 'acarya' means one who teaches by example. It is also taken to mean someone who has emerged as an authority or head of a sampradaya. Acaryas generally refer to high soul Vaisnavas of towering stature demonstrated in their intensity of worship, profound and clear explanation of bhakti subjects, and manifestations of mystical experiences as a result of their deep love for Lord Krsna. Specifically in regards to the Sri Caitanya tradition, acaryas refer to devotees of eminence such as the Six Goswamis who were Mahaprabhu's emissaries for propagating His teachings. Ritviks claim that qualified gurus are rare within this world and that the most recent manifestation of was Bhaktivedanta Swami. Was Bhaktivedanta Swami really an exceptional acarya of the Gaudiya Vaisnava Sampradaya? Traveling around the globe establishing a hundred temples, giving initiation to some thousands of members, establishing a book publishing organization (BBT) for translating bhakti literature—are these accomplishments or feats proof of a self effulgent acarya? Unanimously in ISKCON everyone agrees. Its members rave that Bhaktivedanta Swami stands in a spiritual status surpassing that of the previous acaryas because of his preaching work in the western world through ISKCON.

Many followers attribute Bhaktivedanta Swami as being a great scholar of the bhakti scriptures. Was he? Scholar now-a-days refers to someone with a title like PhD, a researcher and expert in a subject who has received his title

from an accredited institution. Even in India, many learned pandits acquire degrees in universities and accredited institutions through intense Sanskrit study and research. In Gaudiya Vaisnavism, scholars spend years of studying the Sanskrit works of Jiva Goswami, such as the Sandarbhas which are canons of the specific philosophy and theology regarding Sri Caitanya's teachings, the ancient Bhagavata Purana with many commentaries of prominent arcayas, the works of Rupa Goswami, Visvanath Cakravarti Thakur, etc. According to his biography though, Bhaktivedanta Swami did not finish his college chemistry degree, which was no where near religious studies. There is no history of his studying Sanskrit deeply, nor thoroughly the bhakti scriptures, as in the case of many prominent acaryas who spent years with a teacher going through all the subjects of the bhakti scriptures. He spent a great portion of his life as a family man who fathered five children while working in the pharmaceutical business, at times traveling at great lengths for business purposes. Although his father arrange for an initiation for him at the age of 12, according to his biography, he did not take it seriously and instead pursued politics in his youth. His translations of his BBT books as a sannyasi were from Bengali editions and his Bhagavad Gita translations were knowingly plagiarized from the Gita Press edition of the same. Despite his efforts, his translations contain many errors, even his Caitanya Caritamrta which was translated from his native Bengali. He seemed not to always have a clear grasp of many of the traditional Gaudiya Vaisnava teachings as is evident in his commentaries known as the Bhaktivedanta purports. Many contradictions would be found throughout his commentaries, becoming a playground of speculative debate amongst ISKCON followers. In many places throughout his writings and lectures are teachings contradictory to the teachings of the Goswami acaryas. He sometime would use the commentaries as a platform to brag about his achievements, launch slanderous accusations against Vaisnavas and brahmanas, as well as provide a plateful of women bashing, an unethical practice amongst saints. Looking through his volumes of books objectively, Bhaktivedanta Swami does fall somewhat short in scholarly effectiveness in presenting the teachings of Sri Caitanya as an acarya. Can an acarya lead effectively a world Vaisnava community if he himself is not clear, or even misrepresents the teachings of Sri Caitanya? The fact that after his death there is a great disorientation amongst his followers on a guru system does not give Bhaktivedanta Swami much credential as great teacher.

Is Bhaktivedanta Swami connected to parampara, a traditional spiritual lineage of diksa gurus? Despite the warm charisma that he displayed, the ability to inspire followers to abandon wealth and the pursuit of material happiness to chant the holy name of God in zeal, Bhaktivedanta Swami is not connected to a parampara, a branch of the tree of Sri Caitanya's Gaudiya Vaisnava sampradaya. ISKCON and its parent religious sect, Gaudiya Math, are connected to the lineage of Bimal Prasad, the son of Bhaktivinoda Thakur

known as Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati. He was rejected initiation by Gaura Kishor Das Baba, a great Vaisnava ascetic of the late 19th and early 20th century. Instead of seeking initiation from another Vaisnava guru, he proceeded to accept students of his own and mount his own brand of Vaisnava religion, instituting practices and concepts contrary to the traditional teachings of the Sri Caitanya tradition. This may explain some of the quirks found within these Vaisnava sects in comparison with the rest of the tradition. The list of guru succession written in places within the Gaudiya Math and in ISKCON is a fake. How could Narottama Das Thakur give initiation to Visvanath Cakravarti Thakur if the former passed away before the latter was born? Same in the case of Visvanath Cakravarti and Jagannatha Das Baba, they never met having a gap of fifty years between the passing away of one and the birth of another. The Gaudiya Math collapsed after the death of Bhaktisiddhanta due to disclosure of the broken link between Bhaktisiddhanta and the rest of the Sri Caitanya tradition. Bhaktivedanta Swami presented to his followers a twisted history of that event that does not coincide with the view and perception of what actually took place, according to those who were there. In truth, the Gaudiya Math broke up because Ananta Vasudeva who succeeded as head of the Gaudiya Math discovered that Bhaktisiddhanta did not receive initiation rites from Gaura Kishor Das Baba. There is no parampara in the Gaudiya Math, hence not in ISKCON either. Bhakti is transferred from Vaisnava to candidate for devotional service through the holy ritual of initiation. The transmission of sacred and empowered mantras, a necessity for advancement in the bhakti path, is at the core of this ritual. Without it, there is no entrance onto the path of devotion. After Ananta Vasudeva discovered this fraud, he advised his followers and brothers of the sect to seek authentic Vaisnava gurus who can give them genuine initiation and teach the path of bhakti to them according to the teachings of Sri Caitanya and the Six Goswamis. Consequently, he disbanded the organization which caused a great chaos to many there. Those that were sincere followed his advice and traveled to Vrindavan to meet holy men engaged in intense devotional service. They took shelter at their feet by accepting genuine initiation and the path of devotion. Those that were concerned with money and power stayed in the maths (temples) waging civil law suits to gain control of property and assets. Bhaktivedanta Swami was not living in the Gaudiya Math when these affairs happened, but nonetheless, he was somewhat aware of the controversies over the disciplic succession issues and the mysterious Bhaktisiddhanta, as evident to his response when these issues were raised to him.

Ritviks describe a different version of this chapter, the one that Bhaktivedanta Swami presented, which helps their cause. They believe that the disciples of Bhaktisiddhanta disobeyed the orders of Bhaktisiddhanta by its members electing a guru successor after his death which resulted in the fall of the guru and the organization. They call it the 'origin of the guru hoax'.

However, Ananta Vasudeva appears to have been a hand chosen successor by Bhaktisiddhanta himself. It is a tradition in Gaudiya Math, still in vogue today, to choose a successor prior to the head of the guru's death. Ananta Vasudeva left the Gaudiya Math and so did many others, many to take initiation from leading Vaisnava saints in Radha Kunda and Vrndavana. His tomb stands today in Radha Kunda. Others who left the Gaudiya Math to initiate from saints and perform devotional service in Vraja where alive until recently; fortunately, they lived to tell their story. Krsna Das Madrasi Baba, Madana Mohan Das Baba (perhaps still living) and Dr. L.B.O. Kapoor, all former members of the Gaudiya Math, were some of the great souls we had the pleasure of meeting who eye witnessed these events. Jai Nitia Das Baba, a great saint who lived to be 114 years, knew Gaura Kishor Das Baba and confirmed that Bhaktisiddhanta was not an initiated disciple of Gaura Kishor Das Baba. Lalit Prasad, the youngest son of Bhaktivinoda and brother of Bhaktisiddhanta also has made the same statements. It appears that the real 'origin of the guru hoax' was one portrayed by the founder of Gaudiya Math, Bhaktisiddhanta.

While a great number of gurus have fallen away in ISKCON, many in great scandal, it is not proof that a ritvik guru system is what should or should have been in place. The matter is rather symptomatic of a deeper problem, i.e. no diksa connection with a guru disciplic lineage, not having access or connection with Gaudiya Vaisnavas from the tradition and a deficiency of traditional understanding of the teachings of Sri Caitanya as propagated by the Six Goswamis. With the emergence of yet another movement within ISKCON that advocates community workshops conducted by members of the mental health profession, ISKCON will continue to drift further away from its already sketchy roots. The sect will continue its big turn over of membership while some will opt to explore alternatives to the ISKCON religion.