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Sivaram Swami: A Clarification

BY: AKINCANA STAFF / ON: DECEMBER 9, 2022 / IN: BHAKTIVEDANTA ACADEMY MAYAPUR, CHILD PROTECTION, GBC, NEWS / TAGGED: CHILD PROTECTION / WITH: 0 COMMENTS

[Letter dated Dec. 7, 2022 – original PDF can be downloaded at this link: SRS-LETTER_221207.]

Dear Devotees,

Please accept my humble obeisances. All glories to Śrīla Prabhupāda.

A month ago I composed a letter to the GBC and ICPO with the purpose of pointing out ISKCON's responsibility towards its members. That private letter was meant to raise questions for the GBC and ICPO to discuss, but unfortunately it was shared publicly and has been wrongfully interpreted as my official statement to the entire devotee community. I would like to clarify my words in their proper context, present my personal opinion on this issue, and apologise to the devotee community for any misconceptions that letter created.

While I took objection to a few comments in the CPO report, I would have never publicly called for the CPO directors to resign. They did not deserve to be humiliated in public and for that I apologise to them. Since its inception I have been a supporter of the work of the CPO and particularly appreciative of the service of the current directors.

In my letter I requested that the Māyāpur management be held responsible for the abuses suffered by devotees under BVP—from now on to be referred to as Avd.

Furthermore, I petitioned the receivers to consider the role that scriptural statements like *api cet suduracaro* have in deciding cases of abuse and other crimes that come before the CPO, GBC, or Judicial Ministry, as well as what compensation is afforded primarily to victims and—secondarily and if appropriate—to culprits.

With the newly disclosed history of AVd's latest child abuse and pastoral abuse, I mistakenly used him as the example to question whether the *api cet* principle was relevant to his crimes, and whether he would be eligible for compensation. I should not have done that.

Although these were principles and questions to be considered as typical of guidelines for compensation and their appropriateness—*not* proposals placed to the CPO and GBC—those questions have now been mistaken for my way

of thinking and a proposal that AVd receive some stipend and a lighter sentence.

Nothing could be farther from the truth.

However, that is the interpretation making the rounds amongst devotee circles, and it is my haphazard communication that has become the cause of disturbance and anxiety for disciples, well-wishers, and Vaiṣṇavas in general.

As a *sannyāsī,* ex-GBC, and *guru* my responsibility is to give spiritual leadership and not to confuse devotees into thinking that I protect a child abuser. I do not!

Allow me to make clear that I abhor and condemn, and always have, all forms of abuse, such as child abuse, domestic violence, and pastoral abuse—to name a few. As for AVd, I am disgusted at the revelation of his recent crimes and I believe he deserves more punishment than what the CPO has given him.

I have no sympathy for him. He has had enough chances, and enough is enough.

In my letter, I wrote that I do not think he was a born abuser. That statement was wrong. I do not know how he was born, and whether abuse was part of his pre-ISKCON life. So logically I retract that sentence.

Below I will make clear my real attitude to AVd.

* * * *

Firstly it is important for me to state that this was a private letter written to confidential conferences and closely concerned devotees. I had no intention of communicating to the devotee world. Unfortunately, the letter was leaked and here we are.

In any case, considering to whom I was writing, I did not take the time to either carefully consider or edit the letter. In my almost 40 years on the GBC, that would be the way we sometimes presented ideas, which members would

then critique. No doubt had I received feedback from members they would be saying something like,

Member 1: Sivarama Swami you have some good points, but some of your stuff is really misleading.

Member 2: It sounds like you are a supporter of AVd, that you want to lessen his sentence and give him a pension or something.

Member 3: You better rewrite this thing to say what you actually mean, or just forget the whole thing.

And so I would apologise to them for my muddle and then clarify my words.

I write this to make clear that such was the audience to whom I was writing, and naturally I would have realised my mistakes—as I do now—and make adjustments accordingly.

In conclusion, I had no intention or need to write my message to a wider, what to speak of global, devotee audience. However, I understand that as my letter has been circulated, it can appear as if I am considering AVd and child abusers saintly merely because they have been in ISKCON for some time. That is not the case and I regret the confusion my letter caused.

* * * *

I want to emphasise that aside from a proposal regarding the CPO, throughout my letter I either ask the GBC questions or request them to consider certain topics, including topics on AVd or the *api cet suduracaro* principle. In that text I am not presenting my personal opinion, but asking the ultimate managing body of the Society to consider them and make decisions as they see fit.

Following that, my primary conclusion is that Māyāpur, like any *yatra* in ISKCON where such abuse would take place, bears the moral, spiritual, and financial responsibility for transgressions taking place on its campus.

Next point.

In the introductory background to the letter, I also explain that AVd has

been an acquaintance and not a "bosom buddy."

That is certainly the truth: a few photos depicting friendly poses during festivals at which he was a guest do not negate that truth. Aside from his visits to Hungary, I had no interaction with him via email or phone, and on my stays in Māyāpur over the years he never visited me, nor I him. Indeed, even at the times when I am in Māyāpur, we maintain zero contact via internet or phone. The exception was the two times that I stayed in a hut on *gurukula* campus in the early '90s. But even then we shared minimal interaction, since I was always in GBC meetings from morning till night.

I emphasise that my letter was not meant to defend a close friend. I offer no defence for his abuses, neither do I think he requires maintenance from ISKCON. On this point of a stipend, I will say the following:

If Māyāpur offers any *laksmi* at all by way of compensation, and that is a big "if," then there is a long line of abused devotees to whom it will be offered first. That I make clear in my letter. I do not believe for a minute that there would be any stipend for their abuser.

One of the many reasons AVd obviously disqualifies himself to deserve support is that at no time in the past year has he sent a letter of apology for his misdeeds to his many abused victims. Neither has he sent apology to Māyāpur community devotees, to devotees in general, or to myself and the devotees of Hungary, where his fiasco has disturbed both the faith of many in Śrīla Prabhupāda's movement and their path back to Godhead.

* * * *

Devotees have asked what my knowledge was of AVd's atrocities over the years. My answer to that question is, "As much as any GBC."

My first knowledge of AVd's behaviour was in the 1991 investigation, after which he was restricted in a variety of ways, one being to not stay in Māyāpur all the time, but to travel. In 2000, the newly formed CPO did a deeper review

of the pre-1991 *gurukula* abuses and gave him further restrictions, such as no further initiations. No doubt these restrictions were insufficient.

After 2000, the only mention of AVd was the 2015 CPO report on the girl's *gurukula*, wherein the *sannyāsa* ministry was requested to look into allegations against him. For reasons beyond my knowledge, no report ensued.

In short, between 1991 and 2000 AVd was not charged with any new abuse. And from 2000–2021, there has been no official investigation or report on him.

Did I hear of any abuse of that time?

While no one came to me in person to make a report, through the grapevine I heard a few allegations. However, since no official body took action, I assumed the allegations were inaccurate. To this day, I do not know why further investigations didn't happen.

That is what I knew.

The next question devotees quite rightly raise is, "Why did you let a known abuser come to Hungary?"

As he had been requested to travel outside India, in 1992 or '93 he was brought to the Hungarian *yātrā* to help cook for our big travelling festival. He was liked by devotees for his knowledge of deity worship, culture, and his interesting classes. So he was invited back on multiple occasions, until 2018. In that time, he initiated six disciples and gathered a following amongst devotees, but he was never allowed to deal with children in any way.

Since we were following his CPO restrictions, and since there were no new charges against him between 1991 and 2021, I mistakenly presumed that he had reformed his ways, and so I

thought it fair to give him a chance.

Śrīla Prabhupāda asked us to reform and not remove devotees who have erred. For example, we currently have successful GBC's who had left ISKCON but were given a chance to return. Similarly, I had experience of a fallen *sannyāsīs* who, when given a chance, successfully reformed. Of course,

violence and Vaiṣṇava *aparādha* is a different category; nevertheless, I

naively thought he was a changed person. I now deeply regret my naivety.

Additionally, because AVd and I were not close, he never confided his problems to me.

It may be asked why AVd's truly brutal and sadistic beatings of children were not enough for me and others to shut the doors on him.

Three decades ago, I, like the majority of ISKCON's leadership, was much less educated on child abuse than I am now. So the 2000 report didn't ring the same alarm bells as they would now. I don't give this answer as any form of justification, but rather as an explanation of facts.

As I mentioned, AVd had a clean record since 1991, other *yātrās* gave him a chance, and in all his time in Hungary there was never a complaint against him. He behaved well. That warranted a chance to prove himself.

* * * *

In conclusion, allow me to add a few points why I and the GBC overlooked a sadist who was living in our midst in the guise of a *sannyāsī* and *guru.*

The GBC are devotees who, like everyone else in our Society, joined ISKCON to chant and be happy. In Śrīla Prabhupāda's service they accepted the duties of the GBC whether they were qualified managers or not. Added to that was the duty of *guru* for most, and temple president for some, which meant they carried the workload of two or three people, generally with insufficient backup. Thus child protection, to which ISKCON only opened its eyes in the 1990s, while top priority, was still only one of dozens of pressing issues and of even more other duties. In short, GBC men were overloaded. And overloaded managers easily overlook things.

However, more significant is the difference between day-to-day knowledge and historical hindsight.

Today devotees look at the last 30 years of AVd's acts as a clear picture, and so they may wonder, "Why didn't the GBC know what was going on?" Some even think that there is a massive "cover-up" of child abuse in ISKCON.

However, when AVd's abuse—known and unknown—is incremental over

30 years, the picture is only gradually filled in and only gains clarity with the benefit of hindsight.

This is the case with all sorts of crimes committed globally, which are difficult to detect and only become known with the passing of years.

In hindsight it may be easy to say that AVd's abuses were obvious, but when seen day by day over the course of decades they were not. What to speak of I or others having the foresight in 1991 to see how twisted a person he was. Thus when devotees ask why I did not see AVd for what he was, and why I did not distance myself and my *yātrā* from him, I can only say that at the time the picture was not clear to me, whereas now it is evident. I accept that this is a case of misjudgement and mismanagement on my part, and it also speaks to the lengths of deceit an abuser will go to in order to hide his crimes.

In my almost 40 years as GBC, while trying my best to serve Śrīla Prabhupāda, I have made mistakes. Of course, I wish I had not given AVd the benefit of doubt, and I wish I had not written my recent letter. Both are regretted.

In this letter I have tried to give more detailed reasoning of what I meant by my letter of November, and why I acted as I did with AVd over the last 30 years.

The last thing I wanted was to create a disturbance in devotees' minds and in Śrīla Prabhupāda's movement. For that I humbly apologise to the devotee community and request their forgiveness. And I especially apologise to AVd's many victims for the pain I must have inflicted upon them.

Abuse of any kind is never acceptable and we, as a Society, must collectively do better. This incident should not have happened, and we all share responsibility; the whole system failed the victims. This is a much-needed wake-up call for all leaders and *yātrās* to take child protection more seriously, and to take added precautions in the future. In fact, I urge the GBC and

leaders of ISKCON to make our Society one in which both adults and children benefit from complete protection and care. Personally I shall continue to make myself available to victims of abuse and help them any way that I can.

I am aware that some devotees will critique and reject my presentation, while others may find it therapeutic. All I can say is that I have tried to act for others' best interest and herein I have told the truth. This recent chaos was the last thing I wanted, for my entire life has always been dedicated to the service of Vaiṣṇavas.

May Śrīla Prabhupāda and the Vaiṣṇavas forgive me. Your servant,

Śivarāma Swami

7 December 2022

Māyāpur.

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