SABHA
(*Spiritual Advisors Bhagavata Assembly*)

1. **PURPOSES:**

(a) Establishing the *Spiritual Advisors Bhagavata Assembly*, or SABHA,[1] has manifold functions. It aims at strengthening unity among ISKCON's global spiritual leaders. It facilitates their cooperation, communication and working relation for the progress of Srila Prabhupada's movement.

(b) The SABHA provides checks and balances on the authority of the GBC and course-correction for its decisions. More consultation, more dialogue and more interaction can be conducive to better, wiser and more acceptable decisions. There are historical precedents for this approach during Srila Prabhupada's presence, for example the GBC resolution dated 15 March 1976 states: "Since several resolutions under 'ISKCON Organization' passed at the March 9, 9 a.m. meeting, caused a great disturbance among the temple presidents and thus with our spiritual master, the GBC acknowledges that they were mistaken proposals and hereby rejects them. This was ordered by Srila Prabhupada, and refers specifically to resolutions 1, 2, 3, and 10." The next year the GBC formally established a system of review of its decisions by the Temple Presidents: "After the agenda has been completed Temple President's meeting will be held. If by a 2/3 majority the Presidents vote any suggested amendments to the resolutions or make new resolutions, these will be referred back to the GBC who will meet to vote on them and that decision will be final. Srila Prabhupada will then review this decisions [*sic*] for ultimate decision and/or approval." (1st March 1977). The SABHA is thus intended to enrich the decision-making ability of the GBC by providing variegated viewpoints and deeper insight into the needs and concerns of the various ISKCON constituents.

[1] In Sanskrit SABHA means assembly, council, court, conclave, etc.

(c) The SABHA also offers the GBC the opportunity to hear from other qualified Vaisnavas and tap their collective wisdom in the spirit recommended by Srila Prabhupada: "if we keep Krsna in the center, then there will be agreement in varieties. This is called unity in diversity. I am therefore suggesting that all our men meet in Mayapur every year during the birth anniversary of Lord Caitanya Mahaprabhu. With all GBC and senior men present we should discuss how to make unity in diversity. But, if we fight on account of diversity, then it is simply the material platform. Please try to maintain the philosophy of unity in diversity. That will make our movement successful." (Letter to Kirtanananda, 18 Oct 1973)

(d) The SABHA can also suggest issues to the GBC for discussion or solution. Again, there is precedent for this in Srila Prabhupada's presence. A GBC resolution dated 7 March 1977 stated: "Concerning topics to be presented each year at the GBC meeting in Mayapur the temple presidents should submit topics to their GBC representative 45-days prior to the meeting, and the GBC representatives will present those topics 30-days before the meeting to the three GBC officers."

(e) Overall, the SABHA collaboratively works with the GBC by reviewing and proposing legislation and by suggesting topics for discussion with the aim of improving the quality, legitimacy and acceptance of GBC resolutions, priorities and directions. The SABHA adds value to ISKCON's governance by offering sound *sastric* advice and by expressing the will of the constituencies they represent. The sacred duty of the SABHA is to, together with the GBC, act as an instrument of the will of the Founder-*Acarya*.

(f) The establishment of the SABHA does not replace or substitute the SGGS, the Sanga of GBCs, Gurus & Sannyasis.

2. **<u>REVIEWING GBC RESOLUTIONS:</u>**

(a) By a two-third majority of all its voting members,[2] the SABHA can formally object to any GBC resolution and send it back to the GBC for review and reconsideration.

(b) The objection shall be communicated to the GBC within 30 days of the passing of the resolution, specifically from the date the GBC shares the resolution with the SABHA.

(c) When mandating a review, the SABHA shall share with the GBC the result of the voting, and include, in writing, their reasoning and their recommendations. When applicable, the dissenting opinion should also be shared, in writing.

(d) Upon the SABHA mandating a review, implementation of the resolution shall be suspended and the GBC shall revisit the resolution at their next meeting, during which they will consider the SABHA's concerns and recommendations.

(e) The GBC shall determine their next step, which could include, but not necessarily be limited to, dialogue with the SABHA to come to a mutually acceptable resolution, pass a modified version, reaffirm the original resolution, etc.

(f) In special circumstances, the GBC will have to make emergency decisions and pass resolutions that need immediate implementation or will have to process matters – such as those of a personal or legal nature – that require a high level of privacy and confidentiality. In these special cases, the GBC, at its discretion, may decide to render such resolutions immediately effective and/or keep such deliberations as confidential, without sharing them with the SABHA.

3. **PROPOSING NEW LEGISLATION**:

(a) By the majority of all its voting members,[3] the SABHA can directly propose new legislation or modifications of existing legislation to the GBC – without the requirement of GBCs having to sponsor the proposal.

(b) The SABHA shall submit its proposals in the standard format, at any time, during the year. The GBC shall process the proposal within one (1) year of its submission.

[2] If the SABHA has 35 members, to mandate a review it would require at least 24 valid cast votes.

[3] If the SABHA has 35 members, to propose legislation it would require at least 18 valid votes.

(c) Since the SABHA is neither a legislative nor executive body, it cannot enact or implement any legislation independently.

4. SUGGESTING TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION:

(a) By the majority of all its voting members,[4] the SABHA can suggest topics for discussion by the GBC. They might include issues in need of being addressed, clarified or resolved.

(b) Topics can be submitted at any time during the year.

(c) The submission should include why the SABHA considers them important and may include recommendations on the desired outcome.

(d) The GBC shall act on the suggestion within one (1) year of the submission, determining how to process it, which may involve, but not necessarily be limited to, discussing it within the GBC, involving the whole SGGS, requesting the Sastric Advisory Council to research the topic, constituting a joint GBC/SABHA subcommittee, etc.

(e) From time to time, the GBC may request the SABHA to assume specific duties, of an occasional or ongoing nature. These requests shall not be automatically binding upon the SABHA.

(f) Acceptance of a request will be subject to the majority vote of all SABHA's voting members.[5]

(g) The SABHA shall meet in person at least once a year for a minimum of three (3) full days at a place and time of their choice.

5. PARTICIPATING IN GBC MEETINGS:

(a) In addition to the above functions, three (3) members of the SABHA – chosen by the SABHA – shall be invited to attend the GBC meetings (both the Annual General Meetings and the Midterm General Meetings), as observers.

[4] If the SABHA has 35 members, to suggest topics of discussion it would require at least 18 valid votes.

[5] If the SABHA has 35 members, acceptance of a GBC request to assume an additional duty would require at least 18 valid votes.

(b) They can contribute to the discussions, but they will not have a vote. They should faithfully represent the collective views and concerns of the SABHA as its spokespersons, staying away from promoting individual opinions not shared by the SABHA. These SABHA representatives shall also share information about the dynamics and deliberations of the GBC meetings with the SABHA.

6. MEMBERSHIP:

6.1 Categories:

(a) The SABHA shall have thirty-five (35) members subdivided in the following categories:

(i) Sannyasis & gurus (12 members);

(ii) Senior devotees (5 members);

(iii) Vaishnavis (5 members);

(iv) Youth (3 members); and

(v) Area representatives (10 members).

(b) The categories are defined as follows:

(i) Sannyasis & gurus[6] (12): All sannyasis and initiating spiritual masters not serving as GBC. It is preferred that among the elected members some variety be present (e.g.: a few *grihastha* gurus).

(ii) Senior devotees (5): Devotees initiated for at least thirty (30) years.

(iii) Vaishnavis (5): This is intended to be the minimum reserved allocation and does not include the ladies who might be elected in other categories (e.g.: senior devotees, youth or area representatives).

(iv) Youth (3): Devotees below the age of thirty (30) at the time of election.

(v) Area representatives (10): One devotee from each of the following territories:

i. India

[6] Throughout the document, the expression 'guru' indicates an ISKCON-approved initiating spiritual master.

ii. China
iii. Southeast Asia
iv. Rest of Asia (including the Far East, the Middle East, the rest of the Indian Subcontinent, etc.)
v. North America
vi. Europe
vii. Africa
viii. Russia & former USSR
ix. Australia & Oceania
x. Latin America & the Caribbean

Note: These area representatives could be Zonal Supervisors, members of National Councils, Temple Presidents, community leaders, congregational leaders, etc. and could also include devotees not holding any official administrative position.

6.2 Pre-requisites for Membership

a. Being loyal to Srila Prabhupada.
b. Being ISKCON devotees in good standing.[7]
c. Possessing the capacity and the willingness to bring their diverse experiences, expertise and viewpoints to the SABHA discussions.

[7] ISKCON Law 8.1.4.2: *Principles for Determining Who Is "In Good Standing"* [Note: The requirement of being an initiated disciple only applies to the 'sannyasis and gurus' and 'senior devotees' categories.]

- An ISKCON devotee (temple resident/congregational) who follows the rules and regulations appropriate to his situation, who is not acting inimically to ISKCON or its interests, who is not put under any disciplinary mandate, and;
- Anyone serving in ISKCON who is a disciple of a bona fide *guru,* who is faithfully following his vows and obligations to his *guru,* and;
- A person who is appropriately adhering to the rules and regulations in his *asrama* and
- A spiritual authority who is not on probation or suspension is in good standing.
- This list is not exhaustive, the GBC or its delegated authorities may add standards for determining devotees in good standing as required.

d. Interested in developing a shared, broadminded and inclusive global vision.
e. Able to articulate the concerns of the broader constituents within ISKCON.
f. Able to maintain confidentiality.[8]
g. Committed to attending the SABHA annual meeting as well as the scheduled conference calls.
h. Committed to responding to email and other forms of required communication such as commenting on documents, filling surveys, online voting, etc. in a timely manner.
i. Committed to actively participate in the discussions and other proceedings.
j. Willing to join and serve in subcommittees as the need arises.
k. Possessing basic computer literacy.[9]
l. Possessing working proficiency in English.[10]

7. NOMINATIONS AND ELECTIONS OF SABHA MEMBERS:

(a) All the non-GBC members of the SGGS comprise the main electing body (electing 22 of the 35 SABHA members); every member has a vote. They will elect the 12 members from the gurus & sannyasis category and the 5 senior devotees. Where the territorial definitions precisely align with existing continental or national councils (North America, Europe, Latin America, India and China), those bodies will elect one SABHA member each. The non-GBC members of the SGGS will also elect one SABHA member from each of the remaining five territories. The Vaisnavi Ministry will be the electing body for the Vaisnavis and the Youth Ministry will be the elective body for the youths.

(b) The following guidelines apply to the procedure for nominations and elections by the (non-GBC) SGGS members. The Vaisnavi Ministry, the Youth Ministry and the above continental

[8] Breaching confidentiality constitutes sufficient grounds for immediate removal from the SABHA.
[9] Defined as the basic ability to operate email and navigate the web or possessing regular assistance enabling them to do so.
10 Ability to understand the written and spoken words; ability to communicate in written and spoken form. A minimum of level 2 in the ILR scale (see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ILR_scale)

and national councils shall follow procedures of their own choice to elect their quotas of SABHA members.

(c) Sannyasis and gurus (if not already serving as GBCs) can volunteer and nominate themselves or nominate others for membership in the SABHA.

(d) Although only (non-GBC) sannyasis and gurus can nominate candidates, everyone else is free to contact one of them to volunteer to serve or to suggest other possible nominees.

(e) All nominations shall include a brief introduction and a photo of the candidate.

The following devotees are not eligible for nomination or election: GBC members, Global Duty Officers (GDOs), global ministers, chairs of existing GBC Committees and Offices.

(f) GBC Emeriti and ex-GBC members are eligible for being nominated and elected. Deputies are also eligible but acceptance of the position would require them to relinquish their Deputy service.

(g) All nominees shall be informed of the duties and responsibilities of elected members and must confirm their acceptance of such duties and responsibilities prior to the voting.

(h) Before an election takes place, there should be at least the minimum number of confirmed nominees to fill every category (i.e. at least 12 nominees who are sannyasis or gurus; 5 who are senior devotees; and 1 for each of the 5 areas).

(i) The same individual can be nominated for more than one category (e.g.: the same senior could be nominated as a senior or as an area representative; gurus and sannyasis could be nominated as gurus and sannyasis or as area representatives) but upon election it should be clarified in which category s/he has been elected.

(j) Upon election, the SABHA members shall take the standard ISKCON Oath of Allegiance, valid for the duration of their tenure.

(k) Elected members can only hold a single membership and a single vote; no one can fill more than one position or have more than one vote. This does not prevent members from representing the views and concerns of various categories or constituencies (e.g.: a sannyasi may simultaneously represent the interests of his asrama, of ISKCON educators, of Latin America, of emerging leaders, etc.).

(l) To be elected, the nominee needs to receive the majority of the cast votes.[11]

(m) When a category (e.g.: 'senior devotees') or sub-category (e.g.: area representative for Europe) has more nominees than the prescribed number of members, then, a nominee needs to receive both a simple majority of the valid cast votes and enough votes to be among those elected. For instance, if the senior category, which is allocated 5 representatives, has 6 nominations and a total of 60 valid votes are cast, such that the 6 candidates receive 50, 45, 42, 40, 38 and 35 votes respectively, only the 5 candidates that received 50, 45, 42, 40 and 38 votes are elected. (Although the nominee who received 35 votes also received a majority, he or she is not elected).[12]

(n) Voting to elect members shall take place primarily online.[13] Votes received after the specified deadline shall not be considered valid and will not be counted.

(o) If two or more candidates receive the majority of the cast votes but are tied in the number of votes, and not all of them can be elected due to the quota of the category, then a run-off election will be held to determine which candidate or candidates will be elected.[14]

(p) In case an election does not immediately elect all thirty-five (35) members,[15] a minimum of twenty-five (25) regularly elected members will be sufficient for the SABHA to start legitimately functioning, while simultaneously work to fill the vacant seats. Should the number of active members fall under twenty-five (25) at any time, an election for filling the vacant seats shall take place.

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[11] "Majority" means more than half of the valid votes cast; it doesn't mean more than half of the number of eligible voters. In other words, if, say, 100 sannyasis and gurus are eligible to vote but, say, only 40 cast their vote, 21 votes in favor constitute the majority and the candidate can be duly elected. Voters have the right to abstain. Abstentions are not valid votes; abstentions are counted and noted, but not as valid votes. there is no minimum number members required to vote for the vote to be valid (no quorum).

[12] Voters can vote for as many candidates they approve of; they don't have to limit themselves to the number of allocated members for each category. For instance, the 'senior devotees' category is permitted 5 members; if there are 8 candidates, voters can choose to vote for 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 or 8 of them – or for none of them.

[13] At the indicated site or by email, within a specified deadline. In case the SGGS wishes to vote while in session, those not attending in person shall be permitted to cast their votes online.

[14] For instance, if in the youth category (3 members) if only three candidates receive a simple majority of the cast vote, they will all be elected even if there is a tie. But if, for example, there are 4 candidates receive a simple majority and the same number of votes, a run-off is necessary to determine the 3 that get elected.

[15] Because not enough candidates receive a simple majority, or because one or more run-offs being needed, or because of other reasons.

(q) Elected members shall receive an onboarding package including essential information and orientation materials.

8. TENURE

(a) Elected members shall serve for four (4) years, provided they continue to fulfill both prerequisites and responsibilities of the service.[16]

(b) SABHA members can be elected for a maximum of two (2) consecutive terms, but can be re-elected after the gap.

9. CHAIR

(a) The members of the SABHA shall elect a Chair by a majority vote of all its voting members.[17]

(b) The Chair's tenure shall be two (2) years, renewable indefinitely.

(c) The Chair's responsibilities shall include, but not be limited to, convening the meetings, creating (or approving) the agenda, chairing the meetings (or identifying facilitators), managing the voting, supervising the expenditures of the SABHA, overseeing the election of members, etc.

(d) The Chair shall ensure effective communication and strive for harmonious working relations – both within the SABHA and between the SABHA and the GBC.

(e) The SABHA may decide to establish further aspects of its governance and administration – such as adding officers and other formal functions.

10. FUNDING

[16] Individuals might be elected as representatives of different categories at different times (e.g.: a man elected as 'senior devotee' might eventually take sannyasa and later be elected in the category of 'sannyasis and gurus').

[17] If the SABHA has 35 members, to elect the Chair would require at least 18 valid votes.

(a) As the GBC wishes the SABHA to function effectively, although it is envisioned that in the future the SABHA will make its own arrangements, for the first three (3) years of operations, the GBC will grant US$12,000.00 from its yearly budget to the SABHA.

(b) Accounts shall be submitted on a yearly basis to the GBC treasurer.

11. REVIEW OF THE SYSTEM

The GBC shall, at any time in the future, at its discretion, review and amend the SABHA's structure and functioning, in consultation with the SGGS and the SABHA, to increase the SABHA's effectiveness.

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