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Responding to Various Critiques of Indradyumna Swami

Indradyumna Swami Maharaja (IDS) is a popular leader in the Hare Krishna movement, and thus along with considerable appreciation, he also attracts some criticism. Recently, following the emergence of revelations about Anirdesya Vapu Das (AVD), IDS provided a statement apologizing for having supported and endorsed AVD in the past. Since the release of that letter, several accusations/critiques have been leveled against IDS, particularly concerning his previous closeness with AVD, and concerning IDS's own character and dealings with children. Some, who have been inspired by IDS's dedicated preaching, kindness, and character have become disturbed by said accusations, and what follows will an attempt to unpack and explore the major concerns (along with any evidence), in a manner that is fair and respectful to all parties, and to draw some reasonable conclusions.

This note will likely prove most useful for devotees that are favorable to IDS and have some concerns they would like to intelligently work through. For those that have already rejected IDS, or judged him as being unqualified, this note may be of less perceived value. Perhaps though, what follows will at least help to weed out some of the less tenable accusations and critiques.

To start, in 2022, complaints were lodged against AVD and after the ensuing investigation was completed ISKCON's International Child Protection Office (CPO) published an Official Decision (in October, 2022), that found AVD guilty of sexual abuse. Decades prior to this recent and shocking revelation, AVD had also been found guilty of having used excessive corporal punishment on his students in the 1980s (including severe caning), when he was in charge of a boys' school in Mayapur.

At that time, in 1991, it was also reported that for years AVD had known about, but done little to nothing to stop the rampant sexual abuse that had occurred in the boys' school during the 80s and into the beginning of the 90s. This accusation was somewhat less certain though, as AVD has testified that he was unaware of sexual abuse having occurred in his school, prior to it being investigated in 1991.

1. Over the years, until recently, IDS had been friendly with and had expressed appreciation for AVD. For some, this association with AVD casts doubt on IDS's character, as AVD had admitted to using excessive corporal punishment and had been accused of knowing about and ignoring the horrible sexual abuse that went on unabated for years in his school.

It seems reasonable that some devotees were disturbed by IDS's friendliness towards AVD, even more so for those devotees (and/or their loved ones), who had received physical punishment from AVD, and/or suffered sexual abuse while in the school that was under his supervision. It is important to note though that many of the boys who had graduated from the school (now grown-up men), were seen continuing to hold AVD in high regard, and even serving with him. As such, it is at least not totally inappropriate for IDS to have viewed AVD's usage of corporal punishment as something in the past, and as somewhat forgivable.

Also very significant is that IDS has stated, when questioned, that he (like many ISKCON devotees and leaders) had previously accepted AVD's testimony that AVD had been unaware of the sexual abuse that had gone on in his school prior to it having been investigated in 1991. IDS has also stated when asked that he, not ever having been a GBC member, had not received or read any reports about the case, and had just accepted that whatever restrictions the CPO had placed on AVD in 2000 were sufficient, given that the CPO devotees were the experts entrusted to adjudicate such matters. IDS has said that, in retrospect, he now realizes that the corporal punishment AVD committed was far worse than what he had previously understood, and he also acknowledges that the CPO restrictions initially placed on AVD had been too light. Finally, IDS recognizes his responsibility to be better informed about child protection issues.

2. In addition to the corporal punishment, it was recently revealed that AVD had sexually abused an adult woman (one of IDS's disciples), and that he had also sexually abused an underaged girl. In the wake of this news, IDS has received additional criticism for not having known about this abuse, or alternatively, for having known about it but not having stopped it. In this regard, IDS has stated unequivocally that he had no idea until just some months ago (in 2022), that AVD had ever committed sexual abuse.

Devotees and leaders from all over the world were also unaware of the sexual abuse perpetrated by AVD, and even devotees that lived and served alongside AVD in Mayapur year-round were unaware of these crimes. Even the husband of one of the two primary victims did not find out about his own wife's abuse until just recently (after having served AVD closely in Mayapur for the last fifteen years). Like almost all sexual

abuse, AVD's crimes had occurred in secret and the victims were traumatized, so opening up about the abuse had been very difficult for them.

Given all of this, it does not seem well-reasoned to single out IDS (who visits Mayapur infrequently, and only for relatively short periods of time), and charge that he must have, or should have, been aware of the sexual abuse. Of course, once IDS found out about AVD's nefarious activities, he immediately stopped endorsing and associating with AVD.

3. There is also an accusation that, about a decade ago, IDS initiated at least one disciple on behalf of AVD. This would have occurred after AVD had been restricted from giving initiation, due to the excessive corporal punishment he had inflicted on students throughout the 80s. If IDS had given initiation to a devotee on AVD's behalf, although this does not seem to be the case, it is unclear whether this would have constituted any breach of ISKCON's resolution against AVD himself initiating.

In any event, the initiate in question came forward recently and stated publicly that IDS did not initiate him on behalf of AVD, despite a few devotees having claimed that the initiate had told them previously that AVD was his real guru, and that IDS was only a proxy. A number of other devotees have countered these proxy initiation claims though, and stated that the initiate in question was always, and currently is, IDS's disciple. Importantly, when asked, IDS has said that the initiate has always been and continues to be his disciple.

Looking at the video of the initiation, AVD can be seen performing the fire sacrifice and lecturing (although this was a standard role for him to play, when ceremonies occurred at the school). It is notable though that AVD did not give the initiate his new name, nor did AVD give the initiate his beads, nor did AVD give any instructions to the initiate, nor did the initiate even offer AVD obeisances during the ceremony. IDS was seen interacting with the initiate in all these critical ways though. Given all of the above, and given that there does not seem to be any particular reason for IDS to lie about a proxy initiation (especially, when considering that he had already acknowledged his mistaken endorsement of AVD), it seems the claims of a proxy initiation are inaccurate.

4. In addition to the above, for a number of years, there were allegations that students at a girls' school in Mayapur were being emotionally and psychologically abused by their female principal (both the principal, and a number of the affected students were IDS'sdisciples). These allegations resulted in at least two CPO investigations, with the first investigation (in 2007) not recommending for the school to be closed, nor for the principal to be removed. A second CPO investigation (in 2015) did result in the

principal being permanently restricted from teaching or caring for children though, and the school consequently shut down.

Although IDS was never a CPO or GBC member, he received criticism for not having done more to stop the emotional and psychologically abusive behavior at the school, as some of his disciples and followers had (in addition to lodging complaints with the CPO), also complained to him about the girls' school situation over the years. Having received various complaints, IDS did follow up by discussing the allegations with the principal and other school managers on several occasions (and he also spoke with students and their parents).

Unfortunately though, IDS was led to believe (by the principal, by parents and students supporting the principal, and by the CPO) that the complaints against the principal had been exaggerated, and that any problems at the school were minimal, and/or had been resolved. As a result, IDS continued supporting the school and its authorities, and he encouraged others to do the same. In this regard, it is critical to note that the CPO had officially investigated the school in 2007, and concluded that there was no need to reorganize the management structure of the school or change its principal. The CPO even went as far as to state that the girls in the school were happy and well adjusted.

IDS now realizes that a serious mistake was made, and he has expressed remorse about having failed the students by misjudging the situation. Considering this, it seems reasonable that one might lose some faith in IDS's (and the CPO's) judgment, especially any students that suffered abuse at the girls' school and/or their loved ones.

That said, losing faith does not seem to be the only reasonable reaction to the above. Senior devotees are not omniscient, and thus may mistakenly side with the wrong party on a given issue (in this case, with the school authorities and the CPO). Moreover, IDS was not residing in Mayapur and was therefore dependent on the reports of others, which notably misled even the CPO for close to a decade, until 2015.

Given all of the above, a number of discerning devotees (who were residing in Mayapur during this time and/or who are aware of the whole situation), have been able to reasonably reconcile IDS's mistake with their understanding that he is an advanced and committed devotee; one who nonetheless made a serious (albeit understandable and forgivable) misjudgment.

Finally, it is worth noting that the emotional and psychologically abusive behavior at the girls' school, and the investigation into it, is connected to (and complicated by), the

sexual abuse perpetrated by AVD on the school's principal and on one of the school's students. Both through that sexual abuse, and alongside it, AVD created a pervasive culture of secrecy, which made it difficult for even the CPO to ascertain what was actually happening. Thus, AVD's sexual abuse remained unearthed through multiple CPO investigations (until 2022), when the victims bravely came forward.

5. In addition to the above, some have accused IDS of showing too much attention to children, and have argued that it is not befitting a sannyasi, sets a bad example etc. In response to such a critique, it is worthwhile to examine Srila Prabhupada's own interactions with children, as he is ISKCON's Founder-Acarya and an ideal sannyasi.

Others have even gone so far as to accuse IDS of something far more sinister, namely, grooming children for abuse. In response, it bears mentioning, at the outset, that in IDS's more than 52 years of devotional service, there have never been any complaints of his ever having either sexually or physically abused anyone, what to speak of having abused a child. Thus, any allegations of grooming, even if made sincerely, are conclusively disproven by IDS's record over the last fifty plus years. It is important to note that (unlike many senior devotees), IDS always lives with and is in the constant company of adult devotees, and that he further has an open-door policy: He does not isolate himself with women or children, and thus any displays of affection are made in public and do not ever lead to interactions in private.

Furthermore, any physical touch that occurs is "good touch," and well within the comfort zone of the parents (and again, made in the presence of others). It is noteworthy that organizations, such as the US National Association for the Education of Young Children, state in their official position statement on the prevention of child abuse "No-touch policies are misguided efforts that fail to recognize the importance of touch to children's healthy development." IDS himself has also clarified on many occasions that his only motivation in engaging with children is to help create positive Krsna Conscious experiences for them. It is further noteworthy that as girls reach adulthood, IDS adjusts his interactions with them, so that any displays of affection continue to remain age-appropriate.

Additionally, IDS has received criticism for giving gifts (including jewelry) to children. In response to this allegation, it is noteworthy that IDS's generosity towards all devotees, and even towards the general public, is quite well known. He spends money on and has given gifts to many, many devotees (adults and children, men and women, boys and girls, and even non-devotees). That said, IDS does not have a personal bank account and any funds he receives go toward outreach activities, particularly in Poland where he has funded 200+ devotees traveling and putting on festival programs each summer for the past 30 years. IDS sometimes also receives gifts of jewelry for his

Deities, and occasionally gives gifts, to friends and followers, of jewelry taken from his altar and offered to devotees as prasadam.

For some, IDS's generosity is difficult to fathom, because it does not lead to exploitation (or even expectation) but stands on its own without asking for much (if anything) in return. Inspiring the recipient seems to be its primary and/or sole purpose. Sometimes though, unfortunately, a type of sibling rivalry occurs amongst IDS's followers (based on who is perceived to have gotten more attention, or who received a valuable gift). Such things can be common within families, including spiritual ones, and IDS's has not been immune to it.

Given this, IDS's generosity may have contributed to the fomenting of sentiments like jealousy and/or resentment etc. amongst his followers. Generally, such sentiments have resolved themselves in due course of time, as devotees mature. Occasionally though, they have become a source of ongoing tension and discord amongst god-brothers and god-sisters, or even between IDS and a given disciple. IDS may bear some responsibility in this regard, and it's not necessarily wrong to fault him for his part. That said, in order to reach a fair conclusion, any negative impacts of IDS's generosity would need to be measured up against the good will and inspiration that it has generated for thousands of devotees and their children, over many decades.

6. Finally, some have criticized IDS's recent apology letter for including explanations alongside the contrition, instead of being entirely unconditional. Such critiques are common enough amongst apology receivers, but they often ignore that some recipients of apologies actually want to know: what happened, what went wrong, and what (for better or worse) the person making the apology was thinking at the time. Answering such questions can help preserve love and trust, and not doing so can be a disservice that leaves friends and followers unnecessarily confused. Also, it is noteworthy that this explanatory aspect of a full apology is seen to occur in our sacred texts, in the apologies made by great personalities, who thereby set an example for thoughtful devotees to follow in both making and receiving apologies.

There will always be some that criticize whatever is written, and there will also always be individuals that make accusations going far, far beyond what has actually occurred. Given all the details that have been surveyed above though, IDS's apology can be seen for what it was, namely, a sincere statement from a senior devotee of excellent character; one that nonetheless made some misjudgments that he has acknowledged and apologized for.