

## Can a liberated soul make false statements?

Part I of a response to *The Sunīti Pramāṇa and Set Theory*

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In the paper [The Sunīti Pramāṇa and Set Theory](#), the authors apply formal logic to Śrīla Prabhupāda’s statement in *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 4.12.32 in order to prove that it does not indicate that women are generally disallowed from becoming *dīkṣā-guru*. However, their application of logic depends on three erroneous maneuvers: 1) accepting the possibilities of falsity or intentional ambiguity within that statement; 2) the unnecessary use of *lakṣaṇā-vṛtti* (indirect meaning) instead of the statement’s *mukhya-vṛtti* (direct meaning); and 3) oversimplification of the statement’s grammar to support a naïve, inadequate model of Śrīla Prabhupāda’s intent.

Before addressing the authors’ errors of interpretation, I would like to briefly state what the correct understanding of Śrīla Prabhupāda’s text is and why it should be read this way.

Under consideration is this statement of Śrīla Prabhupāda’s:

“Sunīti, however, being a woman, and specifically his mother, could not become Dhruva Mahārāja’s *dīkṣā-guru*.”

By its direct meaning (*mukhya-vṛtti*), the reasons for Sunīti’s disqualification are to be read as a list of two items, each of which are sufficient to disqualify her. For example, in one airline’s listing of items not allowed in checked-in baggage, among other things, it is written, “Compressed gases - deeply refrigerated, flammable, non-flammable and poisonous such as butane oxygen, liquid nitrogen, aqualung cylinders and compressed gas cylinders.”<sup>1</sup> Each of the items mentioned is prohibited, and the words *woman* and *mother* in Śrīla Prabhupāda’s sentence should be read the same way. Because no additional inferences about the text are required to understand the reasons for disqualification, this is its direct meaning; its meaning is self-evident.

In disputing the text’s direct meaning, however, the authors of the *Set Theory* paper depend on one or more indirect meanings (*lakṣaṇā-vṛtti*), which require additional assumptions not required by its direct meaning. And in order to justify these additional assumptions, they end up committing the above-mentioned errors: asserting the possibility of Śrīla Prabhupāda making false or untrue statements, choosing an indirect meaning of his statement over its direct meaning when the direct meaning makes sense, and oversimplification of the text’s grammar to make way for indirect meanings.

Each of the first three parts of this response deal with each of these errors, and a fourth part will deal with specific misquotes and specious allegations the authors make against my own self. This part specifically deals with the first of the authors’ three fundamental errors: alleging the possibility of falsity within Śrīla Prabhupāda’s statement.

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<sup>1</sup> Indigo, “Things not allowed in flight,” Indigo Airlines, 1 Mar. 2021 <<https://www.goindigo.in/baggage/dangerous-goods-policy.html>>.

## Part I

In the course of their argument, the authors of the *Set Theory* paper classify Śrīla Prabhupāda’s statement as a “logical truth,” which they define as “true regardless of the truth or falsity of its constituent propositions” (page 6 in their paper). And their conclusion depends on at least one of the constituent parts of Śrīla Prabhupāda’s statement possibly (but not necessarily) being false.

They say that it is possible that Sunīti could not become her son Dhruva’s *dīkṣā-guru* because,

- she was his mother and **not because she was a woman**, or
- she was a woman and **not because she was a mother**.

And they entertain the possibility that one of the reasons (*woman* or *mother*) given in Śrīla Prabhupāda’s statement may be false (without us knowing which one, hence the ambiguity) while his statement overall (that Sunīti could not become her son Dhruva’s *dīkṣā-guru*) remains true.

They say,

However, case 2 (highlighted in the truth table) proves that, in the strict logical sense, Sunīti being a woman and still initiating Dhruva is not ruled out by SP in case Sunīti happens to be either not Dhruva’s mother or a mother in general. In other words, it does not necessarily follow from SP that no women can be *dīkṣā-gurus*. [page 10]

So, their entire argument is dependent on Śrīla Prabhupāda’s statement being defined as a “logical truth,” which allows for the possibility of one of its constituent statements being false. (What they mean here by “false” is merely that a particular condition is unfulfilled.) And on account of the possibility of partial falsity, the authors say “the exact nature” of the reason for Sunīti’s ineligibility “is ambiguous”:

However, even assuming that the statement “Sunīti, however, being a woman, and specifically his mother” is the antecedent, and her inability to become Dhruva’s *dīkṣā-guru* is the consequent, the exact nature of this assumed implication is ambiguous, starting with the antecedent’s own structure: Is this both her gender and her motherhood that disqualified her from being Dhruva’s *dīkṣā-guru*, or just one of them? [page 6]

Yet even if we accept the authors’ expansion of the meaning of the word *mother* to mean the seven mothers (*ātma-mātā guru-patni brāhmaṇī rāja-patnikā . . .*), Śrīla Prabhupāda nonetheless applies the disqualifying categories of *woman* and *mother* to the specific case of Sunīti. That means that in order to support the claim that his statement is ambiguous with regard to the specific reasons for Sunīti’s own ineligibility to become her son Dhruva’s *dīkṣā-guru*, we would have to necessarily accept that some part of Śrīla Prabhupāda’s own statement about Sunīti could be false. But can a liberated soul make a false statement—even a partially false one?

Whatever Śrīla Prabhupāda’s says, it is not merely a disembodied string of words that can be evaluated true or false. It is an attempt by him to communicate something to us. That means the ambiguity would have to be accepted as intentionally communicated or communicated in error. And if the reason for the ambiguity is that some part of his statement could be false—regardless of us being unable to understand which part—then that would mean some part of what he is saying to us could either be intentionally false or communicated in error.

The authors, it should be noted, do not give any reason as to why one of Śrīla Prabhupāda’s statements or parts of his statement could be false; without giving any explanation they just assume that it is possible. But even if they had accounted for the possibility, it would have to be on account one of the four attributes of a conditioned soul—mistakes, illusion, cheating, and imperfect senses. And if in a complex statement some part of what Śrīla Prabhupāda says could be false, as the authors allege, then why couldn’t his simple statements in their entirety made elsewhere by him also be false? The authors also do not address this.

Of course, in the latter half of the *Set Theory* paper the authors do make several strong claims, based on *śāstra* and statements of *ācāryas*, that Śrīla Prabhupāda is a liberated soul and therefore free from defect. But they never reconcile these evidences with the assumption of the possibility of Śrīla Prabhupāda making false statements, which the application of set theory in the first half of their paper depends on. Therefore, in spite of the authors’ quoting *śāstra* and *ācāryas* to the contrary, their thesis nonetheless depends on the assumption that Śrīla Prabhupāda makes false statements. Certainly, a very substantial part of their argument depends on it. This is a fundamental defect in the argument put forward by the authors of the *Set Theory* paper.

If, as the authors assume, Śrīla Prabhupāda were communicating false statements either in whole or in part, here are some of the implications:

- *Īśvarāṇām vacaḥ satyaṁ* (SB 10.33.31), “The statements of the Lord’s empowered servants are always true. . .” So, he would not be the Lord’s empowered servant.
- *Ārṣa-vijñā-vākye nāhi doṣa ei saba* (CC Adi 2.86), his words would then be subject to the four defects of a conditioned soul.
- Not all the “words emanating from his lotus mouth” would be purifying, etc.
- His life work, his books, even ISKCON itself, would be considered worthless.

But we know that none of this could be true.

However, if one nonetheless claims that some statement of Śrīla Prabhupāda’s is inherently ambiguous because one or more of the parts of his statement could be false, then one necessarily makes the allegation that Śrīla Prabhupāda is also communicating false statements. That alleges he is a conditioned soul, that he is not perfect, not a pure Vaiṣṇava, etc. But this cannot be accepted, because as a liberated soul, Śrīla Prabhupāda is free from defects.

Being a liberated soul is a property that also acts as *a constraint* on what can be understood from the statements made by a liberated soul. A constraint disallows one from doing something one would ordinarily be allowed to do, just like women are not to be punished for some offenses that are punishable for men. Being a woman is a constraint that exempts them from certain kinds of punishments. Similarly, we are constrained from interpreting statements of liberated beings as being defective—in whole or in part.

In the topic under discussion—Sunīti’s eligibility to become Dhruva’s *dīkṣā-guru*—we would be constrained from asserting that some part of Śrīla Prabhupāda’s statement about her is false. We would have to take Śrīla Prabhupāda’s statement for each part as being true. This means we would have to accept that being a woman is a disqualification and that being Dhruva Mahārāja’s mother is also a

disqualification. Both are necessarily true, due to the constraint that the utterance is from a liberated soul.

This brings us to considering the unedited version of Śrīla Prabhupāda’s statement in the *Bhāgavatam*, which the authors quote in their paper:

Sunīti, however, being in family relationship with Dhruva, his mother, and also woman, could not become the *dīkṣā-guru* of Dhruva Maharaja. [page 6]

The phrase *family relationship with Dhruva* can only refer to being *Dhruva’s mother* because the antecedent, Sunīti, is known. No other family relationship is being considered. Therefore, as in the current version of this statement, *his mother* is non-restrictive and parenthetical, so it is not distinct from the preceding phrase, *family relationship with Dhruva*. The notion that Śrīla Prabhupāda was also speaking about someone named “Sunīti” who could be someone else’s mother but not Dhruva’s is therefore rejected, as is the idea that Śrīla Prabhupāda was also talking of non-female “mothers” like Lord Kṛṣṇa.

So, there are two categories here, and both would necessarily be true, because to allege that one of them may not be true would render Śrīla Prabhupāda’s own statements as unauthoritative. Doing so would be alleging that he is making an untrue statement—even if partly so. This is not allowed because of the constraint imposed by the property of Śrīla Prabhupāda’s status as a liberated soul.

This means that the authors’ assertion that Śrīla Prabhupāda’s statement about Sunīti is “more appropriately classified as a logical truth, which ‘is true regardless of the truth or falsity of its constituent propositions’” is rejected. And since their conclusion depends on Śrīla Prabhupāda’s statement both being a logical truth and also on one of the constituent statements potentially being false, their entire argument collapses, and their conclusion is unreachable by the means they have adopted.

The authors’ argument leads us away from the commonsense reading of Śrīla Prabhupāda’s statement, in which it is understood that *woman* and *mother* each is a sufficient ground for disqualification. Just as no one reads a list of items prohibited on a flight as a “logical truth,” as defined by the authors, in which one of the items listed may not necessarily be prohibited and therefore permitted to bring on a flight, no one should read Śrīla Prabhupāda’s statement as being partly untrue.

But the authors reject this direct meaning for a *lakṣaṇā-vṛtti*, an indirect meaning, in order to support their conclusion. That is, their method of interpreting Śrīla Prabhupāda’s statement is chosen *because* it allows their conclusion. The direct meaning would not allow it.

Their reasons for choosing an indirect interpretation of Śrīla Prabhupāda’s statement over its direct, uninterpreted meaning will be dealt with in the next part.