

AWARDING SASTRA DEGREES

Version 4 – September 2010

ISKCON BOARD OF EXAMINATIONS

Srila Prabhupada desired that ISKCON award sastra degrees:

I am suggesting the following examinations: Bhaktishastri (for all brahmins) based on Bhagavad-gita, Sri Isopanisad, Nectar of Devotion, Nectar of Instruction, and all the small paperbacks. Bhaktibhaibhava—the above plus first six cantos of the Srimad Bhagavatam. Bhaktivedanta—the above plus cantos 7-12 of the Srimad Bhagavatam. Bhaktisarvabhauma—the above plus Caitanya Caritamrta. These titles can correspond to entrance, B.A., M.A., Ph.D. (Letter dated January 27, 1976)

In 1990 the GBC body empowered a Board of Examinations (BOEX) to conclude upon and institute a system for awarding ISKCON sastra degrees:

1990-12. That a standing committee, called the ISKCON Board of Examinations shall be formed. This committee shall have power to review and approve proposed examinations for the awarding of the degrees Bhakti Sastri, Bhakti Vaibhava, Bhakti Vedanta, and Bhakti Sarvabhauma. The basis for review and approval shall be the guidelines given by Srila Prabhupada for the awarding of these degrees. No ISKCON center may award these degrees without seeking the approval of the ISKCON Board of Examinations.

This Board of Examinations (BOEX) now functions under the supervision of the ISKCON Ministry for Educational Development.

Examination Centers

Any ISKCON temple or other ISKCON institution may apply to become an Approved Bhakti Sastri Degree Center. Such centers may then conduct programs according to the guidelines. The names of successful candidates are then forwarded to the Secretary of the BOEX, who supplies the certificates. Centers may also issue their own certificates, but only in conjunction with the certificates from the BOEX.

The BOEX does not require the implementation of any particular system of instruction, so local Examination centers are free to choose any curriculum system they find effective. Instructional systems are available from many sources. Local centers may choose to require participation in a set course of instruction, or they may choose to allow anyone to sit for the exams, regardless of coursework. The Board of Examinations only concerns itself with the system of assessment. More on this below.

To become an Approved Bhakti Sastri Degree Center, an ISKCON temple or other ISKCON institution should:

1. Apply for authorization as per BOEX policies.
2. Obtain authorization from the BOEX to conduct assessments. Centers can choose whether to use either the summative or formative assessment system:
 - a) Summative Assessment System: This involves administering an examination constructed according to the guidelines of the Examination Board. The BOEX supplies a suitable examination each year, or a local center can prepare its own examination as per the guidelines and have it approved by the BOEX in advance.
 - b) Formative Assessment System: This involves administering an integrated program of instruction and assessment.

Individual centers shall have their own admission policies and procedures for admitting a candidate for the Bhakti Sastri degree. Such policies shall require, at a minimum, that all candidates meet the following requirements:

1. The candidate must certify that s/he chants 16 rounds of japa daily and follows the four regulative principles.
2. The candidate must have been recommended by an ISKCON authority who knows the candidate well, certifying that the candidate is engaged favourably in the preaching mission of Lord Caitanya Mahaprabhu for at least the previous twelve months.

The Centers, after completion of the assessment process and announcement of the results, notify the BOEX Secretary, and the necessary certificates are printed, signed by a BOEX official, and then supplied to the local program administrator for second signature and issue to the successful candidates. Centers are required to pay a fee of US \$1 per successful candidate.

Summative Assessment System

General Guidelines for the examination:

1. All questions must be clear and unambiguous.
2. Examination Centers must change their examinations each year. The same examination may not be used twice in the same location.
3. The Bhakti Sastri Examination will consist of a minimum of the following: 60 short answer questions, 8 essay questions, and knowledge of the Sanskrit transliteration and English meaning of 15 Sanskrit verses. Individual Examination Centers may add further questions, if so desired.
4. Examinations should be completed within one day, in two three-hour sessions. Short answer questions should be answered in the first three-hour session. The second three-hour session can be split according to the discretion of the Examination Center.
5. The Bhakti Sastri examination shall only require knowledge of the first nineteen chapters of the Nectar of Devotion.

Short Answer Questions:

6. An individual should be able to write his/her answer to a short answer question within 1-2 minutes. This means an answer should not require more than three sentences.
7. The 60 short answer questions should be broken up as follows: 40 on the Bhagavad-gita As It is, 10 on the Nectar of Devotion, 5 on the Nectar of Instruction, and 5 on Sri Isopanisad.
8. Short answer questions should cover, in a balanced fashion, all sections of the required books.
9. Short answer questions should be balanced between essential facts, key concepts, and analogies.

Essential Facts: Sastra inform us of essential facts, such as those related to the Lord's activities, the activities of His devotees, the organization of the universe, the different yoga systems, the structure of Vedic society, qualifications for an individual to become spiritually advanced, etc. Devotees should know these essential facts.

Key Concepts: Devotees should know the philosophical concepts which form the basis of Krishna consciousness, such as the transcendental nature of the soul, the law of karma, the influence of the modes of nature, the process and development of bhakti, the purpose of creation, the qualities and opulences of the Supreme Lord, etc.

Analogies: Srila Prabhupada and our great acaryas have taught via analogies, which help us understand new concepts indirectly. We should know and be able to explain these analogies. Some examples are the analogy of the man lost in the middle of the ocean, of the sun rising on the horizon, of the mailbox, of the eggs of the scorpion, of the green bird in the green tree, etc.

Essay Questions:

10. Five essay questions should test a candidate's deeper understanding and practical application of the philosophy. Candidates will be required to answer five of the nine questions. Three of the essay questions should be on the Bhagavad-gita As It is.
11. An individual should be able to write his/her answer to each essay question within 20-25 minutes. This means an essay question should not require an answer of more than 150 words.

Required Verses:

12. Centers should require candidates to learn 45 verses. Of these, the BOEX will choose 30 standard verses and the individual center will choose an additional 15. Of the required 45 verses, only 15 will be selected for testing on the Bhakti Sastri Examination. Of these 15, 10 will be from the list provided by the BOEX and 5 will be chosen by the local center.

13. Candidates will be required to write the transliterated Sanskrit of all required verses. Correct use of diacritic marks is not mandatory. Candidates shall also be required to write a translation that contains each main concept of the verse. An exact, literal, "book translation" is not required.

Grading of Exams:

14. Bhakti Sastri program administrators shall appoint qualified graders to grade the completed exams. Exam graders must be twice initiated, chanting 16 rounds per day, following the four rules, must hold a Bhakti Sastri degree, and must be known and trusted by the members of the community where the exams are to be administered. The previously existing system for approval of newly appointed graders has been discontinued as of March 2009. The requirement for holding a Bhakti Sastri degree does not apply to those who were approved as Bhakti Sastri exam graders under the pre-March 2009 system. New centers without experienced graders available should consult with the BOEX before appointing a new grader.
15. The BOEX reserves the right to call for a review of the graded answer papers in order to ensure uniformity in issuance of degrees across the whole society.
16. The previous system of awarding degrees with honors and high honors designations has been discontinued. There will not be any gradation within the Bhakti Sastri award. Local centers may issue their own certificates designating honors and high honors if they so desire, but these will not be reflected on the certificates from the BOEX.

Program Administration Policies

1. Examinees must not refer to books or notes during the Bhakti Sastri examination.
2. Examinees must hand in all question papers along with their answers. Old question papers may be retained under lock and key for reference by Examination Center staff only.
3. Cheating in any form must be dealt with as per BOEX policies.
4. All rules must be explained to the examinees before the examination commences.
5. Examination centers must not allow old exam question papers or graded answer papers to circulate.
6. Examination centers must retain completed answer papers with grading information for three years from the date of announcement of the results.
7. The BOEX reserves the right to revoke the status of an examination center if these guidelines are not strictly followed.

Formative Assessment System

Learning Outcomes to be Assessed:

- a. Knowledge and memorization of at least 45 verses found in the four Bhakti Sastri books.
- b. Knowledge, understanding and application of the philosophy contained in the four Bhakti Sastri books: Bhagavad gita, Nectar of Devotion, Nectar of Instruction and Sri Isopanisad.
- c. Personal behavior that reflects the principles and values found in the four Bhakti Sastri books.

Course Assessment:

In order to ensure a basic minimum standard and at the same time allow a degree of flexibility, approved centres may establish their own assessment policies within the following boundaries:

- a. 50-65% for open book questions assessing student's depth of understanding, application and values in respect to the themes and content of the four Bhakti Sastri books. Required answers shall either be in the form of essays or else compositions of at least several paragraphs each. The sum of the minimum required words for the answers should be at least 7,500.
- b. 30-40% for closed book tests requiring:
 - The answering of at least seventy-five short-answer questions, 45 on Bhagavad gita, 15 on Nectar of Devotion, 7 on Nectar of Instruction, and 7 on Sri Isopanisad.
 - Being able to recite from memory with proper pronunciation the original Sanskrit text and approximate English translation of at least 45 verses found in the four Bhakti Sastri books.

- c. 5-10% for personal Vaisnava behaviour, including at least 75% attendance at classes, punctuality, sadhana, extra-curricular service, co-operative mood, and ability to function as part of a team.
- d. The percentage marks required for passing grade will be at the discretion of the local center.

Program Administration Policies:

- a. Bhakti Sastri program administrators shall appoint a qualified lead instructor to oversee the assessment. The minimum qualification shall be successful completion of the Bhakti Sastri course and VTE courses Teacher Training Part 1, Teacher Training Part 2, and Bhakti Sastri Teacher Training, or equivalent courses as certified by the BOEX. Exceptions to this rule shall only be permitted by special resolution of the BOEX.
- b. The BOEX may assess each approved center's program to ascertain if the learning outcomes are being satisfactorily achieved. The Board retains the right to discontinue certification should it determine that the program has been significantly deficient.