AWARDING BHAKTI SASTRI DEGREES
Version 6.3 – April 2021

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. Bhaktisarvabhouma—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 of Education.

Examination Centers

Any ISKCON center or other ISKCON institution may apply to become an Approved Bhakti Sastri Degree Center. Such centers may then conduct programs according to these 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.

To become an Approved Bhakti Sastri Degree Center, an ISKCON center or other ISKCON institution should put in place a system of instruction that they find effective. Instructional systems are available from many sources. Then they 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 administrating 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. However, at the discretion of the Program Administrator, a candidate that cannot so certify may be admitted to the course under the following conditions:
   a. The candidate is strongly recommended by an ISKCON authority as per point 2 below and the Program Administrator considers that s/he can significantly benefit from being admitted to the course.
   b. If the candidate cannot certify that s/he has come to the required standard by the time of the completion of the course then s/he will not be issued a Bhakti Sastri certificate at that time. Instead, s/he can be given a course completion certificate and/or a mark sheet that explains that a Bhakti Sastri certificate may be issued later when the required standard is met.

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 mission of Lord Caitanya Mahaprabhu for at least the previous twelve months.
3. It is recommended that every applicant for admission into a Bhakti Sastri course be pre-qualified. Some of the questions for pre-qualifying the candidate could be:
    a. What is your understanding of Srila Prabhupada's mood and mission?
    b. What is your objective in taking the BS course?
    c. Please submit a list of Srila Prabhupada's books that you have read till now. (This shall be verified by a local administrator).
    d. Describe your previous study of Srila Prabhupada's books.
    e. What ISKCON seminars / courses have you taken / completed till date?
    f. Have you read Srila Prabhupada Lilamrita? What did you find most appealing in the Lilamrita?

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

Note: The Board of Exams has decided that in principle the summative system should be discontinued and all existing centers approved under the summative system shall make plans to switch to the formative system. Exceptions will be considered in limited circumstances. However, existing examination centers may apply to the Board for permission to administer a summative exam to a senior devotee who is unable to enroll in an approved course.

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, 9 essay questions, and knowledge of the Sanskrit transliteration and approximate meaning of 15 Sanskrit verses. Individual Examination Centers may add further questions, if so desired.
4. As a general rule, 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. However, in cases where classes are held only once or twice per week, then at the discretion of the local center the same exam may be broken up into a maximum of three parts and administered over different days with the same six-hour total time frame.
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. The 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. Local Examination Center policies may permit examinees to see, but not retain, their graded answer papers. 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 methodology 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. At least 50-60% of these open book questions should be higher order cognitive questions on the application of the philosophy. They should test personal integrity, evaluation skills, preaching application, and personal acceptance. No more than 20% of submitted answers can be cut and paste from elsewhere.

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 meaning of at least 45 verses found in the four Bhakti Sastri books.

c. 5-10% for personal Vaisnava behaviour, punctuality, sadhana, extra-curricular service, co-operative mood, and ability to function as part of a team.

d. The following shows the minimum requirement standard for being deemed as passing the course. Centers can set their minimum requirement for passing higher than this if they so desire:

Assessment Area	Minimum Passing Level	Remedy for Failure
Open book assessment	60% in each unit (see also Note 1 below)	Failed papers may be resubmitted
Closed book assessment	65% in each unit (")	The student can again sit for a (different) test. However, where student's scores are less than 50% or where the answers represent a serious lack of clarity in the subject matter, they should retake the classes and closed book assessments for the unit.
Sloka assessment	65% in each unit (")	The student may apply for a time extension of up to 18 months from the date of initial assessment for achieving a passing level, which may be granted at the discretion of the Lead Instructor.
Personal Behavior	Adequate	None
Attendance	75% for each unit (see also Note 2 below)	Retake the unit
Weighted aggregate	None specified (see also Note 3 below)	At discretion of center.

Note 1: The following are the "units" for Bhakti Sastri:
   Sri Isopanisad
   Nectar of Instruction

Nectar of Devotion

Bhagavad-gita broken into two or three units. Either chapters 1-9 and 10-18 or chapters 1-6, 7-12, and 13-18.

Note 2: This attendance requirement may be waived for senior devotees with the permission of the Board of Examinations.

Note 3: Weighted aggregate is not essential for pass/fail considerations under this scheme since minimum passing levels are given for each component. However, centers may have a required weighted aggregate level, either by unit or for the whole course, if they want. But even if weighted aggregate for the whole course is not used as part of the pass/fail determination of a candidate, it does give a useful indication of course performance in a single number. Thus it should be calculated and, at a minimum, provided to the candidate and to the BOEX for its permanent records of certificates issued.

Program Administration Policies:

a. Bhakti Sastri program administrators must take responsibility for the quality of instruction and must make sure that all standards are being met. They shall appoint a qualified Lead Instructor to oversee the assessment. The minimum qualification for a Lead Instructor is the successful completion, on site or online, of the Bhakti Sastri course and VTE courses Teacher Training Part 1 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. It is recommended that all teachers involved in the program have taken VTE Teacher Training Part 1 and that the Lead Instructor has taken VTE Teacher Training Part 2.

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.

c. Local Examination Center policies may permit examinees to see, but not retain, their graded closed book answer papers.

d. Centers that are conducting online courses should make sure that the existing formative standards are followed and do not get watered down in the process of making them available online, but otherwise they are given freedom to develop the courses as they see fit. However, centers that are conducting online courses are required to notify the Board of Examinations in the standard format.