

On Varnasrama Development

From: Suhotra Dasa Vanachari

Dear Lokanath Maharaja,

Please accept my humble obeisances. All glories to Srila Prabhupada. In response to your request that I participate in a panel discussion on varnasrama-dharma, I have to decline. The first reason is that the timings you indicate - 10 to 12 PM on the 22nd or 23rd - conflict with a seminar that I am giving at the gurukula. The second reason is that I have been sick with a fever, cough and sore throat, which makes it difficult for me to speak.

But I have looked over your list of questions. In response, I would like to offer you the following thoughts. While my thoughts are not point-by-point replies to your questions, they are in my humble opinion essential to any serious discussion on varnasrama. I offer these thoughts to you with the suggestion that perhaps your discussion group should reconsider its present emphasis on "how to" question, and consider more the "why" question. I can appreciate that your discussion group is anxious to get things moving in a practical direction, to "do something". But varnasrama-dharma means much more than just doing something. Lord Krsna speaks of varnasrama as a matter of guna as well as karma. In my understanding, a basic plan for varnasrama "karma" is already apparent in the material world. However, it is perverted. Why is it perverted? Because it is devoid of guna, or quality.

In daivi-varnasrama-dharma, the qualities (gunas) of the varnas are most uncommon. These gunas are daivi (divine). They are described by Narada Muni to Maharaja Yudhishthira in Srimad-Bhagavatam Canto 7 chapter 11. In verses 8-12, Narada lists "the general principles to be followed by all human beings" (i.e. all varnas). Prabhupada clearly states in the purport that these principles are for everyone, even Muslim, Christians and Buddhists. Amazingly, these are the basic qualities attributed in Bhagavad-gita to the brahmanas: satyam (truthfulness),

daya (mercy), tapah (austerity), saucam (cleanliness), titiksa (toleration), sama (control of the mind), dama (control of the senses), ahimsa (nonviolence), brahmacarya (celibacy), tyaga (giving up at least 50% of one's income), svadhyaya (study of the sastra), arjavam (simplicity), and so on. That daivi-varnasrama is predominated by the spiritual guna is what I think sets it apart from materialistic varnasrama-dharma. Then in verse 13, Narada describes the qualities of the dvijas (twice-born), which means the brahmanas, ksatriyas and vaisyas. He says these varnas follow the four asramas (brahmacari, grhastha, vanaprastha and sannyasa). Hence we can understand that sudras are those who do not graduate thorough all four asramas. After outlining the duties of each varna in verses 11-23, Narada again returns to their qualities (brahmana qualities are presented in verse 21, ksatriya in 22, vaisya in 23 and sudra in 24).

Finally, in verses 25-29, Narada speaks of the qualities and duties of a Vedic woman. You ask if women form a separate varna. I don't find Prabhupada ever saying they form a separate varna, but a guna and karma that is specific to them is prescribed by Narada in these verses. Apart from this specific guna-karma, the general qualities that signify daivi varnasrama apply to women as much as to all human beings.

There is a difference between ability and competency. In my understanding, a person's karma is his ability, but his karma plus hi guna adds up to his competency to perform a varna duty as prescribed in the sastra. In Bhagavad-gita, Lord Krsna speaks of sukrinas and duskrinas. Both have ability. But only the sukrinas are competent to execute the dharmic mission of human life. Just like any doctor certified by a medical school will have the ability to cure others of disease. Yet if he is a drunkard, that doctor is considered incompetent because he cannot perform his duty properly due to a poor fund of good qualities. Therefore I take "varna" (which is composed of guna and karma) to mean "competency identity". To make clearer this idea of "competency identity", there is a verse in Caitanya-caritamrta (Adi 17.30) in which bhakti-dharma (which may also be called Bhagavat-dharma or daivi-varnasrama-dharma) is defined thusly:

sada nama la-iba, yatha-labhete santosa

eita acara kare bhakti-dharma-posa

TRANSLATION: One should strictly follow the principle of always chanting the holy name, and one should be satisfied with whatever he gets easily. Such devotional behavior solidly maintains one's devotional service.

A devotee is "competent" so long as he is solidly fixed in his service to the holy name, and so long as his situation in society is satisfying and yields easily whatever he needs to carry on in his dharma. Problems arise in society when there is a conflict between the guna (which, according to Narada, primarily means spiritual qualities) and the karma. If one's karma is not satisfying and does not easily yield what one needs to maintain his dharma, there is a danger of one losing the qualities of a devotee due to agitation of a mind. Also, if one's karma yields an excess of material wealth, that too will tempt a incompetent person to abandon devotional qualities (for example, the principle of tyaga mentioned above). As Srila Prabhupada stated in the Bhagavat-dharma discourses he held in New Vrndavana in 1972:

One should work only enough to keep the body functioning in order to execute dharma. If more money comes, then it should not be used for sense gratification but for Krsna. Therefore in ages past, rich men used to employ their money by constructing temples or churches. At the present moment, however, churches are being transformed into factories and post offices because people have lost their sense of religion. Thus people have become animalistic, and peace and prosperity are not possible in a society of animals.

So in conclusion, a devotee's varna or "competency identity" is to be understood by the happy harmony between his guna - which again, in daivi-varnasrama primarily means spiritual guna - and his karma. In practical terms, this means that a devotee who is solidly fixed in his service to the holy name while performing brahmana-karma nicely and who is satisfied with whatever easily comes to him as a brahmana is a competent brahmana. Same with the vaisya.

You ask, "Who is a sudra in ISKCON?" A sudra in ISKCON must have the general qualities prescribed for all bona fide participants in daivi-varnasrama. But if he is obliged to run his own business, or manage a social community, or act as the intellectual head of society, he will be incompetent. In the Bhagavat-dharma discourses, Srila Prabhupada explained: In all societies there is a class of men concerned with the cultivation and broadcasting of knowledge - scientific and philosophical knowledge. Such men are supposed to have brahminical qualifications, because if one distributes knowledge he must have a good brain and education, for a fool and a rascal is not capable. And in all societies there are politicians and administrators (ksartiyas) who are supposed to be under the guidance of the intelligent class in order to keep society in a peaceful situation. In all societies there are merchants, shop keepers and farmers (vaisyas), otherwise how could men live? And the fourth class, the laborer class (sudra), is there in all societies, for every society needs a class of working men. This class may have neither great intelligence, nor administrative, nor productive ability, but they can work under the direction of some higher authorities... Everyone can cultivate his particular occupational duty with the aim of attaining ultimate salvation. Human life is meant for salvation, for liberation from the bondage of birth and death.

So, regarding the sudras, Srila Prabhupada writes that while they have neither great intelligence, nor administrative nor productive ability, they are satisfied to work under the direction of some higher authority. This brings up what I feel is a very important consideration about how daivi varnasrama-dharma is supposed to work. The whole scheme depends on the principle of a natural affinity of the social classes to work with each other in Krsna consciousness, as much as the parts of the human body have an affinity to work together harmoniously. Daivi means "godly", so that affinity is the natural attraction, appreciation and respect devotees feel for one another as servants of God. There can be no daivi-varnasrama without the foremost principle of sadhu-sangha. The materialistic version of varnasrama (caste-ism) puts more stress on division. Daivi-varnasrama puts more stress on unity, or unity in diversity. Actually, only daivi-varnasrama is really dharma, because dharma actually refers to God or Krsna. Srila Prabhupada explains in his Bhagavat-dharma discourses:

Brahmanyeh dharma-varmani. Dharma-varmani refers to He who embodies all religious principles. The Sanskrit word dharma actually refers to God or Krsna. Generally, dharma is translated into English as religion, but this is not a perfect translation, for dharma is different from religion. Religion is usually defined in a dictionary as a kind of faith, but dharma is not really a faith... As liquidity is the

natural state of water, similarly dharma is the natural state of the living entity. Since the living entity is part and parcel of God, he has a natural position. For instance, one's finger is part and parcel of the body, and as such it has a natural position... In this way the finger serves the whole body. Similarly, dharma indicates that the living entity, being part and parcel of God, must serve Him. ... Service is actually meant for God, but because we have forgotten Him, we are rendering service to so many forms of maya. Srila Prabhupada distinguished between nivr̥tti-marga varnasrama-dharma and other social systems aimed at sense enjoyment. The following section of quotations from the Bhagavat-dharma discourses shows that real Vedic dharma, or varnasrama-dharma, is nivr̥tti-dharma. Accordingly, the yajna (sacrificial work) meant for each and every occupation of the social body's four parts aims at liberation. Besides nivr̥tti-marga varnasrama- dharma, there is the Vedic pravṛtti-marga. And there is "Hindu dharma" and modern technological society. Materialistic social systems work for some kind of substitute for real liberation.

According to the Vedic system, there are two paths: pravṛtti-marga or the path of sense enjoyment, and nivr̥tti-marga, or the path of renunciation. We have come within the material world to enjoy material resources, and this is the path of pravṛtti. However, when a person comes to understand that he is not the body but the soul, then his occupation changes, and he enters onto the path of nivr̥tti.

We have already described dharma as occupational duty. According to the Vedic system, we are supposed to follow the varnasrama-dharma. However, at the present moment "Hindu dharma" has become very ambiguous. Actually the Vedic literatures never mention a thing as "Hindu dharma". Such an expression is never found in Bhagavad-gita, Srimad- Bhagavatam or any other authorized scripture. Unfortunately, in India the term "Hindu dharma" has become very prominent. This is unfortunate because so-called Hindu dharma is a vitiation of the real Vedic dharma, which is varnasrama- dharma.

Everyone can cultivate his particular occupational duty with the aim of attaining ultimate salvation. Human life is meant for salvation, for liberation from the bondage of birth and death. Unfortunately at present the so-called intellectual class of men has no information of ultimate liberation.

Formerly, the brahmanas used to learn Ayurvedic medicine and astrology. The lower castes - the ksatriys, vaisyas and sudras - used to consult the brahmanas on these two subjects. Everyone wants to know about his health, and therefore everyone wants to know about the future, so by studying these, the brahmanas could supply the information required. However, Srimad-Bhagavatam points out: "I am not this body". As pointed out previously, to accept a dharma is to nullify all these vargas - hard work, fear, frustration and death. One should not think, however, that executing dharma is simply going to church or temple and asking God for some bread. ... Such a prayer means that one does not know how to pray. One should rather pray to God to grant him release from material miseries.

If one does not work for Yajna, Visnu, he is bound by the reaction of his work. If one works piously, he is elevated to higher planetary systems, or he becomes a rich man's son. By performing pious activities, one may get a good birth (janma) in an aristocratic or rich family, or one may receive good learning (sruta) or one may be rewarded by a beautiful body (sri). These are the results of pious activities. And if one performs impious activities, he receives just the opposite: birth in a low family, poor education and an ugly body. Generally people understand dharma by these things. But Srimad-Bhagavatam says that dharma, religious principles, should be executed in order to nullify material benefits. Whether one becomes poor or rich he has to undergo the tribulations of material existence. Just because one is a rich man, he cannot avoid death. The poor man also works hard but for even less money and is also subjected to the other tribulations. Some people think that if they become rich all their tribulations will be ended, but who would think that by becoming rich he will be free from old age, disease and death?

Modern educated society does not know what vimukti is. They may know what liberation is, but they do not know what the ultimate liberation is. The scientists, for instance, are trying to give us so many facilities by developing the machine. In a sense, this is also vimukti. We may be inconvenienced and have to travel a far distance, so the scientists devise some kind of "horseless carriage" that can travel long distances at great speeds. In a sense, then, this is also vimukti. In the world every attempt is being made at vimukti, for getting out of some inconvenient situation. The tragedy is, however, that no one knows of the ultimate vimukti. The ultimate vimukti is to attain freedom from birth, old age, disease and death.

Furthering our material comforts is not real progress. Actually our comforts and discomforts are already settled as soon as we get a particular type of body. Some bodies entail a great deal of suffering, and others entail less. If we buy a very cheap car, our ride will not be comfortable, and if we buy a very expensive car, our ride will be comfortable. The degree of comfort is determined beforehand by the amount of money we put into a vehicle. There is no necessity in trying to improve it. Indeed we cannot improve it. In the human body a certain amount of discomfort is destined to come.

Now, to bring all this to a conclusion, we should always remember that varnasrama is Vedic, and Vedic means the true path of knowledge that frees a human being from repeated birth and death. The terms brahmana, ksatriya, vaisya and sudra refer to four orders of Vedic knowledge in society. I find it a bit perplexing that in your list of questions, education (part III) is given less attention than other areas, when in fact if we are concerned with VEDIC society, then the education of the varnas and asramas must assume the first rank of importance. Vedic education is primarily concerned with inculcating good qualities in the human. Good qualities in human society cannot be legislated by government. In a Bhagavatam lecture, Srila Prabhupada stated:

And if there is want to good men, how you can expect peace and prosperity in the world? If everyone is full of rascaldom, how you can expect? You are... Why you are accusing the government? The government is your representative. You are rascals, fools. You select some rascal and fool. How you can expect good government? Democracy. You become good man. You will see government is good. So therefore the mass education should be how to become good man.

It seems to me that Srila Prabhupada established ISKCON to provide this mass education. Therefore, for example, he called for the formation of a Varnasrama College. The first question on your list is "What is ISKCON's (the institution's) responsibility for the social development of its members?" The only answer I can see to this question is that ISKCON's responsibility is to first educate its members in the gunas (qualities) that Narada prescribes for all human beings, and then educate them further in the qualities and duties assigned to the specific varnas (including women).

After having been so educated, those who wish to practice nivṛtti-marga varnasrama-dharma ought to remain in ISKCON. This means their only goal in life is to fully comprehend transcendental knowledge. Those who wish to practice pravṛtti-marga varnasrama (which allows for some measure of involvement in bodily consciousness) should establish themselves separately from the institution. But they should offer the institution some part of the results of their work as yajna. In practical ISKCON terms, I believe the dividing line between nivṛtti and pravṛtti falls "more or less" between the classifications of madhyama and kanistha adhikaris. Srila Prabhupada said kanistha devotees are not expert in transcendental knowledge, and that they are somewhat attached to sense gratification. But kanisthas become purified by worshiping the Deity in their own home. Srila Prabhupada also noted that the kanistha aspiration is to become a fully qualified puja-brahmana. So from this we should conclude that in the pravṛtti-marga, all four varnas are active. But as was noted above in a quotation, the brahmanas of the pravṛtti-marga are not so expert in transcendental knowledge... people come to them for ritualistic puja, and also for astrology and ayurveda. In the ISKCON institution, all varnas are also active. But these are nivṛtti-marga varnas, which are dedicated to transcendental knowledge. Thus the members of these varnas are dedicated preachers or are dedicated activeservants of the preaching (i.e. the foremost motivation of their dharma is to see transcendental knowledge expand throughout the world). The brahmanas preach transcendental knowledge very scientifically. The ksatriyas manage the distribution of transcendental knowledge. The vaisyas distribute transcendental knowledge through business enterprises (for example prasadam distribution, or even book distribution that is done more in business fashion than as preaching). The sudras help the others. Gopal Bhatta Gosvami, in the Sat Kriya Sara Dipika, states "The sudra who is servant of a brahmana and devotee is superior to the ksatriya and vaisya". The "brahmana and devotee" (brahmana-vaisnava) is the direct preacher; thus one who directly serves the direct preacher is most fortunate, even if he is only competent to act as a sudra.

Both the kanistha and madhyama devotees revere and aspire for the good qualities that Narada Muni prescribes for the human being in Vedic society. And both develop these qualities by their dharma. The kanistha develop these qualities for their own good. The madhyamas develop them for the good of the whole world. I think this is enough for now. Thank you for engaging me in this service.