

Caste system cast out- in Bhagavad-Gita

Caste system is probably among the most talked and most misunderstood current social controversies concerning Bhagavad-Gita; misunderstood because it is based on a false premise- caste determination by birth.

The Bhagavad-Gita however, declares that this social division known as varnashrama was based on qualities and activities (guna-karma) – not birth. In Bhagavad-Gita 4.13 Lord Krishna specifically states:

cātur-varṇyaṁ mayā sṛṣṭaṁ

guṇa-karma-vibhāgaśaḥ

tasya kartāram api mām

viddhy akartāram avyayam

According to the three modes of material nature and the work ascribed to them, the four divisions of human society were created by Me. And, although I am the creator of this system, you should know that I am yet the non-doer, being unchangeable.

How this social division is achieved based on qualities and activities? Lord Krishna specifically describes the basis of such division in detail in the last chapter of Bhagavad-Gita (18.41) as follows:

brāhmaṇa-kṣatriya-viśāṁ

sūdrāṇāṁ ca parantapa

karmāṇi pravibhaktāni

svabhāva-prabhavair guṇaiḥ

Brāhmaṇas, kṣatriyas, vaiśyas and sūdras are distinguished by their qualities of work, O chastiser of the enemy, in accordance with the modes of nature.

The requisite qualities for each social division are explained as follows:

Brahmanas: *Peacefulness, self-control, austerity, purity, tolerance, honesty, wisdom, knowledge, and religiousness—these are the qualities by which the brāhmaṇas work. (BG 18.42)*

Kshatriyas: *Heroism, power, determination, resourcefulness, courage in battle, generosity, and leadership are the qualities of work for the kṣatriyas. (BG 18.43)*

Vaisyas: *Farming, cattle rising and business are the qualities of work for the vaiśyas. (BG 18.44)*

Sudras: *for the sūdras there is labor and service to others. (BG 18.44)*

Śrīla Prabhupāda further explains the practical application of varnashrama as per Bhagavad-Gita practiced in the Krishna Consciousness movement as follows: “Kṛṣṇa says, cātur-varṇyaṁ mayā sṛṣṭaṁ guṇa-karma-vibhāgaśaḥ: "I created four divisions of men according to their quality and work." (Bg. 4.13) For instance, you can understand that there are engineers as well as medical practitioners in society. Do you say they belong to different castes—that one is in the engineer caste and the other is in the medical caste? No. If a man has qualified himself in medical school, you accept him as a doctor; and if another man has a degree in engineering, you accept him as an engineer. Similarly, the Bhagavad-gītā defines four classes of men in society: a class of highly intelligent men, a class of administrators, a class of productive men, and ordinary workers. These divisions are natural. For example, one class of men is very intelligent. But to actually meet the qualifications of first-class men as described in the Bhagavad-gītā, they need to be trained, just as an intelligent boy requires training in a college to become a qualified doctor. So in the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement we are training the intelligent men how to control their minds, how to control their senses, how to become truthful, how to become clean internally and externally, how to become wise, how to apply their knowledge in practical life, and how to become God conscious. Thus these youth have first-class intelligence, and now we are training them to

use it properly. We are not introducing the caste system, in which any rascal born in a brāhmaṇa family is automatically a brāhmaṇa. He may have the habits of a fifth-class man, but he is accepted as first class because of his birth in a brāhmaṇa family. We don't accept that. We recognize a man as first class who is trained as a brāhmaṇa. It doesn't matter whether he is Indian, European, or American; lowborn or highborn—it doesn't matter. Any intelligent man can be trained to adopt first-class habits. We want to stop the nonsensical idea that we are imposing the Indian caste system on our disciples. We are simply picking out men with first-class intelligence and training them how to become first class in every respect.

This kind of social division is perfectly scientific and in fact inevitable for a proper running of society. The Rg Veda (10.90.12) compares the society to the human body:

- The brahmanas (thinkers and teachers) are compared to the head,
- the kshatriyas (governors and protectors) to the arms,
- vaishyas (producers and traders) to the belly and
- shudras (workers and general assistants) to the feet.

In our body, one part may be positioned higher than the other, but that is just to facilitate its optimum contribution to the body. Ultimately all parts need nourishment and are necessary for proper bodily functioning. If any part is neglected or malfunctions, the whole body suffers. Similarly, in the social body, brahmanas (determined by qualities, not birth) are higher in the social hierarchy, but that is just to ensure optimum social utilization of their intellectual abilities. Ultimately, every class is valued for its contribution to society. If any class is exploited or is lethargic, the entire society is adversely affected. Importantly, these four social classes, known as varnas, are not discriminatory man-made divisions. Essentially they are four human types found in every human society. Most people exhibit qualities that reflect an overlapping of these categories, but one occupational inclination eventually predominates. Interestingly, we find similar divisions in a modern MNC – researchers, managers, financiers and workers. This division is not discriminatory, but fair, because people are classified not forcibly, but as per their abilities.

The Vedic society's organizational structure functioned very similar to a MNC. The individuals were judged and trained by their qualities and modes of work not by their birth. There are several instances of such classification based on qualities such as: Narada Muni, who was born as a son of maid servant but is accepted as greatest sage of all times; Valmiki Muni, who was born a son of hunter but went on to become the author of greatest epic Ramayana, Drona, the teacher of Pandavas and Kauravas in the warrior arts, who was born a brahmana but was a qualified kshatriya by his abilities and so was his son Aswatthama. There is an interesting account mentioned in Jabalopanisad to demonstrate how in Vedic times an individual was trained based on his qualities (as mentioned in Bhagavad-Gita) and not based on his birth.

Satyakāma Jabala was a prostitute's son. And he approached Gautama Muni, "You kindly make me your disciple." Gautama Muni asked, "My dear child, please let me know your family lineage, who is your father?" He replied, "That I do not know." So Gautama Muni said, "Ask your mother." The boy went back and inquired from his mother about the same. So his mother replied, "My dear son, I do not know who is your father." The following day he promptly came back and said to Gautama Muni, "Sir, my mother also does not know who my father is." Then Gautama Muni said, "Yes, you are brāhmaṇa. Come on. I shall initiate you because you are speaking truth. So unless you are a son of a brāhmaṇa, you cannot speak such secret truth. Nobody will say that I do not know who my father is. But you plainly said that "My mother does not know who my father is." So immediately Gautama Muni accepted him as brāhmaṇa: "You are telling the truth," because it is first qualification of a brahmana as mentioned in Bhagavad-Gita. Thus the Vedic varnashrama system was in no way the current caste system which determines a person based on birth and not qualification.

The purpose of following this varnashrama institution is that one can realize life's perfection simply by satisfying the Supreme Personality of Godhead as mentioned in Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam (1.2.13):

ataḥ pumbhir dvija-śreṣṭhā varṇāśrama-vibhāgaśaḥ

sv-anuṣṭhitasya dharmasya samsiddhir hari-toṣaṇam

"O best among the twice-born, it is therefore concluded that the highest perfection one can achieve by discharging the duties prescribed for one's own occupation according to caste divisions and orders of life is to please the Personality of Godhead."

The Indian culture of today is restricted by the hereditary caste system and kept in the custody of narrow-minded people who are like frogs in a well. If instead India had spread the transcendental message of Bhagavad-gītā in the generous manner befitting a noble brāhmaṇa, then peace and tranquillity in this world would not be in such acute short supply. By the propagation of brahminical culture, the world would have greatly prospered. Instead, the Vedic culture has been seriously maimed by the imposition of the hereditary caste system, and this has had grievously adverse effects on the world. The Supreme Lord in His incarnation as Lord Caitanya has opened many avenues to peaceful living by propagating the brahminical culture, which He calls the religion of the soul. Those who are fortunate can emulate His life, follow His divine teachings, and perfect their lives. He elevated a born Muslim into nāmacārya- the Spiritual Master of holy name as Haridas Thakura. In fact, Lord Caitanya wanted this sankīrtana movement to spread and envelope the entire humanity and he predicted that in every town and village the holy name of Krishna will be chanted irrespective of caste, creed, race, nationality or religion.

His Divine Grace A.C.Bhaktivedānta Swami Prabhupada fulfilled this prediction of Lord Caitanya Mahāprabhu by travelling to West, initiating 10,000 disciples from Western world and establishing the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON).

How can the peaceful varṇāśrama-dharma be revived when people are so harassed in this age? It is virtually impossible. The whole aim of bhakti-yoga is to satisfy Viṣṇu. Yajñaiḥ saṅkīrtana-prāyaiḥ: Kṛṣṇa, came Himself as Caitanya Mahāprabhu to teach us the way of saṅkīrtana. Therefore it is not possible to reinstitute the Vedic culture in this day and age. That would be a fanatical endeavor. Rather, one should simply take to the process of saṅkīrtana movement which involves congregational practice of mantra meditation as ‘Hare Kṛṣṇa Hare Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa Hare Hare, Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare’, which the members of Vedic Science Club are performing in mantra meditation circle. Lord Caitanya did not place much emphasis on the Vedic varṇāśrama-dharma or the brahminical caste system. Regardless of one’s position or sectarian designation or color or creed, He simply invited everyone to join in chanting the holy names of God. But as a helpful enhancement to our spiritual culture, we try to apply the principles of Vedic culture. These principles, namely cleanliness, austerity, truthfulness and mercy, are declared in the Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam as universal principles for a spiritual culture. There is no question of sectarian dogma. These are operating principles of religiosity. Cleanliness—taking baths; austerity—limiting the eating, sleeping, and sex life. This is spiritual culture—to apply these principles. According to time and place, there may be different applications called for. The varṇāśrama-dharma is the scientific Vedic system for social and spiritual development within society. It is very scientific, but it is not possible in this age to reinstitute. So, rather, we try to engage everyone in chanting the holy names of God and then attempt to apply the principles as much as practically possible.

The members of Vedic Science Club are therefore urged to diligently take to this process of mantra meditation and also try to understand the Vedic Science by regularly reading the small booklet provided, ‘Beyond Birth and Death’ and thus graduate as successful Vedic Thinkers.

Hare Krishna!