

# ISKCON Communications statement against caste-based discrimination

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The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), also known as the Hare Krishna movement, belongs to the Gaudiya-Vaishnava sampradaya, or denomination, a monotheistic tradition within Hindu culture. Today ISKCON has over 400 temples, dozens of rural communities and eco-sustainable projects, and nearly 100 vegetarian restaurants world-wide. ISKCON's Hare Krishna Food for Life program has grown to become the world's largest vegetarian food relief project, feeding millions of free meals daily in India and other countries around the globe. ISKCON was founded in 1966 by His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, a highly respected Vaishnava scholar and monk, who at the age of 70 journeyed from India to New York City to bring the bhakti tradition, or Krishna Consciousness, to the west. In the 11 years before his passing in 1977, Srila Prabhupada translated, with elaborate commentaries, 60 volumes of Vaishnava literature; established more than 100 temples on six continents; and initiated 5,000 disciples. Today his writings are studied in universities around the globe and are translated into nearly 100 languages.

ISKCON Communications: Statement of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness on Caste-Based Discrimination

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The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), a worldwide movement representing the Gaudiya Vaishnava *sampradaya* within the broad Hindu family of faiths, unequivocally opposes a birth-based caste system, and strongly condemns the use of such a system to discriminate against any person or group, or to preclude their participation in any aspect of religious or secular life.

ISKCON's Founder-Acharya, His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, was an outspoken critic of the erroneous belief that one's birth in a particular "caste" determined one's occupation or station in life. Prabhupada boldly offered a more forward-thinking reading of references to *varna* in Vedic, or Hindu scriptures, arguing that such passages describe a system of natural social stratification intended to help people find the opportunities best suited to them, not to prevent them from making religious or secular progress. Prabhupada stressed that a person's qualities and activities, not a person's birth, determined one's *varna*. He strongly condemned discrimination based on a birth-based caste system as a harmful and unauthorized misinterpretation of Vedic scriptures and tradition.

In speaking out against caste, Srila Prabhupada followed a venerable tradition, within the Vaishnava fold, of opposing caste-based discrimination. Prabhupada's own guru, Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati Thakura, challenged prominent Hindus of that day who claimed that the scriptures supported such caste-based discrimination. Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati argued against this spurious view in public debates (for which his life was later threatened). He also demonstrated his practical opposition to such discrimination by offering the ceremonial sacred thread and the opportunity to become a Brahmin priest to anyone, regardless of caste. Prior to Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati and Prabhupada, other Vaishnava teachers and saints had similarly opposed a birth-based caste system. These include, for instance, the poets Kabir and Mirbai, and such renowned scholars as Sripada Ramunuja and Sripada Madhvacharya.

Perhaps most significantly for members of ISKCON and the Gaudiya Vaishnava *sampradaya*, Sri Krishna Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486-1533) himself demonstrated his opposition to caste: among his inner circle of confidential, trusted associates and followers are counted Haridasa Thakura, Rupa Goswami, and Sanatana Goswami—all considered untouchables, by

birth or circumstance, according to the prevailing caste system of their day.

Following the example set by his predecessors, Srila Prabhupada was unfaltering in his belief that no one should be denied opportunity on the basis of birth or caste. At the same time, Prabhupada was also critical of some efforts to eradicate caste-based discrimination through political slogans and shallow calls for equality, or by attempting to expunge the Hindu tradition of any mention of *varna*. He rejected such efforts, well intentioned as they might be, as superficial remedies that failed to address the underlying disparity of educational opportunities that lay at the heart of the issue.

For his part, Prabhupada sought to attack caste-based discrimination at its root. He worked tirelessly to share the keys to spiritual upliftment and self-realization with all. Not only did he offer such opportunities to those downtrodden by caste-based discrimination within India, but he also extended those opportunities – arguably for the first time in history on such a massive scale – to men and women not born into Indian families (also considered “untouchables” by defenders of a birth-based caste system). In doing so, Prabhupada practically demonstrated that anyone, whatever their caste or status, could achieve the highest spiritual and secular success promised in the scriptures, without bar or restriction.

ISKCON devotees strive to follow in Prabhupada’s footsteps and to build upon the work he began. ISKCON continues to initiate and foster opportunities designed to give all people the tools needed to access a dynamic and rewarding spiritual life. ISKCON’s educational and religious activities are open to all, irrespective of caste, creed, race, gender, or background. Some ISKCON projects, particularly grass-roots food distribution and educational work, also specifically reach out to those routinely neglected because of their socio-economic status. In promoting *Sanatan Dharma* through the proper understanding of the Vedic sacred texts, ISKCON devotees strive to replace the divisive and restrictive misapplication of caste based on birth with a renewed appreciation that every soul in every status of life should be afforded respect and dignity, and be given every opportunity to cooperatively serve God and his creation.

## Appendix

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The following excerpt, from an interview that Srila Prabhupada gave to the Bhavan's Journal in 1976, offers a striking look into his view of a birth-based caste system and caste-based discrimination. It demonstrates his critique of both those who would uphold such a system, and those who would attempt to solve the problem by eradicating the notion of varna (social division) altogether.

This excerpt has been edited for space and clarity.

**Question:** Will the fundamental values of the Hindu religion be in any way affected by the eradication of the caste system, toward which a concerted effort is now being made at all levels?

**Srila Prabhupada:** The Vedic system of religion we have been describing—the *varnashrama* system created by Krishna—is not to be confused with the present-day caste system—determination of social divisions by birth. But as to eradication of all social divisions, it cannot be done... But the difficulty is that this so-called caste system has come in, on account of the false notion that in order to be a Brahmin, one must be the son of a Brahmin. That is the caste system. But Krishna does not say that. He says “according to quality and work.” He never says “according to birth.” So this so-called caste system in India is a false notion of *catur-varnyam*, the system of four social divisions. The real system of *catur-varnyam* means *guna-karma-vibhagasah*, determination of the four social divisions according to quality and work. One must be qualified.

So people who want to become Brahmins must be educated to acquire these qualities. It is not enough simply to abolish the caste system, which is contaminated by the false conception of qualification by birthright. Certainly, this wrong caste system should be abolished. Also, educational centers should be opened for teaching all people how to become genuine Brahmins and Kshatriyas.

According to their qualities and work, people naturally belong to different social groupings. So you cannot avoid it, but because you have created a false caste system, that should be abolished, and the actual system recommended by Krishna—that should be adopted.

**Q:** You're saying the natural system is to classify a person and train him for a particular duty, according to his particular inner qualities and his particular propensity to act.

**Prabhupada:** Yes. That classification is wanted. That must be there.

Selected Quotes from the Works of His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada

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*Guest:* "Being a Brahmin by birth, does it mean anything?"

*Prabhupada:* "No, they [disciples coming from non-Brahmin families] are not born of Brahmin father. Now they are Brahmins."

*Guest:* "But you were saying about Brahmins, so I..."

*Prabhupada:* "Brahmins means qualified Brahmins. When you say engineer, that means qualified engineer, not born engineer. An engineer is not born. "Because his father is an engineer, he is an engineer." What is this? You become an engineer. *Guna-karma-vibhagasah. Catur-varnyam maya srstam* (Bhagavad Gita 4.13). There must be qualification and work; otherwise what kind of Brahmin?"

**(Srila Prabhupada, conversation with guests; September 1972)**

"It is the quality, not the birth. They have made it now like that. That has caused the downfall of Hindu culture in India, when it came to the caste system. It is not [supposed to be] the caste system by birth. In Bhagavad Gita it is said, 'By quality...'"

**(Srila Prabhupada, conversation with banker; September 1973)**

"So *shastra* says if these qualities are *anyatrapi drsyeta*, if these qualities are found somewhere else.... Suppose a [so-called] Shudra or a Chandala [Harijana], if these qualities are found there, then he should be accepted by those qualities, not by birth.... So, this is *shastric* injunction. Then later on this caste "Brahminism," "Shudraism" made the whole thing, the whole Hindu culture, Vedic culture, spoiled."

**(Srila Prabhupada, room conversation; November 1974)**

"This has killed the Indian, I mean Vedic culture when they began to claim superiority simply by birth without any qualification. That killed the whole civilization.... How you can simply say that because I'm born in such and such family, therefore I have also the same thing. Because my father was high-court judge, therefore I am high-court judge. Is that very good logic?"

**(Srila Prabhupada, morning walk conversation; December 1973)**

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