

Course 403 Varnasrama Dharma

Introduction

The concept of VarNa has been one of the most misunderstood concepts of Hinduism. Modern intellectuals have considered varNa and JAti system to be degrading, discriminating and violating human rights. Such a generalization is far from the Truth. Due to these misconceptions, Caste and jAti have become an easy fodder for opponents of Hinduism to mischaracterize Hinduism.

Concept of VarNa as described in the Hindu scriptures is an universal psychological classification system of human beings. This categorization applies to all societies at all times. There is no concept of superiority or discrimination of any of the groups within the varNa system. VarNa system is a pure psychological classification of human beings that can be helpful in identifying psychological tendencies within human beings.

Seventh Chapter of Srimad Bhagavatham describes the highest and the most sublime ethical principles ever put together by human beings. These principles of Sanatana Dharma represent the ethical principles that need to be practiced by all human beings for spiritual elevation. This portion of the 7th canto is a conversation between DharmarAja and Maharshi NARada. First part of the dialog describes the ethical principles for all human beings. Then they discuss ethical principles for different varNas or groups of people. They say that this definition came from Lord NARayana himself. Maharshis who put together these principles were sages of the highest order. Anything that comes from by sages of such caliber will not have unethical principles such as discrimination and untouchability. If you read the ethical principles in detail, this fact becomes obvious to everybody.

This paper is based on the talks given by esteemed Sanskrit Scholar, Philosopher, Author of several philosophical works and Poet, Sri Bannanje GovindAcharya. Sri GovindAcharya is one of the foremost scholars of VaishNava and Indian philosophy in South India. He has brought to light many previously unknown works of various scholars and has written many commentaries on variety of Philosophical works. He is well known for his incisive analysis and deep thinking about scriptures. From this analysis, he can give scientific explanations of various practices of Hinduism and how these aspects of Hinduism are relevant in the modern world.

By reading this paper, the reader will get a clear idea of varNas as defined in the shastras in particular in the Srimad Bhagavatha purANa. All the misconceptions about varNa are removed. Reader will realize that the positions of the great rishis and the scriptures on the subject of varNa, represent the highest ideals known to mankind. Reader will also know the difference between VarNa and JAti. Reader will know that unethical practices seen in the current society of untouchability and discrimination have no place in what rishis say about ethical principles in Srimad BhAgavatham.

Definition of VarNa , jAti and Caste

These words are used as equivalents in many places, but each of these words have specific meanings. It is very important that we understand these words in a precise fashion. We now define each of these words in greater detail:

Definition of VarNa

varNAs are psychological classification of human beings. varNas group the human beings into different classes according to their innate characteristics. Srimad Bhagavatham emphasizes this by using the word "lakshaNa", which means an attribute or qualification when describing the nature of the varNAs. This shows the psychological qualities each varNa has are their innate characteristics. Sri krishNa also says in Bhagavad Gita that four varNAs are created by using the classification of their qualities and their deeds . [*chAturvarNam mayA shrusTaM guNa karma vibhAgashaH – Four VarNas were created by using classification according to their guNas (qualities) – Bhagavad Gita*] In both these instances, we can see that varNas are characteristics of human beings. It is not accorded by their birth.

Over a period of time, varNas became identified by birth instead of innate characteristic of a person. This could be due to several reasons. It is much easier to identify a person by his birth than by looking into the innate characteristics of a person. In the old days when the mental purity of individuals was high, it was easier to identify the innate characteristics of individuals. Over time, this practice was lost.

In mahAbhArata, we can see these two types of identification of varNas. Sri vedavyAsa, was born of a fisher woman. He rose to become a great maharshi and many consider him to be an avatar of Sri vishNu. In his case, varNa was determined by his innate characteristic and not by his birth. On the other hand, Sri Vidura was a great scholar, but he was constantly put down and humiliated by kauravas as a son of a shudra woman. In vidura's case, at least some people determined his varNa by birth.

Some people in the society have tendencies to gain knowledge and teach knowledge to others. These are classified as brahmins. Some people have ability to protect , manage, and excel in administration . They are classified as kshatriyas. Some people have ability to innovate and produce new goods and services. They are classified as vyshyas. Some people have ability to work for others. They are classified as Shudras. Most of the people who work for others belong to the Shudra varNa. Sri Paramahansa Yogananda in his commentary of Bhagavad Gita says that these four categories are spiritual intelligentsia; the Soldiers, rulers and leaders; Business men and laborers. This type of classification exists in all societies and at all times.

If we can analyze the various groups of people in a modern society, professors and scientists can be considered as brahmins. Politicians, armed forces and police can be considered as kshatriyas. Businessmen can be considered as vyshyas. People who are employed by others can be considered as shudras. Thus we can see that this classification exists in all societies.

There is no discrimination or putting down any group in this scheme of classification. All groups should work in harmony and welfare of all. Thus we can see that the varNa system is a scientific classification of human beings.

Definition of jAti

jAti describes thousands of clans, tribes and sub-communities in India. Classical scriptures do not use the word jAti. This is a socio-economic and cultural system that has come into existence in the last thousand years. jAtis originally started out as economic specialization of various categories work as such stone masons, Jewelers, shoe makers etc. It was beneficial for all the people having a particular skill to associate with others in that group to increase their specialization. jAti was a means for economic specialization within the clan. Many of the jAtis in non-brahmin classes wielded high economic power until the advent of British.

Gradually, this seems to have transformed in some cases into extreme separation of groups, discrimination and untouchability etc.

Definition of Caste

English word Caste comes from Spanish /Portuguese word Casta which is defined as race, lineage or breed. Portuguese started using the word Casta when they encountered Hindu social groups when they came to India. From there, it was transferred to English. The word Caste today is being used imprecisely to denote varNa and jAti. Caste should refer only to jAti. Caste should not be used to refer to varNa once we understand the true meaning of varNa. In this article we will only use the word varNa as we discussing how the concept was used in the scriptures.

Who are qualified to give the definition of Dharma

DharmarAja also defines the qualifications for persons who can give a definition of Dharma. He says that nArada is the most important and beloved son of Brahma. nArada is a supreme practitioner of tapas, yoga and SamAdhi (Complete absorption in the Divine). Only kind hearted, pious, ones with tranquil minds like nArada will be able to know the secrets of Dharma.

This shows that there are very high qualifications for persons who can define Dharma and ethical practices in a society.

What is Sanatana Dharma

First Srimad Bhagavatham talks about the sanAtana Dharma and defines what Dharma is before going into VarnAshrama Dharma. Sage Narada says that this definition he has heard from Lord Narayana himself. It is mentioned that is called sanAtana Dharma (Note that it is not called Hindu Dharma). This definition of SanAtana Dharma transcends boundaries of region, time and religion.

nArada gives a short and important definition of Dharma. He says Dharma are set of practices which take us towards God. Adharmic practices are ones which make us turn away from God. God himself is at the root of Dharmic practices. Vedas have come from the Lord Hari. So, these unauthored (apaurusheya) texts or vedas are the source of Dharma.

There are two other sources for obtaining definitions or clarifications for Dharma. These have practical applications for obtaining clarifications on Dharma. One source of Dharma is the people who have realized God and Vedas. These people's mind will be tuned to God and righteous behavior. Whatever comes to their mind will be according to Dharma. In summary, nArada gives the sources of Dharma as 1) God and Vedas, 2) people who are enlightened in God and the vedas , 3) enlightened people whose mind has become tuned to God and the Vedas and 4) finally one's inner conscience (sAkshi) can also be a guidance for right dharma, provided it is properly trained with sAdhana (spiritual practice) and nurtured with ethical behavior. For most normal people, who can not read and understand the vedas, conduct and advice of the enlightened people is the main source of the knowledge of Dharma.

Manu smriti also says exactly the same thing. Vedas are the source of Dharma, conduct of people who are enlightened and who know the vedas and inner conscience are primary source of the Dharma. [*vedAkhilo dharmā moolāM smRitisheelshcha*

Dharma for all human beings

Srimad BhAgavatha talks about Dharma or ethical principles for all human beings before it talks about Dharma for individual VarNas. Srimad BhAgavatha talks in much more detail and has lot more principles of Dharma that should be followed by all human beings. The fact that Srimad BhAgavatha gives more emphasis on the common dhArmic principles for all human beings compared to dharmic principles for different varNas shows that, common dhArmic principles that binds all human beings are lot more important than the dhArmic principles that specific classes of human beings should follow.

All these dhArmic principles are universal principles that apply to all human beings not just to Hindus. These dhArmic principles set a very high bar for ethical behavior for all human beings. Everybody can check how much they are following these principles. One can gauge how much they have progressed by measuring themselves against these dharmic principles. These principles have to be fully followed if one is interested in spiritual growth.

Common dhArmic principles for all human beings are as follows

- Satyam (Truth, Integrity) There are different dimensions to this attribute. It is not just telling the truth always. Telling truth and hurting others is not dharma. If we are lying truly to help others who are following in dharmic paths, then it is dharma. One example of this in MahAbhAratha is when Sri Krishna tells YudhisTira to tell a lie that Ashvathama an elephant has died. This is because Sri DroNacharya was battling for the adhamic side and killing people unnecessarily accumulating sins. So, when krishNa told Sri yudhisTira to lie, he tells for the welfare of people and to prevent Sri DronAcharya from accumulating sins. So, Sri krishNa asking YudhisTira to lie was a dharmic act and an act of Satya.
- DayA or Compassion : Compassion is a very important principle. We have to respond to other people's difficulties and server other people as much as possible. Patanjali Yoga sutra (1.33) says mind becomes purified by cultivating feelings of maitri (friendliness, lovingness) which is a feeling towards others when others are happy, Karuna (Compassion or mercy) feelings towards others when others are suffering, mudita (Gladness or good will) towards where there are good things happening and upeksha (indifference, neutrality or acceptance) where there is bad things are happening or bad behavior from other people.
- tapaH or austerity , spiritual practices or deep thinking: Thinking deeply about any topic is called tapas. Thinking deeply about any topic gives discrimination and full knowledge on that topic. This can be used determine the right behavior and right course of action.
- SauchaM: purity of body and mind: . Usually people place more emphasis on the physical purity. The purity from a spiritual practice perspective refers to the purity of the mind. Purity of the body is an aid or tool to develop the purity of the mind.
- titiksha, tolerance: Even if somebody does wrong to you, accept them and forgive them. Facing happiness , sorrow and other dualities of life with equanimity is also titiksha. Sri Purandara dAsa says that there is no better tapas than tolerance and patience.
- ijya , pooja of the Lord: We have to do all of our activities as if it is pooja to the Lord. Then the life itself becomes the pooja to the Lord. Our Children are also gifts from God. Treat them as gifts provided by God.
- Shama is the control and tranquility of the mind and concentration of the mind in the Lord. If the mind is focused on the God, then it will not go towards the sense objects.
- Dama, Control of the sense organs, body and mind: The restraint of the sense organs, body and mind is one of the most important characteristics of sAdhana as srimad Bhagavad Gita and kaThopanishad emphasize.
- ahimsa, non-violence: Ahimsa paramo dharmah. Ahimsa is the ultimate dharma. Without ahimsa there can be no dharma. If you are not treating others well, then there is benefit from sAdhana.
- brahmacharya: Common meaning of brahmacharya is celibacy. Inner meaning of the word is one whose mind is set in the brahman and not seeking worldly pleasures. brahmacharya is also mainly in the mind. Example of this is Hanuman, when he was searching for Sita in Ravana's palace, he saw many women in their bedroom. Still his mind was not disturbed by seeing those places, because his mind always fixed on searching for mother sita and Lord Sri Rama.
- tyAgaH, renunciation and giving up. Giving things and service to others.
- svAdhyayaH: self study . Everybody has to constantly study and gain knowledge all the time.
- Arjavam: Consistency in thought, speech and action. Have no difference between inner and outer thoughts and behavior. Usually most of us have play various roles and have various masks when we play different roles. If we truly remove all masks and have the same thoughts and behaviors internally and externally, that is a sign of spiritual progress.
- SantoshaH: Happiness. Happiness arises out of contentment.
- samadRuk: Treating everybody with respect according to their relation to you. We should not discriminate against anybody. Bhisma says that "we should not discriminate against anybody in the society" [*ina varNANam vibhedosti – There is no discrimination among varNas- Bhishma in MahAbhAratha*]
- seva: Service to others is a great road to spiritual process. Sri madhvAcharya says "service to everybody" is a great tool for spiritual progress . service to others is a way to service to God. [*Ana janasya shushUsha – Service to various people should be performed- Sri madhvAcharya*]
- Or is it kramye...gramyehoparamaH shanaiH: Withdrawl from the worldly desires in a gradual fashion. The rishis know that is not very easy to withdraw from the worldly desires. It has to be done in a gradual fashion.

Next they talk about one of the most important characteristics of spiritual progress. They talk about the nine different kinds of bhakti towards God.

- ShravaNam: to hear about God and scriptures such as Vedas , upanishads and purANas.
- kirtanaM: to Sings bhajans and devotional poetry

- smaraNam: Constant remembrance of God. This is a very Sri madhvAchArya says that Constant Remembrance of God is the only rule that needs to be followed. All other rules are slaves to this rule. *[smartavyaM satataM vishuH vismaratvyam na kadAchana | sarve vidhi nishedhAH syuH etayoreva kimkarAH – vishNu should be remembered always . He should not forgotten even for a moment. All rules of conduct are subservient to these two rules- Sri madhvAcharya in krishNamrita maharNava]*
- seva: Service to God and his bhaktas.
- Ijya, pooja: worship of God and his bhaktas.
- avanatiH: Bowing to God and his bhaktas.
- dAsayam: surrender to God. Sri madhvAcharya defines this more precisely as “Seva to external forms of God as dAsyam” *[bahisTa eAshwara dasatvam dAsyam]*
- sakhyaM: Friendship to God. Arjuna is well known for his bhakti in the form of friendship to krishNa.
- Atma samarpaNaM: Complete surrender of Self to God. Sri madhvAcharya defines this in a beautiful fashion. “After knowing God as one who is within me, who is protecting me always from eternal beginning to end, loving him dearly and offering us completely to Him is complete self-surrender” *[anaydyantha kaleshu muktau samasAra evacha maisthAh shobhayet ekah vishnur mam preratyekah sarva devaishu cha iti tam priti tam jnanaM -Sri madhvAcharya]*

All these qualities described above are dharmic principles that all human beings need to follow for spiritual growth. This is an extraordinary group of qualities that every one of us needs to follow. Following these set of principles will enable one to grow rapidly in spiritual path.

Details of VarNas

Characteristics of BrAhmana varNa

Characteristics of the brahmaNa varNas are described below. Many of these items have been described above. These are subsets of the qualities described above. This means that in certain segments of the society, some of the values are emphasized more than others. In the BrahmaNa varNa, these qualities are emphasized.

- shama
- dama
- Shaucham
- kShantiH: tolerance of ups and downs in life.
- arjavaM
- jnanaM
- daya
- achyutatmatvam: Seeing God in all beings and in all actions
- satyam

Many of these qualities have been explained above. These qualities should be in all human beings. People who have these qualities in abundance are called brahmaNAs.

We can see that no where it is said that these qualities come by birth. It is always refers to the innate characteristics of a person.

Characteristics of kshatriya varNa

Nature of the kshatriya dharma are:

- shauryaM, : One who is not afraid or overcome by others.
- veeryaM, unconquerable : One who can overcome anybody . The first two characteristics are necessary to fight against adharmic forces.
- DhruitiH, Courageousness: Ability to fight on even when things are not going well.
- TejaH radiance: The sense of power emanating that can intimidate the opponents.
- tyAgaH,
- AtmajayaH, Self-Control
- kshama, forgiveness:
- brahmanyatA , faithfulness and giving protection to brahmins.
- prasAdaH, happiness and cheerfulness under any conditions
- rakshA, protection of the weaker segments of the society

You can see that first half of the list are the characteristics of power and projection of power. In the second half of the list, are the characteristics that moderate the qualities in the first half and make that person to follow the dharmic principles for good of the society and himself. Without self-control, forgiveness and other balancing qualities, the first set of qualities may make kshatriya to become a tyrant or a dictator. This is why Srimad Bhagavatham emphasizes a balance of the qualities even in a kshatriya.

All these qualities are innate to individuals. We can recognize many people who are among us, who have these kinds of qualities.

Characteristics of Vyashya varNa

These are the characteristics of vYashya varNa:

- devaagurvaAryago bhaktiH, devotion to God, teacher, elders and cows
- trivargapariposhana, promotion of the three objects of human pursuit, dharma, artha and Kama)
- astikyaM
- udyarmonityaM, focused work
- naipuNyaM, skilfulness and innovation
-

Here one can see that vyshyas are focused on innovation, production of goods and services, making money etc.

Characteristics of Shudra varNa

- sannatiH, Obedience
- ShauchaM, Cleanliness
- seva, service. All people who are serving others (working for others) are considered to be shudra characteristics
- svamini amAyaya, serving who employs them without duplicity
- amantra yajanaH, who can worship without the knowledge of mantras. He may not be capable of deep thinking and meditation.
- asteyaM, non-stealing.
- satyaM
- goviprarakshaNam, protection of cows and brahmins

As you see above, service to others is a characteristic of shudra varNa. People who work for others, which includes a large majority people in today's world, have the shudra characteristic. Characteristics of shudras varNa are in line with the main characteristic of service.

How to classify people into varNas

There is a shloka (7. 11. 35) [*yasyayllakshNam proktaM puMso varNAbhivyaMjakaM | yadanyAtrApi dRushyeta tat tEnaiva vinirdishEt ||*] that very clearly states how to classify human beings into various varNAs. It states "If one shows the characteristics of brahmana, kshatriya, vyshya and shudra as described above, even if he has appeared in a different class, he should be accepted according to the results of the classification of his characteristics." It is clearly stated here that people should be classified according to their inherent characteristics, not according to where they are born.

This is not to say that the birth circumstances can have no influence in the character of an individual. Family circumstance and how a person is raised will have some influence in the characteristics of an individual. Innate characteristics and family circumstances both have an different amounts of influence for different people.

Discriminatory segments in Manu Smriti

There are some segments that appear to be discriminatory in nature in Manu smriti. There can be two reasons why such texts appear in Manu smriti.

- Such texts could have been added later. Many of the scriptures such as purANas (except Srimad Bhagavatha purANa) and smritis have texts that have been adulterated with interpolations and deletions.
- purANas and smritis have multiple levels of meanings. In many cases, the literal meaning is not the correct understanding. There other inner meanings which will give the right interpretations.

So, when you find statements in Manu smriti that are against the spirit of the vedas, srimad Bhagavad Gita and Srimad Bhagavatham, we have to interpret these portions with the help of the Acharyas in a manner that that is consistent with the rest of the scriptures. This concept is called "Samanvaya". Only a master that is well versed with the whole compendium of vedas, upanishads, Gita, Brahmasutras, etc., can do interpretation of the texts correctly.

One example of this kind of interpretation was done by Sri Pejwara swamiji of Udipi. He said that when a passage of manu smriti says that ChandAlas should be discriminated against, the meaning of Chandala is a morally depraved person. The passage is saying the person who has shown immoral behavior can be discriminated against as a form of punishment. This interpretation is consistent with highest level ethics presented in Srimad Bhgavatham.

We respectfully request the peeTadhipathis to interpret the manu smriti and other smritis to be relevant for the current day and age. Manu smriti and other smritis are relevant for a particular time and place. They can be periodically updated/interpreted according to the current needs. Not everybody can do these changes. This update needs to be done by a respected AchArya who has done a deep study of the scriptures and who has reached the highest levels of SAdhana.

Summary

This paper has shown that the concept of Varna is non-discriminatory and is based on the principles of classification of all human beings throughout the world. These principles are based on the highest levels of human ethical behavior that is applicable to all human beings as described in the Seventh canto of Srimad Bhagavatham. Srimad Bhagavatham states that principles of varna are psychological in nature and are not birth based. There is no basis for discrimination and unethical practices in the varna system as described in Bhagavatham. These ethical guidelines described in this article are highest level ideals that all human beings follow for their spiritual growth and emotional well being.