**Chapter 6: His Varnasrama Challenge**

*While spreading Krsna consciousness worldwide, Srila Prabhupada used the term* varnasrama *at least four ways, and applied it differently to ISKCON over three time periods.*

Between 1965 and 1977 Srila Prabhupada wrote dozens of books, opened over a hundred centers, and initiated thousands of disciples worldwide. By 1977 his nonstop sacrifice had taken its toll on his body. Returning to Vrindavan1 to continue translating Sanskrit texts about Krsna into English, Prabhupada remarked that his days on earth were numbered. When a disciple later asked if he had any regrets, Prabhupada acknowledged he had “one lamentation.”

“That you have not finished translating the *Srimad-Bhagavatam*?”2

“No, that I have not established *varnasrama.*”3 (Interview with Abhirama Dasa, 18 February 1996, Vrindavan)

That timeless culture which shepherds us from the material to the spiritual realm, *varnasrama* appears repeatedly in Prabhupada’s teachings. Yet Prabhupada had been so busy spreading the Hare Krsna movement he scarcely had time demonstrate *varnasrama’s* practical application in the modern age. Indeed, only in the last years of his life did he identify *varnasrama’s* social-spiritual features as the key to attracting humanity *en masse* to Krsna.

“This is the next aspect of Krsna consciousness which I wish to push forward….On these farms we can demonstrate the full *varnasrama* system. If these farms become successful then the whole world will be enveloped by Krsna consciousness…In the cities we are interested for preaching, but we cannot present the ideal *varnasrama* system; this is possible only at the farms, so they are very important.”4 (Letter excerpts from Srila Prabhupada to Hari Sauri Dasa, recorded in *TKG’s Diary*, 10 August 1977)

Despite the importance Prabhupada gave to *varnasrama*, his followers have been slow to embrace this aspect of his mission. To understand why, and what to do now, our first task is to recognize the different ways Prabhupada used the term.

**Four Ways5**

*One: Vedic Varnasrama*

According to India’s Vedic literature, Krsna consciousness once flourished all over the world with a culture at once scientific and spiritual, down to earth and out of this world.6  Developing their natural vocations (*varnas*) and transcending them in stages (*asramas*), people found harmony and fulfillment working together to please Lord Krsna, the Supreme Personality of Godhead.

In the *Bhagavad-gita* (4.13) Lord Krsna teaches, “According to the three modes of material nature and the work associated with them, the four divisions of human society are created by Me.” As the parts of the body work together to serve the whole, in *varnasrama* four broad vocational groups7 cooperate to serve the social body.

In Vedic times the guarantors of that cooperation were *samskaras*, sacred rites of passage through stages of spiritual progress. Prior to conceiving a child, for example, cultured people meditated on the divine, well aware that life comes from life and that the quality of their progeny would reflect the quality of their consciousness.

“That is Vedic civilization,” Prabhupada observed, *samskara* before the birth and immediately after the birth….then one after another….Marriage is also another *samskara….*These are *dasa-vidha samskara* [ten purificatory rites….[but] where is *samskara* going on [today]? Nobody takes care of….*samskara.* Still, they are declaring that ‘I am *brahmana* [highborn].’ Therefore the conclusion is *kalua sudra sambhavah*: ‘Everyone is [lowborn]. (Morning Walk, 10 April 1974, Bombay)

Indeed, the modern chaos reflects the general quality of the world’s population, as if born of a bottle of beer on Saturday night. The sacred act that once called souls to enter the world to revive their love of God is today routinely reduced to a contact sport hostile to its natural outcome, conception. And those who make it into a womb may not make it out.

As much as Prabhupada liked to present Krsna consciousness as the positive alternative to modern civilization, he knew the days of classic Vedic *varnasrama*---“the days of yore,” he called them---were gone. To spread Krsna

consciousness everywhere in modern times would require a special adaptation of *varnasrama* culture according to “time, candidate, and country.”8

*Two: Dormant Varnasrama*

Though classic *varnasrama* may be gone, its dormant realities endure, awaiting activation. For example, despite utopian attempts to make humanity classless, by nature classes remain. Speaking with a Russian professor in Moscow during the Soviet era, Prabhupada compared *varnasrama* to the sun:

So….sunshine is here---in America, in Russia, in India---everywhere. Similarly, this *varnasrama* system is prevalent everywhere in some form or other. Just like the *brahmanas.* The *brahmanas* means the most intelligent class of men, brain, brain of the society….then the *ksatriyas*, the administrator class, then the *vaisyas*, the productive class, and the *sudras*, the worker class. These four classes….are everywhere present in different names. And because it is creation by the original creator….it is prevalent everywhere, *varnasrama.*  (Conversation with Prof. Grigoriy Kotovsky, 22 June 1971, Moscow)

The professor speaking with Srila Prabhupada was an intellectual, others in his school were administrators, still others workers, and so on. By divine design different classes of people exist, not to exploit but to cooperate with one another. Oblivious of that design, materialistic classes clash and suffer. The equality we seek fully blossoms in devotional service, where all classes are valued as servants of the Supreme. When these values are forgotten, the Lord’s natural *varnasrama order* becomes corrupted, as India’s history shows.

*Three: Materialistic Varnasrama*

“The vitiated caste system of present India is never sanctioned by the scriptures,” Prabhupada wrote Indian Deputy Prime Minister Dr. Sardar Patel. “But the caste system is made by God according to quality and work of the subject and it was never designed for the benefit of accidental birth right.” (Letter to Dr. Patel, 28 February 1949, Calcutta)

Corrupt *brahmanas* claiming power and privilege based on birth have obscured the truth and beauty of India’s original *varnasrama*  culture. Though typecast by the nature we acquire at birth, by engaging in devotional service we can rise above nature’s modes to realize our spiritual potential by cooperatively serving the Lord.

Lacking loving service, too often we compete and bargain with one another, treat God like Santa Claus, and run a ritualistic race to heaven. East or West such materialistic religion wearies us, as it wearies God. It’s love we’re all after, intimate exchanges of selfless service, the spirit of divine *varnasrama* culture.

*Four: Varnasrama for* *Modern Times*

*Varnasrama* that elevates us from material to spiritual consciousness is called *daiva*, or divine. Prabhupada’s daiva-*varnasrama* for modern times includes four essential features: (1) pure devotional service to Lord Krsna, the Supreme Personality of Godhead, as the goal of life; (2) local land-and-cow economics as the model for sustainable living; (3) *varnasrama* colleges for vocational and spiritual retraining; and (4) the introduction of daiva-*varnasrama* principles according to “time, candidate, and country.”9

Borrowing a phrase from the British poet Wordsworth, Prabhupada sometimes referred to *daiva-varnasrama* as “plain living and high thinking.” When Krsna descended to earth, He Himself lived this way—in the bucolic village of Vrindavan as a boy, and later in clean-and-green Dvaraka City as a youthful prince. If we could show the world a better way to live, Prabhupada reasoned, everyone would eventually take the *daiva-varnasrama* journey home.

Prabhupada’s conclusion was the fruit of a lifetime of preaching. But since most modern Hare Krsna people don’t live the way Krsna lives, we’ve been slow to understand how Prabhupada’s application of *varnasrama* to ISKCON evolved over time.

**Three Applications**

*One: Forget Varnasrama*

From 1966 to 1973, the majority of his global preaching years, Srila Prabhupada often dismissed *varnasrama* as impractical. “Therefore, this is the panacea, to engage everyone in Krsna consciousness, chanting Hare Krsna….This is the only remedy. Now you cannot again introduce this system of *varnasrama.*  (*Bhagavad-gita* lecture, 30 December 1968, Los Angeles)

While he was launching ISKCON, Prabhupada’s priority was to put a head back on society: “At the present moment the society is headless, a dead body, or head cracked, crazy. There is head, nonsense head….What is the use of nonsense head? Therefore there is a great necessity of creating a class who will act as brain and head. That is Krsna consciousness movement.” (Lecture, 4 July 1970, San Francisco)

Since *brahmanas* are the head of the *varnasrama* social body, as much as possible Prabhupada was engaging his disciples in brahminical activities: chanting Hare Krsna, worshiping in the temple, studying and distributing his books, staging spiritual festivals, and so on. For the most part, this strategy worked, but not always, as this exchange with an early follower illustrates:

One day after a lecture [Raphael] approached the Swami, stood beside the dais, and spoke up, exasperated, impatient: “I am not meant to sit in a temple and chant on beads! My father was a boxer. I am meant to run on the beach and breathe in big breaths of air…” Raphael went on, gesticulating and voicing his familiar complaints---things he would rather do than take up Krsna consciousness. Suddenly Prabhupada interrupted him in a loud voice: “Then do it! Do it!” Raphael shrank away, but he stayed. (*Srila Prabhupada-lilamrta*, Vol. 2, *Planting the Seed*, Chapter 1)

And most did stay in those heady days of spiritual revolution. Pleased with the counterculture youth flocking to his clarion call to chant Hare Krsna, Prabhupada still wanted to give Krsna consciousness to everyone, including people who wouldn’t chant. Soon Krsna would set the world stage to help Prabhupada make *varnasrama* culture more accessible, and urgent, starting with his own followers.

*Two: The World Needs Varnasrama*

In 1973, owing to artificial manipulation of the oil supply in the Middle East, the modern world experienced an “energy crisis.” High fuel prices, long fuel lines, and violence dramatized the folly of a civilization based on finite fossil fuels.

Amidst the angst Srila Prabhupada saw an opportunity. Walking and talking with leading disciples the following spring, Prabhupada noted that if we could show the public a better way to live, they would be more inclined to listen to Krsna. “Because if the people are in chaos, how they’ll be able to accept the great philosophy? It requires cool brain.” (Morning Walk, 14 March 1974, Vrindavan)

Indeed, a brain nourished by fresh milk from protected cows, Prabhupada wrote, “can assimilate the subtle form of spiritual knowledge.” (*Light of the Bhagavata*, text 27) To show the world a better way to live, Prabhupada’s followers would have to learn and teach the fundamentals of *varnasrama* culture. “[A] *varnasrama* college has to be established immediately,” Prabhupada declared. “Everywhere, wherever we have got our center, a *varnasrama* college should be established.” (Morning Walk, 12 March 1974, Vrindavan)

The devotees were astonished. Why was Prabhupada reversing his attitude toward *varnasrama*? But as they continued to walk with him, they began to understand his new tack as an extension of his compassion.

“Devotee, personally, he has no problem, but he pushes himself in this degraded society to teach….how to live, how to become gentlemen. Otherwise, we have no business. But if we don’t give them the opportunity, they’ll not be able to come to Krsna consciousness.” (Morning Walk, 14 March 1974, Vrindavan)

Since devotees are already with Krsna, Prabhupada continued, they don’t need *varnasrama.*  But humanity needs *varnasrama* to learn how to live and come home to Krsna. It wasn’t long before Prabhupada would further extend his compassion by telling the devotees how much they too needed *varnasrama*, humanity’s “steppingstone for spiritual understanding.” (*Bhagavad-gita As It Is,* 2.31 purport)

*Three: You Need Varnasrama*

On February 14, 1977, in his quarters in Mayapur, India, Srila Prabhupada reminded the devotees how important it was for them to inspire and educate people by following *varnasrama* principles. When a disciple pointed out that Lord Caitanya10 dismissed *varnasrama* as “external,” Prabhupada replied, “Our position is different….Our duty is that we shall arrange the external affairs all so nicely that one day they will come to the spiritual platform very easily, paving the way.”

When another disciple wondered why devotees, who were already on the spiritual platform, beyond the designations of *varna* and *asrama*, should follow *varnasrama* principles, Prabhupada challenged his assumption:

*Varnasrama* should be established to become Vaisnava [devotee]. It is not so easy to become Vaisnava….If Vaisnava, to become Vaisnava, is so easy, why so many… fall down? It is not easy to become Vaisnava.11

The longer Prabhupada preached in the West the more he saw how even his own followers would need the *varnasrama* bridge to come to Krsna. As his life on earth was drawing to a close, Prabhupada knew that building the bridge---a bridge the whole world could cross---would be a great challenge.

**His Varnasrama Challenge**

In Chapter 5 we saw how Srila Prabhupada expanded the Hare Krsna movement in phases. Whereas earlier phases focused on brahminical concerns and activities---holy names and holy books, temples and deity worship, initiation and congregation---the *varnasrama* phaseinvites everyone to help build a spiritual society.

In the *Bhagavad-gita* (12.8-10) Lord Krsna makes a similarly progressive entreaty. “Just fix your mind on Me,” He advises the advanced listener. For the less advanced the Lord then recommends the disciplines of devotional yoga. “In this way you will develop a desire to attain Me.” And for those not ready to follow strict vows, Krsna recommends working for Him.

In his commentary to text 10, Prabhupada reaches out to all kinds of readers:

There are many devotees who are engaged in the propagation of Krsna consciousness, and they require help. So, even if one cannot directly practice the regulative principles of *bhakti-yoga*, he can try to help such work. Every endeavor requires land, capital, organization, and labor…. This voluntary service to the cause of Krsna consciousness will help one to rise to a higher state of love of God, whereupon one becomes perfect.

Where most people live in or near cities, it is natural to engage them in building temples to attract everyone to Krsna. At the same time, the modern urge to live a simpler, more natural way of life will find fulfillment the more devotees engage people in building spiritual communities that live the way Krsna lives.

“So this Krsna consciousness movement is trying to revive….village organization, as you are trying here. Krsna, in his natural life, is a village boy in Vrindavan. Vrindavan is a village…But it does not mean that we shall avoid city life or town life. No. Everything, every place is Krsna’s place. Everywhere there should be Krsna consciousness. (Lecture, 15 July 1976, Gita-nagari Village)

Srila Prabhupada’s *daiva-varnasrama* village holds the keys to unlock the modern eco-challenge. “If these farms become successful, then the whole world will be enveloped by Krsna consciousness.” And since the *varnasrama* college holds the blueprints to the village, “The *varnasrama* college has to be established immediately. Everywhere, wherever we have got our center….”12

Town or country, reviving divine *varnasrama* culture will illumine our natural place in Krsna’s world. And by appreciating one another as His eternal servants, we’ll find the freedom, equality, and happiness we seek in this life and the next.

NOTES

1The earthly counterpart of Krsna’s eternal abode, located some ninety miles southeast of New Delhi, India. 2”The Beautiful Story of the Supreme Personality of Godhead,” the cream of Vedic literature. 3*Varnasrama* culture teaches us how to practice our *varna* (vocation) throughout the stages of spiritual life (*asrama*). 4By “farms” Srila Prabhupada meant agrarian-based villages with certain social-spiritual features. *Varnasrama* cities also included these features, though in different proportions. 5For more about the ways Prabhupada used the term *“varnasrama,”* see the July/August 2000 issue of BTG (#34-4 in the Bhaktivedanta Vedabase). 6Apart from scriptural evidence, modern archeologists continue to unearth Vedic artifacts worldwide. In your search engine, type “vedic artifacts worldwide.” 7The four vocational groups: (1) priests, teachers, counselors; (2) soldiers, statesmen, administrators; (3) agriculturalists, bankers, businessmen; (4) artists, craftsmen, laborers, general assistants. 8*Sri Caitanya-caritamrta, Madhya-lila*,23.105 Purport. 9Ibid. 10Lord Krsna’s “golden avatar,” who popularized the dancing and chanting of Hare Krsna over five hundred years ago in India. 11Room Conversation, 14 February 1977, “Varnasrama System Must Be Introduced,” Mayapur. 12For more about the *varnasrama* college, see the Bhaktivedanta Vedabase: Contents/Compilations/Varnasrama-dharma/VD2

*Having seen the scope of Srila Prabhupada’s* varnasrama *vision, in Chapter 7 we’ll look at how to find our individual mission in his mission.*