

Relevance of the Bhagavad-Gītā's Perspective on Varṇāśrama System

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How to cite this article: Dr. Debojit Pegu (2024). Relevance of the Bhagavad-Gītā's Perspective on Varṇāśrama System. Library Progress International, 44(4), 819-823

Abstract

This paper explores the philosophical relevance of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* perspective on the *varṇāśrama* system in human society. The *Bhagavad-Gītā* is the eternal light for humankind. Living entities are spiritual sparks of the Supreme Being. The *varṇāśrama* system helps people realize their true identities. It refers to both the individual and the collective order. Each order contains four divisions. The four divisions of social life are organized around activity and quality. Every person has natural talent. It determines the individual's inclination. In materialistic life, a person fulfills his responsibility because of his qualities. Spiritual identity is preferable to worldly identity. Spiritual identity creates an environment of tranquility in the material world. The *Bhagavad-Gītā* is a science of spiritual knowledge. It concerns the entire human society, not just a particular society. The *varṇāśrama* system in the *Bhagavad-Gītā* helps individuals discover spiritual science and the Absolute Truth. The Supreme Personality of Godhead, *Kṛṣṇa* is the concrete and the highest spiritual form of Absolute Truth.

Keywords: The Supreme Personality of Godhead, *Kṛṣṇa*, *Bhagavad-Gītā*, *varṇāśrama* system, Self-realization, human society.

Introduction

Human society is governed by a kind of eternal principles. Social rules and regulations have existed from the beginning of civilization. In human society, people live together. For peace and prosperity, everyone in society should work collectively. The totality of the person functioned as the foundation of for society. Human beings are both intellectual beings and spiritual sparks of the Absolute Being.

In Vedic culture, the social order is founded on the scriptures and the knowledge of great wise people or saints. The Holy Scriptures is not an ordinary book; it reveals the Absolute Truth of renowned sages. This is the core of realization. The scriptures enable a person to comprehend his real traits. A person's true identity is that he is not a material body, but a spiritual spirit. He is an integral aspect of the Supreme Personality of Godhead. Self-realization teaches us that we are finite and partial, but the universe is limitless, and the perfect Being exists from whence everything emanates. He is the

source of everything. The human being is composed of both matter and soul.

The corporeal body represents the matter aspect, while the spiritual being represents the spirit aspect. Developing both sides leads to self-realization. It cannot be sustained by the development of only one part. It is only partial. Partial knowledge prevents humans from realizing themselves and the Absolute Truth. He must understand the interrelationship between the physical and spiritual aspects of human beings. Through thorough study of scriptures and following the beneficial directions of truth seers or great sages, a person can develop a humanistic quality and live in harmony with others. Unfortunately, most individuals are not interested in studying scripture or realizing it right now. They spend a lot of time in sense gratification. Science and technological development are valueless and meaningless without concern for the spiritual and moral order. The sense of gratification cannot give peace and prosperity to human beings. Conscience is the eternal light of human existence.

It separates the human being from other living entities in this material world and leads to the path of self-realization.

The *Bhagavad-Gītā* is considered to be the source of eternal light and strength in human civilization. The *Bhagavad-Gītā* provides a comprehensive understanding of both material and spiritual knowledge. A human being must have a thorough comprehension of the Absolute Truth in order to realize it. Spiritual knowledge is superior to material knowledge. Spiritual wisdom is the unbreakable power and strength of the human person. Spiritual wisdom is the mature result of all austerities and penances. In *Bhagavad-Gītā*, chapter fourth, verse 38 says as follows,

**“na hi jñānena sadṛśaṁ pavitraṁ iha vidyaye
tat svayaṁ yoga-saṁsiddhaḥ kālenātmani
vindat | 4 | 38 |”**

“In this world, there is nothing so sublime and pure as transcendental knowledge. Such knowledge is the mature fruit of all mysticism. One who has become accomplished in the practice of devotional service enjoys this knowledge within himself in due course of time¹.”

The *Bhagavad-Gītā* is the core of all Vedic texts and literature. The soul is immortal and eternal. The body, on the other hand, is always altering and deteriorating. The human body is an integral aspect of the human society. Like the spirit, the soul is an important component of the Absolute Being. The Absolute Being is eternally present in His abode. In *Śrī Brahma-saṁhitā* says as follows

**“īśvaraḥ paramaḥ kṛṣṇaḥ sac-cid-ānanda-
vighraḥ
anādir ādir govindaḥ sarva-kāraṇa-kāraṇam
| 1 | 1 |”**

“Kṛṣṇa who is known as Govinda is the Supreme Godhead. He has an eternal blissful spiritual body. He is the original of all. He has no other origin and He is the prime cause of all cause.²”

Varṇāśrama System

A human being is living in society since time immemorial. Individuals are responsible for shaping society. There are far more social activities in the world. Every society has specific standards and traditions. Human society's standards and traditions lead to the supreme personality of Godhead and the ultimate well-

being of human existence. The norm and custom reveal a glimpse of the universal principle. The *varṇāśrama system* in Vedic culture refers to the social structure and order of human civilization. The social and moral order partially governs individual activities. The society serves as a forum for individuals to showcase their actions and realizations.

The *varṇāśrama system* is very scientific and sound in human civilization. The *varṇāśrama system* is the spiritual and moral order of the individual as well as society. The word “varṇāśrama” is constituted by the two words “varṇa” and “āśrama” which indicate the social and individual life respectively. Varna, according to the scripture refers to the classification of people based on their qualities. The term is derived from the Sanskrit word “vr”, which means “to describe”, “to classify” and “to cover”. The varṇa system of four castes --- Brāhmaṇa, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya, and Śūdra is perfectly organized in material terms to allow people to live peacefully and pursue spiritual life while engaged in their regular occupations.

The varṇāśrama system attempts to organize society such that everyone, regardless of position, can progress spiritually. The *varṇāśrama system* assigns work based on individuals' innate capabilities and abilities. There cannot be a classless society because, as long as a person lives in the material world, classes exist in their natural form. In the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, the Supreme Personality of Godhead, Kṛṣṇa states that He creates the four divisions in human society based on quality and behaviour, not by birth. In *Bhagavad-Gītā*, chapter fourth, verse 13, The Supreme Personality of Godhead, Kṛṣṇa Himself declares as follows

**“cātur-varṇyaṁ mayā sṛṣṭaṁ guṇa-karma-
vibhāgaśaḥ
tasya kartāram api mām viddhy akartāram
avyayam | 4 | 13 |”**

“According to the three modes of material nature and the work associated with them, the four divisions of human society are created by Me. And although I am the creator of this system, you should know that I am yet the non-doer, being unchangeable³”

The Lord is the creator of everything. Everything is born of Him, everything is sustained by Him, and

¹ Bhagavad Gītā AS IT IS, A.C.Bhaktivedanta Swāmi Prabhupāda, The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1972, p.285.

² Śrī Brahma-Saṁhitā, Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura Goswāmi, The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 2013, p.1

³ Bhagavad-Gītā AS IT IS, A.C.Bhaktivedanta Swāmi Prabhupāda, The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1972, p.255

everything after annihilation rests in Him. He is, therefore, the creator of the four divisions of the social order, beginning with the intelligent class of men, technically called *Brāhmanas* due to their being situated in the mode of goodness. Next is the administrative class, technically called the *Ksatriyas* due to their being situated in the mode of passion. The mercantile men, called the *vaiśyas* are situated in the mixed modes of passion and ignorance, and the *śūdras* or labor class are situated in the ignorant mode of material nature. The tendency of a particular man toward work is determined by the modes of material nature which he has acquired. Nature is manufacturing different types of bodies according to the association of the living entity with a particular type of quality. The four divisions in human society are set according to quality and action; not by birth.

Quality and Work of Each Class or Varṇa in Society

In the *varṇāśrama* system, each class or *varṇa* has certain qualities and duties. Only possessing the quality is not sufficient; he should perform his duty according to the possessed quality. In material nature, there are three *guṇas* or qualities which are everlasting, for example, the heat and light of the fire. The three qualities are known as goodness (*svattika*), passion (*rājasika*) and ignorance (*tāmasika*). Every person is bound by it. A person performs his duty or action which the quality he possesses. In these senses, there is an interconnection between action and quality.

Brāhmana

These are first-class and intellectual people in society. The Brahmin can control his mind and senses. They are expected to speak the truth and provide the right advice, without fear of anything, including death. In *Bhagavad Gītā*, chapter eighteenth, verse 42 The Supreme Personality of Godhead, *Kṛṣṇa* says the qualities and work like as --

“śamo damas tapaḥ śaucaṁ kṣāntir ārjavam eva ca |
jñānaṁ vijñānaṁ āstikyaṁ brahma-karma
svabhāva-jam || 18 || 42 ||”

“Peacefulness, self-control, austerity, purity, tolerance, honesty, knowledge, wisdom, and

religiousness ---- these are the natural qualities by which the *Brahmaṇas* work⁴.”

Ksatriya

Ksatriyas are the ruling class of the society ----- the people who work for governments in various capacities. They control the government. They are very powerful and very influential. He must be determined; he never flees from any terrible situation. He has a governing spirit. In *Bhagavad Gītā*, chapter eighteenth, verse no. 43 The Supreme Personality of Godhead, *Kṛṣṇa* explains the qualities and work such as ----

“śauryaṁ tejo dhṛtir dākṣyaṁ yuddhe cāpy
apalāyanam |

dānam īśvara-bhāvaś ca kṣātraṁ karma
svabhāva-jam || 18 || 43 ||”

“Heroism, power, determination, resourcefulness, courage in battle, generosity, and leadership are the natural qualities of work for the *kshatriyas*⁵.”

Vaiśya and Śūdra

Vaiśyas are mercantile trader. They produce food grains, and agricultural products and protect the domestic animal. These are business people, and entrepreneurs involved in various businesses that would enable the society to financially sustain.

Śūdras are the working class and general people in society. They are dependent on the other three *varṇas* or classes for work, money, and intellectual support. They serve them in any circumstance. In *Bhagavad-Gītā*, chapter eighteenth, verse 44 The Supreme Personality of Godhead, *Kṛṣṇa* says the qualities and work as follows

“kṛṣi-go-rakṣya-vāṇijyaṁ vaiśya-karma
svabhāva-jam |

Paricaryātmakaṁ karma śūdrasyāpi svabhāva-
jam || 18 || 44 ||

“Farming, cow protection, and business are the natural work for the *vaiśyas* and the *śūdras* there is labor and service to others⁶.”

Four Stages or Āśramas in Individual Life

The literal meaning of the word *āśrama* is “a halting or resting place”. Hence, *āśrama* signifies that a stoppage or we may say a stage of rest in the journey of life to prepare a man for future journeys. The word *āśrama* is derived from the Sanskrit root ‘śrama’ which means to exert oneself. Hence

⁴ *Bhagavad-Gītā AS IT IS*, A.C.Bhaktivedanta Swāmi Prabhupāda, The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1972, p.876

⁵ *Bhagavad-Gītā AS IT IS*, A.C.Bhaktivedanta Swāmi Prabhupāda, The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1972, p.876

⁶ *Ibid.*

āśrama stands to mean (1) the place where exertions are performed. (2) the action of performing such exertion is initiated.

Āśramas are regarded as different stages in the life of an individual which train him for some period and the individual exerts himself in the same order to qualify himself for the next stage of life. According to the scheme, life is divided into four stages viz. Brahmacharya, Gr̥haṣṭha, Vānaprastha, and Śanyāśa. Every stage has its duties and functions. By passing through the prescribed duties, a man can prepare himself for *Mokṣa* or liberation.

Brahmacharya Āśrama

The first stage of life is called Brahmacharya āśrama. Brahmacharya is a period of formal education lasting until around age 25, during which the student leaves home to stay with a guru and attain both spiritual and practical knowledge. The student has two duties: to learn the skills of his life and to practice unwavering devotion to his teachers.

Gr̥haṣṭha Āśrama

The second āśrama begins at marriage when one must undertake the responsibility for earning a living and supporting a family. At this stage person first practices dharma, but also pursues wealth or material gratification (artha) as a necessity, and indulges in sexual pleasure (kāma) under certain defined social and cosmic norms.

Vānaprastha Āśrama

The vanaprastha āśrama is of gradual withdrawal. At this age, he should renounce all physical, material, and sexual pleasures, and retire from his social and professional life. The role of the third āśrama is to be consulted as elders by the community of large, teaching dharma to those who visit him.

Śannyāśa Āśrama

The śannyasa āśrama is one of renunciation and the realization of dharma. At this stage, a person is supposed to be devoted to God. He is a śannyasi, who has renounced all desires, fears, hopes, duties, and responsibilities. He is virtually merged with God, all his worldly ties are broken, and his sole concern becomes attaining mokṣa or release from the circle of birth and death.

Relevance of Bhagavad-Gītā's Perspective on Varṇāśrama in Human Society

The philosophical and spiritual teachings of *Bhagavad-Gītā* are applicable to the entire human species, not just specific societies or communities.

It is eternal and ever-fresh. As a result, it is always important to construct a strong and healthy human society. The *varṇāśrama system* is the most essential and applicable vision of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* because it emphasizes human intellectual aptitude and behaving accordingly, rather than based on birth. Nature has a natural division and categorization, and it is the subtle shape of three types of qualities: goodness, passion, and ignorance.

The *varṇāśrama system* is the spiritual disciplinary code and order for self-realization and through self-realization a human being might be able to realize the esoteric truth and ultimate Reality. The *varṇāśrama system* is an essential and initial stage to revive the dormant eternal consciousness of human beings. Following the instruction of *Bhagavad-Gītā* regarding the *varṇāśrama system* maybe a person can realize his/her real self-identity and live in human society peacefully. Hence the *varṇāśrama system* formulated by the *Bhagavad-Gītā* is ever relevant in human society.

Conclusion

The *varṇāśrama system* encourages people to cooperate and work together to meet societal needs. It is part of the process of self-discovery and development. It is to provide the means for everyone to work according to their natural tendency, bringing enjoyment to both the individual and society. It would assist in the management of physical, mental, intellectual, and spiritual energy in order to improve one's health, mental and physical development, and productivity, as well as spiritual awareness.

The vision of *Bhagavad-Gītā* on the *varṇāśrama system* appears scientific and based on logical reasoning and spiritual views. Intellectual insight, philosophical reasoning, and spiritual vision are fundamental aspects of human beings. To nurture these qualities, strictly adhere to the *varṇāśrama system* of the *Bhagavad-Gītā*. It is always relevant to human civilization, regardless of caste, creed, religion, or ethnicity, to strive for prosperity and peace.

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