

Theme 2D Religious life: Key moral principles of Varnashramadharma

Key concepts

- The origin of the varna system can be traced to the Aryan invasion of India. They devised a class system to organise the new society created by their arrival. Initially they created a system of three varnas, later expanded to include a fourth, the sudra.
- Hindus would also point to the religious origin of the varna system which is its divine justification. It is not a human hierarchy, but a divinely ordained system. In the Rig Veda, the Purusha Sukta hymn refers to the sacrifice of a huge primeval man or giant called Purusha from whom the four varnas came. The Brahmins came from the creator's mouth; the kshatriya emerged from his arms; the vaishya came from his abdomen/thighs and the sudra from his feet.
- Catuvarnashramadharma defines duties for the individual according to the four varnas and the four stages of life: ashramas. Every Hindu has duties according to his or her varna: brahmin, these are the providers of education and spiritual leadership; kshatriyas, these are the protectors of society; vaishyas, this is the productive class; and shudras, these are the workers.
- The ashramas are the four main stages or periods of life. There are specific duties associated with each ashrama, the first is brahmacharya, the student stage. Traditionally boys were expected to live away from home during this stage and study with a guru for several years to foster spiritual values. Grihastha, the householder stage, is the stage when a Hindu decides to marry and accept family responsibilities. Vanaprastha the retired person stage, begins when a man reaches old age. Sannyasa, the ascetic stage, is traditionally it is only available in later life. The Sannyasin become wandering hermits, leaving their family and living a life dependant on God alone.
- Doing good or correct actions in accordance with dharma, and according to varna and ashrama, is understood by many Hindus as a service to humanity and to God. The bhakti movement, which advocates a personal relationship with a deity based on devotion, sees each act, word and deed as an expression of that devotion. Therefore, varnashramadharma can be viewed as an act of bhakti worship. Sanatana-dharma refers to 'the eternal law' which is universal and duties that take into account the person's spiritual identity and are the same for everyone.

Key quotes

"When they divided the man, into how many parts did they disperse him? What became of his mouth, what of his arms, what were his two thighs and his two feet called? His mouth was the brahmana, his arms were made into the Kshatriyas, his two thighs were the vaishyas and from his feet the sudras were born." (Rig Veda 10 : 90 : 11-12)

"The significance of the varna system is thus fundamentally spiritual : it was created by the gods and is inherently dharmic (in the sense of 'the way things should be'); it enables each individual to know what his or her particular dharma is, and thus to gain good karma by following it; and it is based on concepts of spiritual purity." (Ian Jamison - Hinduism)

"The ashrama system has many obvious benefits. It gives each individual a clear framework within which to move through life and emphasises one's obligations to society, while at the same time providing an opportunity to develop one's spiritual side. It further enables each person to know their dharma and thus to accumulate the good karma that they will need to progress up the varna system in a future rebirth or to achieve moksha." (Ian Jamieson - Hinduism)

"It is better to do one's own dharma, even though imperfectly, than to do another's dharma, even though perfectly. By doing one's innate duties, a person does not incur sin." (Bhagavad Gita 18:4)

Key words

Aryan	Rig Veda	Purusha Sukta	Brahmin	varna
Ashrama	kshatriyas	Vaishyas	sudras	grihastha
brahmacharya	sannyasa	dharma	Vanaprastha	bhakti
Catuvarnashramadharma		Sanatana-dharma		

Issues for analysis and evaluation

Key arguments/debates

Some would argue that the ashramas are still relevant for Hindus today. Others would argue that the ashramas do not conform to modern lifestyle. Some would argue that they are of the two pillars of Hindu socio-religious tradition.

Key questions

Can it be argued that Hinduism is a religion of duty?
Is varnashramadharma the greatest influence on Hindu lifestyle?
Is varnashramadharma an act of bhakti worship?