



## An Overview of the Social Structure Depicted in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa

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### Abstract:

*The Bhāgavata Purāṇa (also known as Śrīmad-Bhāgavata am) stands as one of the most revered texts in the Hindu tradition, synthesizing philosophical insight with social ideals. Its social structure reflects both continuity and transformation within Vedic civilization. Rooted in the varṇa-āśrama-dharma system, it presents a hierarchy not merely of birth or occupation but of inner disposition (guṇa) and action (karma). The Purāṇa integrates the four varṇas—Brāhmaṇa, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya, and Śūdra—and the four stages of life—Brahmacarya, Gṛhastha, Vānaprastha, and Sannyāsa—within a broader spiritual framework aiming at liberation (mokṣa). Unlike rigid social codes, the Bhāgavata Purāṇa emphasizes devotion (bhakti) as the highest unifying principle transcending caste and gender distinctions. Exemplary devotees such as Prahlāda, Dhruva, and the gopīs illustrate that true spiritual merit arises from surrender and purity of heart, not social privilege. Simultaneously, the text delineates the duties and moral responsibilities of kings, householders, and ascetics, envisioning a well-ordered yet compassionate society anchored in righteousness (dharma). This paper explores how the Bhāgavata Purāṇa transforms traditional social categories into instruments of spiritual evolution, thereby offering a model of social harmony grounded in ethical conduct, mutual respect, and devotion to the Divine.*

**Keywords:** Bhāgavata Purāṇa, Varṇa-Āśrama-Dharma, Bhakti, Social Structure, Dharma, Equality, Spirituality, Indian Philosophy.

### 1. Introduction

The Bhāgavata Purāṇa, one of the eighteen Mahāpurāṇas, is attributed to Sage Vyāsa and revered as a spiritual scripture par excellence. Composed in Sanskrit, it weaves theology, cosmology, and ethics into narrative form. Beyond its philosophical content, the text provides deep insight into the social organization and moral ideals of classical Indian society. This paper analyzes the Bhāgavata Purāṇa's depiction of social structure, focusing on how it reinterprets Vedic social systems through the transformative lens of bhakti (devotion).

### 2. The Varṇa System: Duties Based on Qualities and Actions

The Bhāgavata Purāṇa (7.11.35) defines varṇa not by birth but by guṇa (qualities) and karma (actions). "The characteristics of brāhmaṇas, kṣatriyas, vaiśyas, and śūdras are determined by their own nature, as

manifested in their activities.”This ethical re-formulation marks a departure from rigid caste hierarchies. Brāhmaṇas are guides of spiritual knowledge; Kṣatriyas uphold justice; Vaiśyas sustain the economy; and Śūdras provide service and labor. Each varṇa contributes to social harmony when guided by dharma and selfless service. The Purāṇa’s narratives, such as that of King Prthu, portray ideal rulers who embody humility and devotion, illustrating leadership grounded in moral virtue.

### **3. The Āśrama System: The Stages of Life**

The text upholds the four āśramas—Brahmacarya (student life), Gṛhastha (householder), Vānaprastha (retirement), and Sannyāsa (renunciation)—as progressive paths of spiritual discipline. The Gṛhastha is praised as the “pivot” of all stages, sustaining society through generosity and dharmic living. Yet the ultimate goal of every āśrama remains God-realization. By emphasizing spiritual purpose across all life stages, the Bhāgavata Purāṇa harmonizes worldly duty and transcendence.

### **4. Women and Family in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa**

Women in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa are depicted with dignity and spiritual potential. Exemplary figures like Devahūti, Kuntī, and the gopīs of Vṛndāvana embody profound devotion surpassing intellectual or social distinctions. The Bhāgavata Purāṇa offers a nuanced portrayal of women and family life within its larger spiritual and social vision. While it reflects the patriarchal framework of ancient Indian society, it simultaneously uplifts women as embodiments of faith, devotion, and moral strength. The text repeatedly emphasizes that spiritual realization is not limited by gender, caste, or social role, but is accessible to anyone devoted to God (bhakta).

#### **4.1 Women as Devotees and Spiritual Exemplars**

The Bhāgavata Purāṇa recognizes women as capable of attaining the highest state of bhakti-yoga (devotion to God). In Canto 10, the gopīs, though simple village women, surpass even divine consorts in their love for God. Here, the Bhāgavata Purāṇa redefines spiritual hierarchy—bhakti, not birth or gender, determines spiritual greatness (S.B.X.47.60). It shows that the gopīs of Vṛndāvana stand as the highest exemplars of unconditional love and surrender to Kṛṣṇa.

#### **4.2 The Role of Mothers and Family Ethics**

The Bhāgavata Purāṇa honors motherhood as sacred, portraying mothers as transmitters of divine values and protectors of dharma. Devahūti, the mother of Lord Kapila, represents wisdom and inquiry. Her dialogue with her son (S.B.III.25–33) conveys the path of self-realization. Kapila teaches Devahūti that spiritual realization comes through association and devotion, not through birthright or gender privilege. The dialogue portrays the mother as a seeker and the son as a divine teacher, symbolizing the sacredness of family relationships when centered on dharma and devotion. In Bhāgavata Purāṇa it is mentioned that “In the association of pure devotees, discussions of My glories are pleasing to the heart and ears, and such talks liberate one from ignorance(S.B.III.25.13).”

#### **4.3 Women as Sources of Wisdom and Faith**

The Bhāgavata Purāṇa portrays several women—such as Queen Kuntī, Draupadī, Devahūti, and Satyabhāmā—as embodiments of strength, humility, and faith. Kuntī’s prayers to Kṛṣṇa (S.B.I.8) are among the most profound expressions of surrender in the entire text. Bhāgavata Purāṇa exemplifies female spiritual heroism—Kuntī welcomes suffering if it brings remembrance of God. The Bhāgavata Purāṇa thus celebrates women’s inner strength and faith rather than restricting them to domestic roles(S.B.I.8.42).

#### 4.4 Family Life as a Field of Dharma

In the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, family life (gṛhastha-āśrama) is not seen as a hindrance to spiritual progress but as a sacred opportunity to practice dharma (righteous duty) and devotion while living amidst worldly responsibilities. The Purāṇa affirms that household life, when guided by discipline, compassion, and God-consciousness, becomes a training ground for selflessness and devotion. In Canto 7.14.9, householders are advised to see marriage as a cooperative path toward dharma and devotion. Thus, the Bhāgavata Purāṇa envisions family as a microcosm of divine service—a place where love, responsibility, and detachment coexist harmoniously. This Purāṇa instructs that one may remain within family life yet be spiritually detached, using relationships as means to cultivate love, patience, and sacrifice. The ideal is to act in the world while keeping one's heart centered on God.

Marriage (vivāha) is portrayed not merely as a social contract but as a sacred partnership meant to advance dharma and mutual spiritual growth. Husband and wife are described as saha-dharmacārīṇī—companions in righteousness (S.B.X.60.47).

The Purāṇa holds the gṛhastha stage in high esteem, describing it as the foundation supporting all other āśramas—brahmacārī (student), vānaprastha (retired), and sannyāsī (renunciate). A householder who performs duties according to dharma not only sustains family members but also supports saints, ascetics, and the needy through generosity (dāna). The verse (S.B.VII.14.8) of Bhāgavata Purāṇa underlines that true prosperity lies in service, not possession. The gṛhastha's home is envisioned as a miniature temple where all actions, including earning and nurturing, are sanctified by remembrance of the Divine.

A dhārmic household is described as one where daily life revolves around remembrance of God. Householders are advised to offer food to the Lord before eating, perform satsaṅga (association with saints), and practice compassion toward all beings. Bhāgavata Purāṇa reveals that hospitality (atithi-sevā) and charity are the essence of domestic dharma, transforming the household into a center of generosity and divine remembrance (S.B.VII.14.15). Bhāgavata Purāṇa depicts household Life as a Path to Liberation. The Bhāgavata Purāṇa repeatedly emphasizes that spiritual realization is possible within family life if one acts selflessly. In seventh skandha, Prahlāda teaches that one may remain in family life and yet be liberated if the mind is not attached (S.B.VII.6.9). Hence, detachment (vairāgya) and devotion (bhakti) are to be cultivated within the home. The household becomes a field for the purification of desire, preparing the soul for higher stages of renunciation.

Thus, it can be said that in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, family life is not renounced but spiritualized. It is portrayed as a laboratory of dharma, where love, duty, and renunciation coexist. A true householder maintains balance — performing worldly duties with care while keeping unwavering remembrance of the Lord. When conducted in this spirit, the family becomes a living expression of yajña (sacrifice) and a vital step toward liberation (mokṣa).

#### 5. Kingship and the Ideal Society

The Bhāgavata Purāṇa presents a profound vision of righteous kingship (rājadharmā), portraying the ruler not as a despot but as a servant of God and protector of the people. Political authority, according to the text, is divinely ordained and carries the highest moral responsibility. A true king (rājan) governs with compassion, justice, and humility, ensuring both material welfare and spiritual elevation of his subjects. Thus, kingship is seen as a spiritual stewardship, forming the foundation of an ideal, God-centered society.

The Purāṇa establishes that the king functions as a representative of the Supreme Lord on earth, entrusted with the duty of protecting dharma and maintaining social harmony (S.B.IV.20.14). Here, the king's authority

derives not from force but from moral integrity. The ruler is called arājarṣi—a “king-sage”—symbolizing a synthesis of governance and wisdom. By his personal virtue, the king inspires the same in his subjects. One of the king’s foremost duties is to protect all beings—humans, animals, and nature—through righteous law and compassionate administration. The verse (S.B.I.17.12) reflects the Bhāgavata Purāṇa’s vision of protective paternal kingship—a ruler as the guardian of moral order, exercising justice without cruelty. Punishment (daṇḍa) is justified only when it upholds righteousness and social harmony.

King Pṛthu, one of the great monarchs described in Canto 4, embodies the Bhāgavata Purāṇa’s ideals of leadership. He is depicted as both a warrior and a sage, ruling with devotion and fairness. The earth herself praises him as her nourisher, for he ensures abundance through righteous conduct (S.B.IV.21.20). Thus, good governance leads to spiritual awakening. When the ruler performs his duty selflessly, his subjects naturally develop devotion (bhakti) and virtue.

Another exemplary king, Parīkṣit, illustrates justice guided by spiritual discernment. In the first skandha, He confronts the personification of Kali (the spirit of the present age of corruption), sparing him only under strict moral conditions (S.B.I.17.25–26). Parīkṣit’s reign represents justice tempered with compassion, where the moral law, not vengeance, guides the ruler’s decisions. This story symbolizes how an ideal king maintains order even in the age of decline by upholding satya (truth) and dayā (compassion).

The Bhāgavata Purāṇa envisions a harmonious society where rulers, priests, merchants, and workers fulfill their duties in mutual respect and cooperation. The prosperity of the realm reflects the king’s adherence to dharma. Under righteous governance, nature itself becomes auspicious (S.B.I.10.4–6). This idyllic vision reflects the Purāṇic belief that when the king rules by dharma, cosmic order (ṛta) is maintained, and all beings—human and non-human—flourish in harmony.

Ultimately, the Bhāgavata Purāṇa rejects the notion of kingship as domination. True sovereignty belongs to God (Īśvara); the king merely serves as His instrument. The verse (S.B.IX.6.53) emphasizes divine kingship as sacred duty — a call to serve, not to rule for self-interest. When the ruler forgets this principle, tyranny and moral decay follow, leading to social and cosmic disorder.

Bhāgavata Purāṇa mentions that the kingship is a sacred trust, and governance is a form of seva (service) to both God and humanity, upholds dharma above personal gain, Protects his people as a father protects his children, rules with humility, wisdom, and devotion, promotes a society where spiritual and material welfare coexist. Such a ruler is not merely a political leader but a spiritual exemplar, guiding his subjects toward righteousness and devotion. Under his rule, the rājya (kingdom) transforms into a dhārmic samāja (righteous society), where justice, prosperity, and peace flow naturally.

## 6. The Supremacy of Bhakti over Social Distinctions

The Bhāgavata Purāṇa elevates bhakti (devotion to God) as the highest and most universal spiritual path, transcending all forms of social, ritual, and caste-based distinctions that traditionally structured Hindu society. In its philosophical outlook, bhakti is not bound by birth, gender, or social class—it is open to everyone who sincerely surrenders to God with pure heart and love. A central teaching of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa is that bhakti (devotion) transcends all social categories. “Even if one is born in a low family, if he has devotion to Me, he is certainly pure.” (S.B.XI.14.21) This doctrine unites all beings under divine equality. Saints like Prahlāda and devotees like Sudāmā show that spiritual worth lies not in caste but in love for God. The text thus envisions a universal community where devotion dissolves barriers of birth, wealth, and gender.

The Purāṇa repeatedly asserts that a devotee's social position or gender does not hinder their spiritual progress. Even those born outside the traditional varṇa system—such as the Śūdras or Mlecchas—are said to attain perfection through bhakti. The verse (S.B.II.4.18) explicitly rejects social exclusion and declares that divine grace and association with true devotees cleanse all impurities of birth and status.

Through this lens, bhakti becomes a transformative force that redefines social identity. One's worth is determined not by lineage (janma), learning (śāstra-jñāna), or ritual purity, but by sincerity of heart and devotion to God. Thus, bhakti democratizes spirituality and undermines rigid social hierarchies (S.B.XI.5.2). This radical statement reinforces that bhakti transcends external qualifications.

In essence, the Bhāgavata Purāṇa envisions a society where bhakti is the ultimate equalizer—erasing barriers of caste, gender, and status. It offers a vision of spiritual democracy: anyone, from a king to a laborer, a scholar to a villager, can attain divine grace through pure love and surrender to the Lord.

## 7. Integration of Dharma and Social Ethics

The Bhāgavata Purāṇa presents a deeply integrated view of dharma (righteous duty) and nīti (ethical conduct), blending social responsibility with spiritual realization. In its philosophical vision, dharma is not merely a set of ritual or caste-based duties but a moral and spiritual principle that upholds both individual conduct and the harmony of society. True dharma, according to the Purāṇa, is that which aligns human actions with divine will and leads to the welfare (śreyas) of all beings.

The Bhāgavata Purāṇa upholds dharma as the sustaining principle (dhāraṇādharmah), which holds together the moral fabric of society. Each person's svadharma—their personal duty according to role and capacity—is seen as a contribution to the larger cosmic order (ṛta). The verse (S.B.I.2.13) shows that the social structure (varṇāśrama-dharma) is not meant for hierarchy or privilege, but to organize life in a way that every action contributes to divine satisfaction and social harmony.

The Purāṇa integrates dharma with nīti (ethical values), emphasizing compassion, truthfulness, and non-violence as essential qualities of a righteous person. Ethics, here, are not secondary to ritual duty—they are its essence (S.B.II.29.17–18). This vision establishes ethical universalism—treating every creature with respect and empathy because all are manifestations of God. Thus, social ethics becomes inseparable from spiritual insight.

The Bhāgavata Purāṇa repeatedly critiques blind ritualism and mechanical adherence to social codes that ignore inner morality and devotion. It calls such superficial religiosity adharmā (false dharma) (S.B.XI.11.32).

The Purāṇa views dharma as a social contract that ensures justice, cooperation, and the welfare of all beings (sarva-bhūta-hita). Leaders, householders, and ascetics are urged to act selflessly, maintaining balance between personal duty and public welfare. The verse (S.B.IV.31.14) symbolizes the ethical unity of life—serving God through dharma benefits the whole of creation, not just the individual.

Unlike rigid codes, the Bhāgavat Purāṇa sees dharma as context-sensitive—it evolves according to time, place, and circumstance (deśa-kāla-pātra). Ethical decisions must arise from compassion and reason, not mere conformity. When conventional norms conflict with genuine goodness, the Purāṇa privileges inner righteousness (sāttvika dharma) over social convention.



The Bhāgavata Purāṇa integrates dharma and social ethics into a single moral vision: to act in a way that benefits all beings while pleasing the Divine. It transforms social duty from a mechanical structure into a living moral-spiritual discipline, harmonizing personal virtue, social responsibility, and devotion. Through this integration, the Purāṇa presents dharma not as a constraint but as the foundation of a compassionate and divinely guided society.

## 8. Conclusion

The Bhāgavata Purāṇa stands as one of the most profound expositions of spiritual and social philosophy in the Indian tradition. Through its integration of dharma (righteous conduct), bhakti (devotion), and nīti (ethics), it constructs a vision of society that is both spiritually elevating and socially harmonious. The text does not merely prescribe rules—it inspires a transformation of consciousness, where social life becomes a sacred expression of divine love and moral responsibility.

At the heart of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa lies the idea that true religion is universal love—the realization that all beings are parts of the Divine. It rejects social exclusivism and ritualistic pride, teaching instead that devotion (bhakti) is the greatest equalizer. As declared in Bhāgavata Purāṇa (S.B.I.2.6), “savaipumsāmparodharmoyatobhaktiradhokṣaje”—the highest dharma for humanity is that which leads to loving devotion to God, untainted by selfish motives or interruptions. This spiritual democratization made the Bhāgavata Purāṇa a unifying force in Indian thought, bridging divides of caste, gender, and status.

The Purāṇa’s portrayal of kingship, family, and social order reflects an ideal society rooted in ethical duty and compassion. Kings are not mere rulers but custodians of dharma; families are not economic units but moral communities where virtues like faith, respect, and service are cultivated. Women and marginalized sections are not neglected but honored as capable of supreme devotion, as shown in the stories of the gopīs and other exemplary devotees. Thus, the social vision of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa combines order with inclusiveness, structure with freedom.

Furthermore, by presenting bhakti as the culmination of all paths—karma (action), jñāna (knowledge), and yoga (discipline)—the text offers a holistic spiritual framework. It asserts that external achievements and rituals are valuable only when infused with inner purity and divine consciousness. Through this lens, dharma becomes not merely social duty but a spiritualized way of living, where every act becomes an offering to God (īśvarārpaṇa-buddhi).

In essence, the Bhāgavata Purāṇa envisions a spiritually enlightened society where devotion inspires justice, compassion guides authority, and wisdom tempers power. It teaches that the harmony of the world depends on the harmony within the individual soul. When one acts selflessly for the welfare of all beings (sarva-bhūta-hita), guided by love for the Divine, both personal liberation and social peace are attained.

Thus, the Bhāgavata Purāṇa’s social vision is not confined to external institutions but radiates from inner transformation. It unites religion, morality, and social life under the guiding light of bhakti, teaching that when love for God awakens in the heart, society itself becomes a reflection of divine order.

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