

WAVES 2011- Conference on Varna, Jati and Kula

The Resolutions below have been adopted by the WAVES Jati / Varna / Kula Conference after thorough deliberations by the participants, consisting of spiritual leaders, scholars and other experts, both at the conference venue and afterwards via follow-up discussions. This represents one key document in the multi-stage process envisaged by the WAVES Jati / Varna / Kula Conference of deliberations and discussions on this sensitive and complex topic. This document is not meant to be a definitive statement of a policy position, but rather a framework for developing further productive discussions on this important subject within the Hindu community.

Guidance on the practices of Dharma is the province of acharyas in the Hindu tradition, and in that light, we note that this is not a prescriptive or binding document for the Hindu community, nor is it any kind of final word on this subject. Rather, it is a set of principles and issues we believe should be carefully considered when the topic of jati / varna / kula is addressed, particularly in a political or academic setting.

Conference Resolutions

Attendees deliberated and decided upon the following resolutions as essential to the fair portrayal of Hinduism & related institutions:

- (1) The word “caste” cannot be conflated with the indigenous Indic jati / varna / kula system. “Caste” derives from the Portuguese word “casta” and describes something distinct from the jati / varna / kula system, which is a complex and ancient socioeconomic ordering system that developed in various manifestations within Indian society over thousands of years. The European concept of “caste” is not an accurate term to describe this indigenous Indian system.
- (2) Jati / varna / kula cannot be understood outside the context of Dharma, the ethical system that underpins Hinduism / Sanatana Dharma. Various dharmas are applicable to individuals at different stages of their life, at different stages of their spiritual development, and taking into account the variables of time, place and circumstance. Dharma is meant to harmonize the spiritual, physical and psychological well being of the individual, as well as the needs and concerns of the family, the society and the larger cosmos. Accordingly, Varnashrama Dharma is one of the elements of Dharma that systemizes the practices of the individual, the family, and the society at large in order to promote individual and social harmony, fulfillment and well-being. It provides for social mobility while embracing diversity, emphasizing Duties over Rights, the equitable distribution of powers amongst different sections of society, and harmonious co-existence as opposed to hyper-competition and a survival of the fittest mentality, among other values.
- (3) Within Sanatana Dharma, jati / varna / kula has been a fundamental aspect used to adapt Dharmic practices to individuals and groups based on their personality makeup. It is an integral part of the social, spiritual, psychological and metaphysical ordering of human beings within the Hindu tradition, inextricably linked with the Indic frameworks of karma, dharma, gunas and doshas. The jati / varna / kula is determined by a number of factors namely birth, clan, quality, conduct, spiritual knowledge and profession. It is not determined by birth alone as perceived in certain quarters. Across the Vedic literature, and across the history, which factor has been considered more important has depended on the context. Different factors have gained importance in different contexts. This diversity amongst

sampradayas / paramparas is a hallmark of the Santana Dharma tradition, which eschews homogenizing institutionalization and such diversity should be embraced and promoted.

(4) The original system of jati / varna has been corrupted and distorted in practice over the course of history, primarily due to the destructive influence of colonialism and systemic destruction of traditional institutions of Dharma over many centuries. This should always be kept in mind when analyzing Hindu society of today, barely 60 years after independence.

(5) When representatives of Hinduism describe jati / varna, they must clearly convey these points. Trying to define jati / varna in Western terms or pigeon holing of these complex ideas into incompatible Western frameworks like human rights, secular humanism, etc. precludes a fair and accurate portrayal of Hinduism on its own terms, and should be resisted strongly.

(6) Varna/Jati/Kula had by and large remained bedrock of socio-political, economic, and spiritual advancement of people in India, up until foreign powers invaded, occupied, and exploited the country. Traditional values and practices of enlightened system of Varna/Jati/Kula need to be asserted through education and governance to not only eradicate any corrupted practices but also to promote strong progressive and harmonious features of the system through socio-political and economic steps for the benefit of people at large.

(7) While there may be many differing views and policies on the applicability of jati / varna in the modern age, and each such view has a legitimate place under the umbrella of Dharma, Hindus must observe certain guidelines when discussing the topic of jati / varna in our roles as Hindu advocacy organizations or as representatives of Dharma, given the political dangers and sensitivities involved.

In particular:

- a. Varnashrama system is inclusive in nature and promotes the well-being of every individual. It is built on foundations of human qualities such as kindness, forgiveness, tolerance, truthfulness, etc. Therefore, we firmly oppose any discriminatory treatment, atrocity and denial of civil rights meted out to anybody, in general.
- b. We resolve not to accept conflation of caste with jati / varna.
- c. We resolve to fight against jati / varna being denigrated as a human rights issue or an issue of racial or ethnic discrimination.

We resolve that the observance of Varnashrama Dharma is a matter to be determined by the various sampradayas / paramparas within Hindu society and it is not appropriate to prescribe any single method of conduct or observance for all of Hindu society, which is antithetical to the Dharmic way.