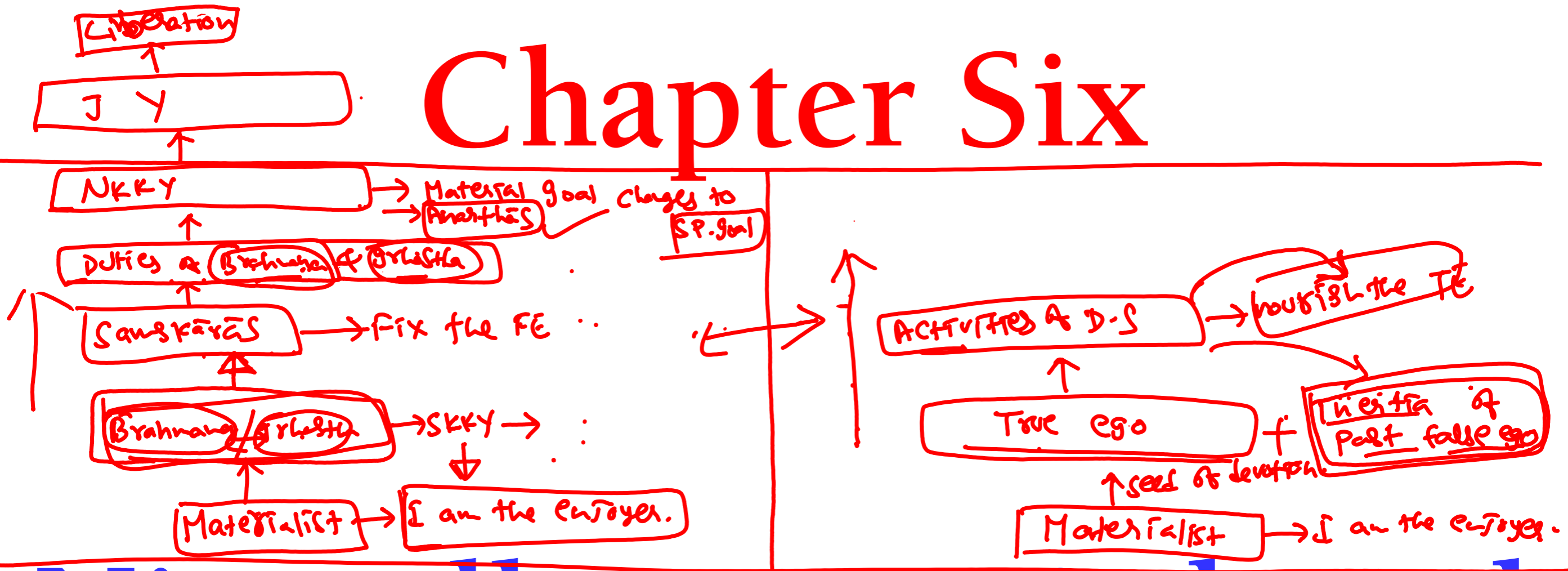


Jaiṡa Dharma

by Śrīla Saccidānanda
Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura

Chapter Six



Nitya-dharma: Birth and Caste Differences

Devīdāsa was a teacher and had firmly believed for a long time that the brāhmaṇas were the noblest of the varṇas, castes, and that it was the sole prerogative of the brāhmaṇas to pursue the path of spirituality.

Mukti was not available to men of other varṇas, but only to brāhmaṇas by birth.

He considered that from birth a brāhmaṇa progressively realizes his oneness with Brahman by the performance of his prescribed varṇāsrāma duties.

Naturally, therefore, Devīdāsa was very vexed by the conversation between the Kāzī and the Vaiṣṇavas he had witnessed a few days before.

He was unable to grasp the meaning of the Kāzī's talk.

He said to himself, "These yavanas, Muslims, are very strange people and their philosophy is equally an enigma."

It is all right for my father to talk with them, as he is proficient in the Persian and Arabic languages and has also researched all the different religious philosophies.

Nevertheless, I wonder why he was so friendly to them? A Hindu has to take a bath upon even touching a yavana, why then did Vaisnava dāsa Bābājī and Paramahaṁsa Premadāsa Bābājī affectionately invite the Kāzī to join their assembly and sit amidst them?"

That night, Devīdāsa, unable to contain his mental agitation, declared to his cousin, “Śambhu! I will ignite the flames of religious debate and incinerate the pāṣaṇḍa, heretic, philosophy.

This Navadvīpa, which was the famous arena for debates upon nyāya śāstra between illustrious scholars such as Sārvabhauma and Śiromani, and which has witnessed Raghunandana’s great dissertations upon the twenty-eight treatises that he compiled from all the smṛti-śāstra, has now to bear the upstart behaviour of the Vaiṣṇavas being overly friendly to the yavanas!

I am sure the scholars and pedagogues of Navadvīpa are as of yet unaware of this incident!”

It took Devīdāsa a few days to prepare for the plunge into his self-assigned mission.

Finally, the day arrived, heralding a continuous nagging drizzle that spread a dismal sheet of slick everywhere.

All morning, the clouds did not allow a glance of the sun upon the earth.

At midday, sensing the time for their fateful debate had arrived, Devīdāsa and Śambhu ate hot khicurī.

The afternoon remained overcast with low hanging clouds continuing to shroud the sun.

Delayed by the bad weather, the Vaiṣṇavas returned later than usual after their daily mādhukarī food collection rounds.

Now, at three in the afternoon, having taken prasādam, some Vaisnavas sat chanting upon their beads in a large cottage adjacent to the courtyard of the Śrī Mādhavī-mālatī Maṇḍapa.

Paramahansa Premadāsa Bābājī, Vaisnava dāsa Bābājī, a visiting Vaiṣṇava paṇḍita from Nṛsimhapallī named Ananta dāsa, Lāhirī Mahāśaya, and Yādava dāsa of Kuliyā village were seated there, quietly relishing the nectar of chanting harināma.

Suddenly, they were interrupted by the arrival of Devīdāsa Vidyāratna, accompanied by Caturbhuja Pādaratna of Samudragarh, Cintāmaṇi Nyāyaratna from Kāśī, Kālidāsa Vācaspati from Pūrvasthalī, and the famous paṇḍita, Kṛṣṇa Cūḍāmaṇi.

The Vaiṣṇavas heartily welcomed this small group of brāhmaṇa paṇḍitas, requesting them to take seats.

Paramahaṁsa Premadāsa Bābājī, being the senior-most Vaiṣṇava, said, “Most people complain that a rainy day like today is bothersome.

However, for us, because today brāhmaṇa paṇḍitas from the holy dhāma have graciously come to sanctify our humble dwellings with the dust of their feet, it is an auspicious day.”

The Vaiṣṇavas are naturally very humble, even more so than a blade of grass.

Therefore, they offered their respect by uttering: ...vipra caraṇebhyoḥ
namaḥ... “I offer obeisances at the feet of the brāhmaṇas.”

By nature, these particular brāhmaṇa paṇḍitas were very proud. Returning
the greetings of the Vaiṣṇavas, the paṇḍitas superciliously waved their hands
in a gesture of blessing and took their seats.

Devīdāsa Vidyāratna had already prepared these young brāhmaṇa paṇḍitas
for a debate.

Seeing Lāhirī Mahāśaya, the paṇḍitas grudgingly offered him respects since he was their senior.

In turn, Lāhirī Mahāśaya, being conversant with the scriptural conclusions, immediately reciprocated their offering of respect.

Amongst the paṇḍitas, Kṛṣṇa Cūḍāmaṇi was very expert in argument.

He had a record of defeating many paṇḍitas in Kāśi, Mithilā, and many other places.

A person of diminutive stature with a shiny dark complexion and a grave demeanour, his eyes were a pair of incandescent spots.

He initiated the debate in the assembly, beginning, “We have come today to have darśana of Vaiṣṇavas.

We do not subscribe to all your etiquette and activities, but we definitely appreciate your sincere devotion.

The Supreme Lord has said in the Bhagavad-gītā, 9.30:

api cet su-durācāro
bhajate mām ananya-bhāk
sādhuḥ eva sa mantavyaḥ
samyag-vyavasīto hi saḥ

“Even if one commits the most abominable action, if he is engaged in devotional service, he is to be considered saintly because he is properly situated in his determination.”

“This quotation from the Bhagavad-gītā is our attestation. On the strength of this verse, we have come to meet sādhus.

The Vaisnavas became a little saddened upon hearing Kṛṣṇa Cūḍāmaṇi’s reproach, Paramahansa Premadāsa Bābājī replying, “We are fools.

What do we know about debating?

Our norms and etiquette simply emulate the example set by our mahājanas, who are the previous ācāryas and sādhus of devotional authority.

We will silently hear your instructions from the scriptures.”

Cūḍāmaṇi replied, “We must say that such friendly dealings with yavanas are highly irregular!”

As a segment of Hindu society, if your personal conduct and teachings are against the injunctions of śāstra, such behaviour will surely act to destroy civilised mankind.

How can you justify your whimsical behaviour with the yavanas by claiming to be following the previous mahājanas, ācāryas, and sādhus?

Furthermore, who should be designated as a mahājana?

Designating just anybody as a mahājana and then citing the scriptural injunction: ...mahājano yena gataḥ sa panthāḥ...

‘One should follow in the footsteps of mahājanas,’ does not solve the raging problems of the world.”

Upon hearing this provocative statement, the Vaiṣṇavas courteously left the assembly place and gathered in another cottage nearby to consult amongst themselves.

They decided that since the paṇḍitas had blasphemed their mahājanas, if at all possible the paṇḍitas should certainly be refuted.

Paramahansa Premadāsa Bābājī was not keen to represent their group and, though Ananta dāsa Paṇḍita was an expert in the nyāya-śāstra and the philosophy of logic, they chose Vaiṣṇava dāsa Bābājī to debate on their behalf.

The Vaiṣṇavas had gathered that Devīdāsa Vidyāratna was the architect of today's dilemma.

His father, Lāhirī Mahāśaya, spoke out unhesitatingly, “Devīdāsa is a very arrogant boy.”

He was definitely disturbed by our amiable dealings with the Kāzī the other day, and so he must have incited these brāhmaṇa paṇḍitas to come here today.”

Bending down to touch Paramahansa Premadāsa Bābājī’s feet, Vaisnava dāsa Bābājī said, “I carry the orders of the Vaiṣṇavas as a crown upon my head.

I believe that all my previous education and scriptural research will now turn out to be of value.”

The drizzle having let up, the scattered clouds allowed little patches of blue to peep through.

A large simple carpet was laid out to cover the major portion of the Śrī Mādhavī-mālatī Mandapa courtyard.

The brāhmaṇa paṇḍitas sat upon one side of the carpet, the Vaiṣṇavas facing them upon the other.

The learned Vaiṣṇavas from Godruma and nearby surrounding areas were invited to attend the debate and sat in the periphery, surrounding the two groups of contestants.

Many eager brāhmaṇa students had also gathered, so the congregation soon swelled to a fair size—an estimated one hundred brāhmaṇa paṇḍitas and students on one side and about two hundred Vaiṣṇavas on the opposite side.

Having taken permission and blessings from the Vaiṣṇavas, Vaiṣṇava dāsa
Bābājī sat at their head, a picture of calm composure.

Suddenly, everyone witnessed a wonderful omen causing the Vaiṣṇavas to
jubilantly chant harināma:

All at once, a confetti of flower petals had rained down upon Vaiṣṇava dāsa
Bābājī from above.

Amongst themselves the Vaiṣṇavas concluded, “This is the prasāda, mercy,
of Śrī Caitanya.”

Kṛṣṇa Cūḍāmaṇi, who was sitting across from them, puckered his nose in obvious disdain and said, “You are mistaken, for it is not the flowers, but the resulting fruits that matter.”

Vaiṣṇava dāsa Bābājī began abruptly without further pomp or frills, he said, “It seems that in Navadvīpa I can at last find an assembly similar to those I’ve seen in Vārāṇasī, which fact gives me great pleasure.

Actually, I am a Bengali, yet most of my life, I’ve spent in Vārāṇasī and other places, studying and giving talks.

Therefore, my proficiency in Bengali has lessened considerably, so I desire that today’s discussion be conducted in Sanskrit.”

Kṛṣṇa Cūdāmaṇi had diligently and sincerely laboured to study the scriptures, but, other than learning by rote, he was not fully conversant with Sanskrit, and hence not confident to debate in the language.

He felt shaky upon hearing Vaiṣṇava dāsa Bābājī's proposal and blurted out, "The fact is that we are holding this assembly in Bengal, so speaking in Bengali is more appropriate.

Besides, I am not fluent in Sanskrit like the paṇḍitas from the northwest."

Everyone understood from Cūdāmaṇi's expression that he was becoming apprehensive of debating with Vaiṣṇava dāsa Bābājī, so they requested Vaiṣṇava dāsa Bābājī to converse in Bengali, to which he readily agreed.

Cūḍāmaṇi began the debate with a volley of questions, “Is jāti, birth-group,
not a nitya, permanent, distinction for the human being?”

Are Hindus and Muslims not of different jāti, birth-group? Is not a Hindu
degraded by associating with a Muslim?”

Vaiṣṇava dāsa Bābājī replied, “Yes, the nyāya-śāstra states that jāti is nitya”

However, the term jāti that we find in the nyāya-śāstra refers not only to race
and caste, but also to species.

The term nitya-jāti-bheda, permanent distinction between birth-groups, that we find mentioned in the nyāya-śāstra, does not intend to indicate distinctions between the various races of human beings born in the different countries of the world.

Rather, when using the term nitya-jāti-bheda, the intention of the nyāya-śāstra is to point out the invariable distinction in jāti that exists between the various species of living entities.

For example, there are permanent distinctions between the goat species, the cow species, and the human species.”

Cūḍāmaṇi, “I agree with your analysis, but is there not a distinction in jāti—this time meaning caste—between Hindus and Muslims?”

Vaiṣṇava dāsa Bābājī, “Yes, there is some dissimilarity in both these jātis, but they are neither permanent, nor eternal.”

The human species is one. The differences lie in language, country, attire, complexion, caste, and so on—and based on these men have created imaginary permanent distinctions, which they wrongly designate as jāti distinctions.”

Cūḍāmaṇi, “Are there no distinctions at all, even on the basis of birth, between a Hindu and a Muslim?”

Or are the differences simply limited to the areas of attire, language, and so on?”

Vaiṣṇava dāsa Bābājī, “The jīva is born into high or low caste as a result of his karma, the activities of his previous lives.”

Depending on caste, humans have specific duties.

There are four castes: brāhmaṇas, kṣatriyas, vaiśyas, and śūdras; others are antyajās, low-born outcastes.”

Cūḍāmaṇi, “Are the yavanas, Muslims, outcastes?”

Vaiṣṇava dāsa Bābājī, “Yes, according to the scriptural decrees they are antyajās, outcastes; they do not qualify for the Vedic castes.”

Cūḍāmani, “If this be true, how then can a yavana ever become a Vaiṣṇava? And should advanced Aryan Vaiṣṇava society socialize with yavanas?”

Vaiṣṇava dāsa Bābājī, “A human being who has developed unalloyed devotion to the Supreme Lord is a Vaisnava and every human being is eligible to become a Vaiṣṇava.”

On account of their low birth, yavanas have no right to perform the duties prescribed for the four varnas in the varṇāśrama system, but they have full eligibility to participate in bhakti.

“As long as one has not meticulously analysed and understood the subtle distinctions between karma-kāṇḍa, jñāna-kāṇḍa, and bhakti-kāṇḍa—known as the three upāsanā-kāṇḍas—it is impossible to conclude that one has attained proper comprehension of the scriptures.”

Cūḍāmaṇi, “So be it. Karma—the prescribed duties of varṇāśrama—cleanses
the consciousness.”

When one’s consciousness is purified, one becomes eligible to gather jñāna,
knowledge.

From jñāna, there spring two varieties of knowledgeable persons, known as
jñānīs: nirbheda-brahman-vādī, the followers of monism; and the saviśeṣa-
vādī, those who worship the personal form of Bhagavān—the Vaiṣṇavas.

Therefore, without perfecting the stage of varṇāśrama-karma a person cannot
become a Vaiṣṇava.

Muslims are not eligible to execute varnāśrama-karma, so how can they ascend to bhakti?”

Vaiṣṇava dāsa Bābājī, “Persons outside the varṇāśrama system, the antyajās are also eligible to embrace the path of bhakti.

All scriptures have supported this point. The Bhagavad-gītā 9.32 states:

**mām hi pārtha vyapāśritya
ye ‘pi syuḥ pāpa-yonayaḥ
striyo vaiśyās tathā śūdrās
te ‘pi yānti parām gatim**