

How to Live on a Farm in the 21st Century

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Introduction

Towards the end of the Cow Culture Conference held in Kuala Lumpur on October 7, 2018, during the question-and-answer session, a devotee asked for practical advice on how to adopt a Vedic farm lifestyle. He wanted to know whether there are any model farms around the world that we could follow, and also what he, a city-dweller, could do if he were to live on a farm.

I was very happy he asked this question because it signalled to me that the devotee was keen to live simply according to *Dharma*, and he wants to know more. That, to me, is the first step in a long but necessary journey back to a Vedic lifestyle based on *Varnasrama Dharma*, which I believe is the only sustainable lifestyle for humanity.

Srila Prabhupada once said, “Unless in the human society the Varnasrama system is introduced, no scheme or social order, health order or any order, political order, will be successful.” Indeed, Srila Prabhupada stressed the importance of varnasrama dharma as he departed this world more than 40 years ago.¹

Hence, I believe the question ought to be answered in a comprehensive manner, which speakers often cannot do at conferences due to time limitations. I am writing this article with the hope that the above question will be answered deservedly.

For a start, let me just briefly say that there are several existing Hare Krishna communities around the world that have established “Vedic villages” in their own way. Although we may aspire to live in an ideal Vedic village, I don’t believe there is any one model that can be copied everywhere because the local conditions and culture in each country will present its own set of challenges and will require specific solutions.

Why Live in a Farm Community?

As a householder (*grhastha*), I strongly advocated during the conference for devotees to shift their mindset towards simple living in accordance with Vedic principles.² In other words, living on a farm naturally, where the economy is essentially cow-based. This is a radical stand, but it is necessary for our own survival.

The current trajectory of so-called development and modern civilisation is pushing all of us towards global disaster – fast. A recent online article entitled, [With Climate Change, Capitalism Could Literally Destroy the Earth By 2040](#), says “mass extinctions and billions of human deaths [are] inevitable under our current course” and “the world as we know it is melting away, and if we do nothing, it will be unrecognizable by 2040.”

¹ See [Srila Prabhupada’s last instructions regarding varnasrama dharma](#).

² Srila Prabhupada wrote in Teachings of Queen Kunti, “Simple Living and High Thinking is the solution to economic problems. Therefore, the Krishna Conscious movement is engaging devotees in producing their own food and living self-sufficiently so that rascals may see how one can live very peacefully, eat the food grains one has grown one-self, drink milk, and chant Hare Krishna.”

The author highlighted a landmark report by a UN intergovernmental panel on climate change³ that said, “avoiding the most serious damage requires transforming the world economy within just a few years”. He concluded, “the only answer to climate change is revolution.” And I agree.

So far, the solutions offered by politicians and pundits have been half-measures that are not sustainable. The main reason why their solutions won’t work is because they are offering *material* solutions to what is fundamentally a *spiritual* problem.

The paradigm shift proposed by Srila Prabhupada – the revival of Vedic villages – is not merely an admonishment for the sake of ISKCON members but also a plea for Krishna conscious devotees to do the right thing so that the inhabitants of Earth itself will be saved.

Thus, in that context, not only do I want my young children to inherit a clean, healthy Earth, I also want them to learn how to live according to *dharma* – to return to God and serve Him. Indeed, I believe that a conscious and voluntary decision to live in a village, despite the seemingly insurmountable challenges for city folks, is not just an act of faith, but also one of courage, intelligence and love.

Begin with the End in Mind

It is very important to begin with a clear picture of what we are trying to achieve. The ultimate goal of living in a Vedic village is not to live in a resort-like environment and get away from the hustle and bustle of city life. The Vedic way of life is simple, natural and sustainable – in accordance with *dharma*.

Hence, we should be making the transition to a farm community with the long-term goal of becoming self-sufficient collectively; where our basic needs – food, shelter, clothing and medicine – are produced locally by ourselves. In this new life, we will have minimal engagement in materialistic pursuits, which should be left behind in the city.

Having said that, I think it’s very important to carefully consider what will be our initial baseline. In my opinion, if we set the bar too high, it will be perceived as unrealistic and too great a challenge for devotees to adopt a Vedic lifestyle. For example, if we say at the outset that there will be no electricity, no tap water, no motorised vehicles and everything that we eat must be grown organically by ourselves, I think that will scare people away rather than attract them to join our mission.

Hence, for me, it is already a very good start if devotees can live together in a village where the main activities are prayer and worship, learning, tending to cows, and producing food and other essentials for our own consumption. These activities should be our primary focus and concern – the question of whether we will have electricity, tap water and so forth ought to be secondary (and discussed in a different forum).

Making the Transition

Of course, it will be unrealistic and naïve to believe that we could quit our jobs, sell off our houses in the city, move to a farm, and start living off the land the very next day. It is important to have a clear and realistic timeframe for us to prepare ourselves and eventually move to a village.

³ The [report](#) was a response to an invitation made by the United Nations in 2015 as part of the Paris Agreement on climate change.

In my opinion, a comfortable transition period for city folks (i.e. those who have lived in cities all their lives) will be two to three years. Of course, this period could be stretched longer or even shortened, depending on our personal circumstances in life. Understandably, there could be existing commitments that could hold us back or the availability of financial and other resources that will enable us to make the move quicker.

Practically speaking, it will much easier to make the move if we are ready to graduate into the *vanaprastha* stage of life. However, not every devotee is at this stage, and it will defeat the purpose of living in a Vedic farm community if everyone waited till they are ready to retire before making the move.⁴ For me, the most logical timing to make the shift should be based on our children's education level. For example, you could set a target to move when your son finishes kindergarten or primary school.

No matter when we decide to move, in the first phase of our journey we will still be living in the city, but we must start laying the groundwork to make the shift to a village.⁵ Assuming that you have set your mind to moving to a farm, we will need to:

1. Find like-minded devotees who will be part of the Vedic farm community; and
2. Ensure you have sufficient financial resources to sustain your family during the transition period;
3. Learn the skills to make a living on a farm.

The above is not a list of tasks to be done one after another. They are dynamic processes which need to be handled simultaneously because they are inter-related. Also, living in a Vedic village is not a one-man show; which is why these things need to be done collectively – hence, the first item in the above list. Very importantly, we must have faith that, as we strive to establish a Vedic village, with Krishna's mercy, all the things we need will fall into place.

ISKCON leaders and initiatives like the OM Sri Surabhi Campaign will facilitate the process of finding like-minded devotees through various activities. Devotees who are keen to adopt a Vedic lifestyle can join the campaign through their website.⁶ Thus, individual devotees need not be too concerned about the first action item.

Financing the Move

There are a few ways to ensure that we have sufficient financial resources to enable us to have a worry-free transition. The simplest would be to have a sufficiently large amount of savings that will tide you over the transition period. Of course, if you choose this path, then you will need to make a realistic estimate of how much will be needed, not only to sustain your family during this period and the cost needed to shift to a new farm home (including building that home) but also possibly the capital needed to start a sustainable enterprise in the village (depending on what you intend to do).

⁴ We simply do not have the luxury of time to wait and, more importantly, I believe we must act with courage and change the way we live immediately because that, in itself, will become an important lesson for our children to learn about living responsibly.

⁵ Of all the changes that need to be made to prepare for the transition, the most crucial is one that needs to take place in our minds. We need no less than a paradigm shift. Indeed, our basic mindset must change for us to see the opportunities that lie ahead of us as we embark on this journey. No doubt, the challenges will be great; especially when we think about giving up the modern comforts and convenience that we are so used to. However, how we can meet these challenges requires a separate discussion.

⁶ Visit the [OM Sri Surabhi Campaign](http://www.srisurabhi.org) website for more information at www.srisurabhi.org

Alternatively, we could invest our savings in an enterprise that will provide a regular stream of income whilst we shift ourselves to a village and build the “lifestyle structures”⁷ that will enable us to become self-sufficient in the longer term. Having said that, we should remember, ideally, that we should not depend on materialistic investments that will keep us bound to the material platform.

A third way to finance the move is for the spouse to take on the role of breadwinner so that the husband (or wife, depending on who will be the primary person who will work in the village) can focus on creating the lifestyle structures that will enable them to live self-sufficiently.

Lastly, with a group of like-minded and committed devotees, we can plan the transition as a collective initiative, including how to share the financial burden of making the paradigm shift. Actually, this is not an option but a necessity because we will eventually live together as a community; we must act cohesively right from the start.

Right Livelihood⁸

Nowadays the main concern of most, if not all, householders is making a living. This is understandable because, regardless of whether we are a businessman or an employee, we need to put food on the table and take care of our family.

In the second phase – the first few years of living on the farm – it may still be necessary for some devotees to find a job and continue working in a town near the village. Indeed, it ought to be anticipated that there will still be significant interaction with the “outside world” at this point, as devotees will need to gradually adapt to a self-sufficient economy and wean off material things.

We must always remember that our duty as a householder is not only to provide for our family but also to lead our children back to God. Hence, one of the main reasons for living in a village is to live according to the Vedic way of life. Therefore, the way we make a living should be based on Vedic principles.⁹

There must be a clear commitment to achieve self-sufficiency. In other words, devotees who decide to live in a Vedic village need to understand that the ultimate goal is to serve Krishna, and we can best do that by creating a sustainable and self-sufficient economy that is based on cows and the land – not a materialist economy based on exploitation of natural resources and industry that is not sustainable.

This will require two parallel processes. First, we need to wind-down our dependency on material things in general. As a practical example, we should no longer view washing machines or televisions as essential items for the household. If we don’t need them, then we will not need to buy them from the shop.

Secondly, we must re-educate ourselves to live in the new economy. In other words, we must learn and equip ourselves with skills to make things that devotees will need. Apart from basic needs and

⁷ The most important structures that need to be established to support this new lifestyle are an income-generating activity and a “school” for children to learn.

⁸ Right livelihood essentially means ethical livelihood, i.e. making a living in a non-harmful way. In Buddhism, *right livelihood* is an essential limb of the Noble Eightfold Path that leads to Enlightenment. See this article for a [detailed definition](#).

⁹ I am not in any way qualified to say what constitutes “right livelihood” for Krishna devotees, but I believe that enterprises or work that enable us to be self-sufficient and move us closer to God will be acceptable and not against *dharma*.

education, devotees will also need, for example, furniture and soap. Hence, some devotees could learn carpentry and soap-making and make a living from those new skills.¹⁰

Krishna *Conscious* Education

For householders with children, education is probably one of their biggest concerns. Therefore, apart from an economic framework, the planning for a Vedic village must also include a school for raising Krishna conscious children. The intricate details of setting up a *gurukula* is beyond the scope of this article; however, a couple of important points regarding education need to be addressed here.

First, like other aspects of living in a Vedic village, the adoption of Vedic education will need to be a gradual transition to enable devotees to learn and adapt to the new way of life. Naturally, with the paradigm shift, the mode of teaching and learning will also be different; which leads us to the second point: The end point of a Vedic education system is not a university qualification or a financially-rewarding career. Such a material perspective needs to be discarded.

We must realise that a Krishna conscious education means teaching our children so that they are equipped with both knowledge and skills to serve Krishna effectively in all aspects of their lives.¹¹ Not only must they know all the prayers and verses to worship God, but they must also know how to use their professional skills to serve Him. For example, a Krishna conscious graduate with mass communication skills should use those skills to serve God by propagating a Krishna conscious way of life.

With this as the end in mind, devotee parents need not be too concerned with what their children will do after finishing school; devotee children will still acquire practical or technical skills in a Vedic society – they just need to use them in the service of Lord Krishna.

This is where *varnasrama* comes in – each one of us have a role to play, and we can do it in accordance with *dharma*. Those devotees who are capable of learning the *Vedas* deeply can be priests and teachers, and those with leadership skills can be administrators of the village. The rest of us will have the privilege of looking after Krishna’s beloved cows or farming to produce what is needed by the community. At the same time, for those who are so inclined, they can be entrepreneurs and professionals that will support the preaching and other activities of ISKCON.

Conclusion

The transition from city life to village life is challenging. Even before the journey begins, one needs to experience a paradigm shift to get the impetus needed to make the drastic move possible. With the right mindset in place, it then becomes a matter of working together with like-minded devotees to plan a new village that will ensure the economic and social needs of all devotees are met. It is important to start with a realistic baseline so that we can have enough devotees to join this life-changing initiative. More than anything else, we need to remember that, if we are truly devoted to Krishna, He will always be merciful and provide us with what we need, including the necessary resources and support to live in a village as a Krishna conscious community.

¹⁰ There are, of course, certain items that we use on a daily basis that we couldn’t possibly make on our own; for example, computers and smartphones. These are things that we will still need to buy from the shop until our global Vedic economy is strong enough to actually make them without relying on the materialist economy.

¹¹ In the traditional system, this means each child will only receive the type of education that is suitable for him, depending on his own *varna*.