

A Critical Analysis of 'Manusmriti'

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Abstract:

In 1794, Sir William Jones transcribed the Manusmriti, the first written version of Hindu dharma. Ancient Hindu social and religious practices are reflected in it. Hindus were separated into four colors, and then into four castes—Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, and Sudras—according to Manu. According to the remaining castes, rulers and Brahmanas were related to one another in that system. It clarifies the role of women in society, spirituality, and Grihya-Sutras. For Vaisyas and Sudras, there existed a specific code. Even Dr. B.R. Ambedkar charged that the Manu system in India was indiscriminate and caste-based. Gandhi favored the social structure based on duties rather than rights.

Keywords:

Customs, Grihya-Sutra, Spirituality, Indiscrimination, Casteism, Buddhistic legislation.

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Introduction

Among the numerous Dharmaceāstras of Hinduism, the Manusmṛiti is an old legal treatise. In 1794, while India was ruled by the British, Sir William Jones translated one of the earliest Sanskrit books, which the colonial authority utilized to create Hindu law. Although there are currently more than fifty versions of the Manusmṛiti, the “Calcutta manuscript with Kulluka Bhatta commentary” is the oldest, most translated, and thought to be authentic version since the 18th century. According to contemporary research, this assumed legitimacy is untrue, as the different Manusmṛiti manuscripts found in India contradict one another as well as themselves, casting doubt on the text’s validity as well as any later insertions or interpolations.

Manu is also credited with creating Buddhistic legislation in Myanmar and Thailand during the Middle Ages, and the scripture had an impact on earlier Hindu kingdoms in Cambodia and Indonesia. Sir William Jones and Karl Wilhelm Friedrich Schlegel, two philologists from the eighteenth century, dated Manusmṛiti to approximately 1250 BCE and 1000 BCE, respectively. This is incompatible with subsequent linguistic advancements because the text’s language must be dated later than the late Vedic writings, such as the Upanishads, which date back to 500 BC, a few centuries ago. The text’s chronology was changed by later study to fall between 200 BCE and 200 CE.

According to Olivelle, the text may have been written around the second or third century CE based on numismatic evidence and the reference to gold coins as a fine. The majority of academics view the text as a composite created over an extended period of time by numerous authors. According to Olivelle, the 100,000 verses and 1,080 chapters of the original book constituted the basis for several ancient and medieval Indian writings’ changes and reprints. But according to Olivelle, the text version currently in use was probably written by a chairman with research assistants or by a single author. Olivelle claims that the Manusmṛiti was not a novel work; rather, it was based on prior writings and represents “a crystallization of an accumulated knowledge” in ancient India. Manusmṛiti’s theoretical models are based on at least two pre-existing shastras: Dharma (an old Indian concept that incorporates obligations, rights, laws, behavior, virtues, and other topics covered in several Dharmasutras older than Manusmṛiti) and Artha (statecraft and legal procedure). Its contents date back to the Vedic Kalpasutras, which paved the way for the creation of Smartasutras, which include Dharmasutras and Grihyasutras. Many of these sutras, all from a time before the Common Era, are contained in the foundational writings of Manusmṛiti. Most of these ancient texts are now lost, and only four of them have survived: the law codes of Apastamba, Gautama, Baudhayana, and Vasistha.

Concerns in postmodern scholarship over the assumed validity and dependability of Manusmriti manuscripts are expressed by Patrick Olivelle, who is credited with translating the text in 2005 and having it published by Oxford University Press. He states that Sir William Jones' translation of the MDh [Manusmriti] in 1794 was the first Indian legal text to be made available to the west. With the exception of Jolly's edition, every publication of the MDh replicates the text exactly as it is in the [Calcutta] manuscript with Kulluka's commentary. This is the "vulgate version" as I have named it. Several translations have been made of Kulluka's version, including Jones (1794), Burnell (1884), Buhler (1886), and Doniger (1991). (..) Burnell (1884, xxix) publicly expressed the belief in the authenticity of Kulluka's text: "On the whole, there is no question that the textus receptus, namely that of Kulluka Bhatta, as adopted in India and by European scholars, is very near to the original text." Other academics draw attention to the discrepancies and have questioned the veracity of the verses as well as the degree to which they were altered, added, or interpolated into the original at a later time. For instance, Sinha claims that just 1,214 of the 2,685 verses in the Manusmriti, or less than half, may be real.

Moreover, there are inherent contradictions in the verses. "Verses such as 3.55-3.62 of Manusmriti, for example, glorify the position of women, while verses such as 9.3 and 9.17 do the opposite." Other Manusmriti passages, like those about Ganesha, are forgeries and insertions from the modern era. According to the Code of Manu, Brahmins were made to study and teach the Vedas and offer sacrifices; Kshatriyas were made to guard the populace; Vaisyas were made to work hard; and Sudras were made to be subservient. However, in Sanskrit works, there isn't a system like that before the Yajur-Veda. It is "clearly evident that the sacred books of the Hindus contain no uniform or consistent account of the origin of castes, but, on the contrary, present the greatest varieties of speculation," according to Mr. Muir, who gathered numerous passages on the topic. He adds that "the freest scope" is given by the individual writers to imaginative and arbitrary conjecture. The classes are said to have sprung from Brahma's mouth, arms, thighs, and feet. This depiction was most likely an allegory in its earliest form. The mystical significance vanishes in the Code of Manu and the subsequent Puranas, where "the figurative narration is hardened into a literal statement of fact." "That the separate origination of the four castes was far from being an article of belief universally received by Indian antiquity" is the conclusion Mr. Muir subsequently comes to. "Society was undoubtedly divided into a variety of ranks, classes, and professions, but was not in the time of the hymns believed to have been derived from four distinct sources." Conversely, it seems from a significant number of passages that the community's higher echelons were considered to be of a single stock, the Aryan.

Hindu sacred texts actually make no argument for the divine origin of caste, but there is ample evidence that Brahmans were seen to be divine from very early times. For example, the Taittiriya-Brahmana states that “The Brahman caste is sprung from the gods; the Sudra from the Asuras.” Professor Lassen proposed that the Sanskrit word for caste, varna, which means color, likely indicated that differences in complexion served as the basis for caste differentiation.

The dark or “black-skinned” aborigines are at the bottom of the caste system, while the pale-colored Hindus are at the top. As we have seen, the term “darkness of skin” was frequently employed in Vedic hymns as a reproach for adversaries who fail to offer sacrifices. These opponents are also occasionally depicted as having flat noses and unintelligible speech. The Hindus arrived from the north and were more equitable than the natives who had occupied India.

Moreover, “color” (varna) would be considered a test of rank as conquest had subjugated the darker race. Undoubtedly, the initial categorization of humanity into four divisions was straightforward and practical, with the four classes being the-

- | | |
|-------------------|------------|
| 1. Ecclesiastical | Brahmans |
| 2. Military | Kshatriyas |
| 3. Industrial | Vaisyas. |
| 4. Servile | Sudras. |

As demonstrated by their ritual, mythical, and mystical Brahmanas as well as their sacrificial Vedas, we have already outlined some of the processes by which Brahmans came to be the all-powerful social regulators. Along with prescribing Grihya (or domestic) rites, which placed a believer’s everyday life under the authority of a spiritual teacher, or Guru, they also created regulations, known as Kalpa-Sutras, to govern the major public celebrations. These guidelines were provided in the Grihya-Sutras, and the Sdmaydchdrika-Sutras established customs and traditions that were accepted by society.

The “Code of Manu,” which is the focus of this study, is notable. It appears, therefore, that “the laws of Manu,” along with the other metrical codes, “are founded on the habits and customs laid down in the works complementary to the Grihya work,” which “completes the Kalpa works; and without the Kalpa works the practical Vedas would be unpractical.”

The codes demonstrate that “without a king who maintains the people’s safety, society cannot carry out the duties outlined in these sacred books; however, a king cannot exist without the produce of the land; land, however, yields no produce without rain; rain is sent down by the favor of the gods; such favor is obtained by

means of sacrificial acts, but where there is no Brahman there is no sacrificial act: king and Brahman thus close the circle within which the people must obey the commands of both.”

The institution of caste is adequately explained by this theory of early Brahmanical influence. We do not see it in the early stages of the Code of Manu, but this Code is their true exponent, a more mature representative. It is of the highest value because it provides a more comprehensive and free view of early Hindu life, as well as the occupations that are allowed and prohibited, than any other work that we have access to. Agriculture is respected, and the Vaisyas caste was supposed to continue it, according to the code's notion. After being girt with his appropriate sacrificial thread and marrying a bride of similar status, let the Vaisya always pay close attention to his commerce, agriculture, and cattle-keeping operations. “Never let a Vaisya be disposed to say, I keep no cattle.” The farmer will be fined ten times the amount of the (king's) share (of the crop, which might have been raised otherwise) if the land is damaged due to his own fault (for example, if he fails to show it in time); however, the fine will only be five times as much as if his servants were at fault without his knowledge. Let him be knowledgeable about the positive and bad aspects of land, as well as the best time and way to plant seeds. Additionally, make sure he understands “the correct modes of measuring and weighing.” Let him take the utmost care to increase his wealth by carrying out his responsibilities, and let him provide food for all living things with great care.”

Both praise and criticism have been directed towards the Manusmrti. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was one of the prominent Indian critics of the text in the early 20th century, claiming that Manusmriti was to blame for India's caste system. On December 25, 1927, Ambedkar burned Manusmrti in a bonfire as a form of protest. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar denounced Manusmriti, while Mahatma Gandhi was against the burning of the book.

The latter claimed that caste discrimination had nothing to do with Hinduism and its writings, including the Manusmriti, but that it was detrimental to spiritual and national development. Gandhi maintained that the text acknowledges a variety of vocations and occupations, does not specify one's rights, but one's obligations, and that every labor, from janitorial to teaching, is equally important and of equal standing. Gandhi believed that although the Manusmriti included noble principles, it was a literature riddled with contradictions and inconsistencies, and no one actually possessed the original manuscript. He advised reading the entire text and accepting the portions of Manusmriti that are in line with “truth and ahimsa (non-injury or non-violence to others)” while rejecting the remaining portions. “Close the Bible

and open the Manu Smriti,” Friedrich Nietzsche is credited with saying. Drawing up a lawbook like Manu means allowing oneself to gain the upper hand, become excellent, and be ambitious of the highest art of living. It also has an affirmation of life and a triumphant, pleasurable experience in life.

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