



## A study of the caste structure and women's lives in Manusmriti

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### Abstract

One of the earliest and most well-known legal treatises used by Hindus is called Manusmriti. It covers a wide range of subjects, including the creation of the world, marriage, and sacraments like "Upanayana." It also discusses the obligations of men and women in relation to various social strata and life stages, as well as penitential rites for breaking moral laws. In either ancient or medieval Hindu society, scholars do not believe that the Manusmriti was ever used as a legal code. According to David Buxbaum, "in the view of the best modern orientalists, it [Manusmriti] does not, in its entirety, represent a body of laws ever truly enforced in Hindustan. It is essentially an idealized depiction of what, in the eyes of a Brahmin, ought to be the law. It is one of the most well-known works in the Brahminical tradition that describes the laws and moral principles that must be followed in order to uphold dharma. One of the most authoritative texts in the tradition, it is regarded as such. The Manusmriti, also known as "The Laws of Manu." In this research, we attempt to analyze the caste system of Manusmriti as well as the experiences and roles of women in Manusmriti.

**Keywords:** Brahma, brahminical tradition, chaturvarnas, dharma, law of man, society

### Introduction

In accordance with the Manu-smriti, Hindus are expected to uphold their dharma, or the set of obligations they have as members of one of the four social classes (varnas) or as individuals who are in one of the four stages of life (ashramas). It addresses subjects including cosmogony, dharma's definition, customs (samskaras), initiation (upanayana), and the study of the Vedas (Hinduism's holy writings). Additionally, it addresses topics like marriage, receiving guests, burial customs, dietary limitations, pollution, and purification of oneself techniques. It also includes advice on how women and kings ought to conduct themselves. Before returning to religious topics like almsgiving, penance rites, the concept of karma, the soul, and damnation, it then continues on to a discussion of legal matters that is divided into 18 sections.

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The text does not categorically distinguish between secular law and religious law and practices. It has had a significant impact on every element of Hindu ideology, but especially on how the caste system is justified. Hindus are required to follow their dharma, or the set of duties they are responsible for as members of one of the four social classes (varnas) and participants in one of the four life stages (ashramas), according to the Manu-smriti. Cosmogony, the concept of dharma, sacraments (samskaras), initiation (upanayana), and the study of the Vedas (the sacred texts) are all topics covered.

### Objectives

1. Evaluate the Manusmriti's caste structure.
2. Examine the experiences and positions of women in Manusmriti.

## Review of literature

In her discussion on Manusmriti: A Modern Perspective from December 12, 2019, Ridhima Soin claims that Indian society is believed to be guided by a Hindu code of conduct in order to uphold a social order. It is largely based on the principles outlined in Manu's famed work "Manusmriti" or "Manava Dharmasastra," which deals with topics like marriage, families, women's status, and other social and moral organizations in Hindu society. However, since the Manu rules were suppressed, contemporary Indian civilization has undergone numerous transformations. Reviewing the fundamental ideas presented in "Manusmriti" and evaluating their applicability within the context of contemporary culture are the goals of our study.

According to Aditya Madhav, (2019) <sup>[6]</sup>, it has been said that where women are honored, the gods are happy, but where they are not honored, no sacred ritual results in rewards. The right of a Hindu widow to get married again has also been specifically condemned in another text. According to certain opinions, Manusmriti is a complex remark on women's rights. Therefore, it is a difficult assignment that generates contradiction and suffers from a lack of coherence in some areas to portray women and their overall status within the confines of Manusmriti. It should be observed, nevertheless, that the negative impacts of unwholesome religious behavior are sometimes exploited to minimize religion's generally favorable effects.

Manusmriti and a Divided Nation in 2020 by P B Savant of the Wire newspaper claims that the Aryans, who were few in number, were responsible for the caste system. Without it, the Aryans would not have been able to get the upper hand. As Brahmins, they elevated themselves to the top of the food chain. To further solidify this, they gave it a divine seal of approval by asserting that Lord Brahma had decreed it. Over time, this divide and conquer strategy produced more than 6,000 sub-castes that were all based on birth, socially segregated from one another, and hostile to one another. A hierarchical structure also inevitably guaranteed that people at the bottom would constantly be exploited and enslaved. This environment is one that encourages intolerance, mistrust, and division.

## Methodology

I have gathered secondary data from journals, newspapers, research publications, and other sources about the caste system and the position of women in Manusmriti.

## Caste systems in the Manusmriti

The word "Varna" refers to the four main functional classes into which society is divided. According to G.H. Mees, the foundation of the Varna system has been based on five conceptions: social, cultural, professional or occupational, symbolic, and cult. There are several references to this social system's origins that we may find. Man is a spirit, without a doubt, but he is an embodied spirit. The material or bodily part of a person's being, which possesses the three prakrti qualities of sattva, rajas, and tamas, also influences his nature, spiritual growth, and course of action. These are basically equivalent to the words "law," "energy," and "materiality." Desire, thinking, and action are the three facets of consciousness that interact with the three properties of the material body.

Manu thus outlines the roles of the various castes: of the Brahmanas, education, study, offering sacrifices, participating in sacrifices, charity, and accepting gifts; of the Kshatriyas, protection of the people, charity, performing sacrifices, study, and lack of attachment to pleasures; of the Vaishyas, cattle-rearing, agriculture, charity, performing sacrifices, study, trade, and money-lending; of the Shudras, service of the three orders. The caste system, also known as the Varna, was important to the social structure of prehistoric Hindu society, according to Manu.

He had faith that the Varnas would uphold and safeguard societal peace and harmony. He vehemently contended that any failure on the side of the monarch rendered him unworthy of holding office because the state with a king was established to defend the Varna system. Manu proposed a four-category classification of societal structure based on the Vedic hymns. These people are Shudras, Vyshyas, Kshatriyas, and Brahmanas. There was a widespread belief that these four Varnas stood for the four separate sections of the divine body.

The Brahmanas rise from the head, the Kshatriyas from the arms, the Vyshyas from the thighs, and the Shudras from the

feet, as a result, Brahmanas have the highest position and were thought of as the law's physical manifestation. Brahmanas are granted this better position in the social structure as a result of their virtue and wisdom. The next highest position in the social system was given to the Kshatriyas. They were required to defend the nation with courage, make sacrifices and presents, and defend the populace. Manu thought that harmonious relations between Brahmanas and Kshatriyas would increase a society's sense of security. While the Shudras were restricted to an agricultural life, The Vyshyas were anticipated to do business and trade

Manu gave them a very low social status and forbade them from participating in any social or religious education. The Chaturvarna theory, which divided everything into four categories, was meant to keep society harmonious. Manu believed that the Varna system had to be an essential component of the social and political structure and was not a choice.

#### **The experiences and positions of women in Manusmriti.**

Manu believes that women are like property, over which the owner alone has ultimate dominion. He unequivocally asserted that women are like property and that a wife cannot be freed from her husband through sale or rejection. Women were occasionally regarded in Manu's code in the same manner as slaves or Shudras. Manu forbade women from getting divorced or getting remarried under any circumstances. Regardless of her husband's personality, she was required to treat him as her God. Manusmriti is thought to be biased towards women and to hold them in high regard. It states that the place where women are respected becomes the gods' preferred home. The well-known verse "Yatra naryastu pujiyante ramante tatra Devata, yatra itaastu na pujiyante sarvaastatrafalaaah kriyaah" is only found in Manusmriti. In addition, a shloka states, "Woman does not deserve independence," which has been translated as "Na sthree swaatantryam arhati." This shloka has been interpreted as Manu's attitude toward women.

However, "swaatantryam" in this context truly means "depending on oneself for sustenance," which was accurate given the circumstances at the time. Manu believes that a

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woman should never be left to fend for herself because she is by definition so divine and special. She must be protected and well-cared for by her father when she was young, her husband when she was married, and her son when she was elderly. Additionally, the contradicting positions and passages in the Manusmriti may be a result of subsequent textual corruption. This was written during a time when becoming a Maharishi was impossible for someone who held such sexist views regarding women.

According to Manusmriti, a man should consider his wife to be an embodiment of the goddess, a woman should always see her husband as a deity, a girl should obey her father and seek his protection, a young woman should seek protection from her husband, and a widow should seek protection from her son.

Manu praised a dedicated lady and saw her spouse as her highest divinity. Manu held the opinion that a wife should worship her husband even if he lacked all attributes. He declared that even if a husband lacks any virtues, he must be revered and obeyed since he is the wife's "lord and master." Manu imposed severe punishments on adulterers and unfaithful women. He gave the husband's power over his wife such importance that he declared that even though the wife had been sold by her husband and had given birth to a son with the new man, the husband should nevertheless maintain his paternity of the child who was so born. "Man does not make a whole of himself alone, but attains fullness in the company of his wife," according to Manu's law. Manu, however, also included a provision for punishment for wives who defied their husbands. According to him, a wife who neglects her husband's duties would suffer the consequences of her transgression in the afterlife by being plagued by illnesses and entering the womb of a jackal. He had the opinion that marriage establishes the husband's dominance over the wife.

#### **Conclusion**

Manus's concepts contributed to the old Hindu political philosophy by making social differences an essential component of it. His overemphasis on the caste system and kingship led to the exclusion of other political philosophical ideas, such as the theory of state or that of government.

Brahmins were accorded the highest social standing and it casteized humans. Women were never given more thought than a shoe. Manu's Hindu text has drawn criticism because it elevates men and members of upper castes while devaluing women and members of lower castes. He clearly drew a lot of inspiration from Hindu tradition and philosophy, as evidenced by his thoughts. His main focus was the monarchical system. In his Varna theory, he made clear that he had highly rigorous and strict views on social hierarchy.

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