

RIGHTS OF WOMEN, RULES FOR WOMEN, CHILDHOOD AND STRUCTURE OF SOCIETY IN THE MANUSMṚTI

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ABSTRACT

It is well known to everyone that women are much more vulnerable towards physical as well as mental danger in comparison to men. And Manu's provisions of protection for the women folk are an assurance of significant status to women, recognizing their sensitivity towards social evils. Women were never treated deprived in comparison to men. In the society of the Manusmṛti people are classified to maintain peace and to attain spiritual upliftment on Hindu ideals.

1. RULES FOR WOMEN FOUND IN THE MANUSMṚTI

The Manusmṛti is based on dictums given by Sage Manu. It is an ancient law book prescribing rules for the governance of Hindu society as a whole. Here, correlated right and duty for members of a Hindu society is elaborately dealt with. Sage Manu prescribes rules to maintain peace in the society. Manu mentions about position of women existed in ancient Hindu society. Manu postulates welfare for women by assigning some right and some restrictions against those rights. For sustainable continuation of human race both man and woman are important. The concept of right of women or equality of women in comparison to man in the Manusmṛti is different from modern age. This work is undoubtedly noteworthy being a fore runner in discussing position of women. According to Manu, woman is the foundation of a family or a home.

Traditionally, in a family the male members accumulate things for survival or food or protection from

external aggression, while the womenfolk nurture continuation of a given society by extending family, be it birth of new offspring or preservation of family tradition. It is said in ancient scriptures that in respect of character human follow their mother entirely, but their father. And in process of procreation mother takes an important role. 1 This revered book of ancient Hindu traditional law is said to be very flexible, as this could be fitted with society of any point of time. It is a base for modern Hindu personal law. The rules given by Manu are meant for Hindu society of any age. And at the very beginning of our discussion we have to point out progressiveness of the dictums given by sage Manu. Sometimes, Manu is said to be oppressive towards women by confining them in the household. A section of people criticise Manu that his dictums are set back for development of women in the perspective of modern age. And his dictums are of no use in the contemporary era of technology. Such critics only quote the verses from the Manusmṛti, which contain criticism for women or are derogatory to womanhood in a contemporary social scenario of technological era. But, it is evident that they willingly or unwillingly over look the stanzas which directly or indirectly praise female entity. Manu formulated the dictums keeping in mind, difference of woman and man. Here, in this chapter attempt will be made to focus the rights of woman as envisaged in the Manusmṛti and its modern perspective. It contains the notion that practices and traditions which are opposed to law and setback for wellbeing are to be discarded. According to Manu, people should avoid the acquisition of wealth and the gratification of desires, if those are opposed to the sacred law, and even lawful acts which may cause pain in the future or are offensive to men. 2 (parityajedarthakāmou you syātām dharmavarjitou/ svabhāva eṣa nārīṇām narāṇamiha dūṣaṇam .etc. ibid., II, 213) Manu wanted to keep women engage in household shores only. During that age restriction of women from going outside was regarded as means for protection. Dictums of Manu indicate social evils while mentioning affects which could cause harm to women by an unknown male. He even criticizes women for their attractive nature towards men. According to Manu, even a wise man could be influenced by lust or anger. 3 3dharmam chāpyasukhodarkam lokavikruṣṭameva ca// Manusmṛti, IV. 176. So, there is need of all day long observation on women to protect her modesty, from unknown outsider. For women can lead astray in this world not only a fool, but even a learned man, and to make him a slave of desire and anger. One should not sit in a lonely place with one's

mother, sister, or daughter; for the senses are powerful, and master even a learned man. Senses may compel even wise men to loose control, to seduce with her attraction.

4(balavānindriyagrāmo vidvaṅsamapi karṣati// Manusmṛti, II. 214-215).

He always vehemently condemns unauthorized union of male and female. Manu prevents woman from doing a single thing on her own. Nothing must be done independently by a girl or a young woman or an aged one, even in her own house. In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her husband is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent.

5 bālayā vā yubatyā va vṛddhayā vā`pi yositā/
na svātantreṇa kartavyaṁ kiñcat kāryaṁ gr̥hesvapi//
bālye piturvaṅse tiṣṭhetpāṅigrāhasya youvane/
putrāṅaṁ bhartari prete na bhajetstrī svatantratām// ibid., V. 147-148

She must not seek to separate herself from her father, husband, or sons; by leaving them she would make both her own and her husband's families contemptible. Such act invites contemplation to families. 6(esaṁ hi birahaṇa strī garhye kuryādubhe kule// ibid, V. 149) For Manu to maintain family discipline behaviour of woman is very important. He aims to regulate human activities within a disciplined social set- up by discharging of duty (svadarma) of each individual through enjoying own right. 7(Ibid., I. 87-91)Manu admits that preservation of creation of almighty rests on this very principle of inter dependence among members of a society. He imposes duty to everyone (men and women) and subsequently attach right to them. There is a general expectation of society to perform his dharma (duty) according to his varṇa (caste). The distinctive characters of womanhood in ancient India are well integrated with general Hindu moral and practice, i.e. discharging of duty every member of a society. And it is known to us that the varṇa dharma philosophy is based on diversity and relativity, not on equality; 8 for sustenance of each individual in a society. Manu's dictums are based on inter depending relation of man and woman. Traditional Hindu society though fairly rigid in its social expectation, exerts a minimum pressure upon individual for

performing own liability. Within the system of interdependent duties, numerous sections or classes are formed with the aim for easy social development, wherein everyone is expected to make his or her own contribution, but in turn he or she receives basic securities. Thus every individual lives his life with little anxiety or guilt. The Manusmṛti says about right of women by assigning duties to men, and vice versa. By assigning duties to men (to protect women) Manu indirectly entitles privilege to women for security in life.

2. RIGHTS IN FAMILY LIFE

2.1 CHILDHOOD

Manu says son is even as oneself, (such) a daughter is equal to a son. 9 Period of infancy is said to be a period of love and affection. In Hindu social custom infant is a part of family, an object for joy. At that stage no differentiation is attached for being boy or girl. This period has basic influence on the socialization of a human being. There was no reference to the evil custom of female infanticide in the Vedic, epic or classical literature. It is said that even if somewhere in Vedic age female infanticide was practiced, it must have been confined to a very small section of people. Smṛtikāras regard destruction of an embryo as the most heinous crime. 10 Ancient Indian society was patriarchal in character. Family was headed by the male. And following the prevailing social behaviour, some dictums of Manu seem to prefer boy in comparison to a girl. Again parts of ancient literatures contain preference of sons over daughters, viz., The Atharvaveda contains charms and rituals to ensure the birth of a son in preference to that of a girl. But at the same time, we have to remember that the Atharvaveda emphasized girls' education. 11 The Manusmṛti substitutes institutional education for women with education of household chores. It says let the husband employ his wife in the collection and expenditure of his wealth, in keeping everything clean, in the fulfillment of religious duties, in the preparation of his food, and in looking after the household utensils. 12 In the Manusmṛti, there is no mentioning of institutional education (religious or social) for women. It is said for women no sacramental rite is performed with sacred texts; women who are destitute of strength and destitute of the knowledge of Vedic texts, are as impure as falsehood (itself), that is a fixed rule. 13

10 Altekar, A.S., (1959) *The Position of Women in the Hindu Civilization*, p. 8 In traditional Hindu society of Vedic age, the foremost duty of female was to look after children and to continue individual family tradition. Thus variance of duties cause difference of education among boys and girls formulated. To educate children and to help those in settling in life are the main duties of parents. The period before marriage was utilized for imparting education to daughter. We find one of the early Upaniṣads recommending a certain ritual to a house holder for ensuring the birth of a scholarly daughter. 14 The Viṣṇudharmaśāstra says that nāmakaṛaṇa and annaprāśana for girls is observed without uttering mantras. 15 In a society, scholarly daughter is regarded as the pride of a family. 16 The Atharvaveda observes that a maiden can succeed in marriage only if she has been properly trained during the period of studentship. 17 The traditional notion of the significance of being a female child in Indian society is a well accepted concept by the world. Because, there was general consensus that in spite of the fact that boys are wanted more than girls', once a child is arrive it is loved for its own sake, that at least in infancy there is no preferential treatment in pre independent India. 18 Westerners were very much clear in their notion that womenfolk in India are treated differently by the society in comparison to the western culture. Here, men and women are regarded as interdependent between one another to maintain sustainable development of a society. Each individual is expected to do his or her duty or dharma and thereby contribute towards welfare of society.

2.2 STRUCTURE OF FAMILY

Sage Manu treats family as the basic unit of society. Although as structure of family we do not get any direct mentioning in the Manusmṛti, but the twelve chapters contain rule for the householder for maintaining peace in a family and thereby contribute towards the Hindu society as a whole. Hindu family is patriarchal in nature. In general, father is responsible for maintenance and wellbeing of each and every member of the family. Existence of mother is nevertheless downtrodden. Because Manu himself says maintenance of a disciplined domestic life only can be ensured in the company of a happy satisfied wife. 19 Main basis of a family is the bond of togetherness between husband and wife for the procreation and healthy upbringing of offspring. In that family, where the husband is pleased with his wife and the wife with her husband, happiness will assuredly be lasting. 20 Both the parents constitute two vital pillars of a family. Hindu

household comprise a group of persons united by the ties of marriage or blood relation or adoption, constituting a single household, interacting with each other in their respective social positions of husband and wife, mother and father, son and daughter, brother and sister. They share and maintain a common culture. And such large family directly helps in maintaining agricultural productivity of a household. Men and women equally contribute towards working of joint family in the time of Manu. This joint family system has been affected and disintegrated under the utter necessity of changing of income source in place of traditional economy primarily based on agricultural produce.

Conclusion

It is well known to everyone that women are much more vulnerable towards physical as well as mental danger in comparison to men. And Manu's provisions of protection for the women folk are an assurance of significant status to women, recognizing their sensitivity towards social evils. Women were never treated deprived in comparison to men. In the society of the Manusmṛti people are classified to maintain peace and to attain spiritual upliftment on Hindu ideals.

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8 Cormack, M., (1953) The Hindu Woman, p.192

9 Manusmṛti, IX. 130

11 brahmacāryeṇa kanyānām yuvā vindate patiṃ// Atharvaveda XI. 7.18

12 Manusmṛti, IX, 11

13 nāsti striṇām kriyā mantrairiti dharma vyavasthitiḥ// ibid., IX, 18

14 atha ya icchedduhitā me paṇḍitā jāyate/ sarvamāyuriyāditi tilaudanam pācayitvā

sarpismantamasniyātāmiśvarau janayitavai// Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad, IV. 4.18

15 Viṣṇudharmaśāstra, XXVII. 1

16 kanyeyam kulajīvitam// Kumārasānbhavam, VI. 63

17brahmacāryeṇa kanyānām yuvā vindate patiṁ// Atharvaveda, XI. 7.18

18 Cormack, M., (1953) The Hindu Woman, p. 9

19 pitrā bhartāraḥ sutairvāpi naicchedvirahamātmanah/

esam hi virahēṇa strī garhye kuryādubhekule// Manusmṛti, V. 149

20 yasminneva kule nityam kalyāṇam tatra vai dhruvam// ibid., III. 60

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