

Manava-Dharmasastra and Human Nature

*¹ Dr. Ajeet Kumar

*¹ Associate Professor, Department of History, Kirori Mal College University of Delhi, Delhi India.

Article Info.

E-ISSN: 2583-6528

Impact Factor (SJIF): 6.876

Peer Reviewed Journal

Available online:

www.alladvancejournal.com

Received: 20/Aug/2024

Accepted: 23/Sep/2024

Abstract

This paper examines the notion of human nature in the *Manava-Dharmasastra* (Manusmriti) and its role in shaping social norms and laws. It argues that while the text does not explicitly theorize human nature, it clearly assumes certain shared traits such as desire, intellect, emotions, and moral tendencies. These traits are both accepted and regulated through dharmic prescriptions. At the same time, the text constructs a hierarchical social order based on varna, suggesting differentiated natures across social groups. By analysing these contradictions, the paper shows that Manusmriti reflects both observation of human behaviour and an attempt by Brahmin elites to shape society according to their ideals. It concludes that the concept of human nature in the text is closely tied to social control, moral regulation, and the assertion of Brahmanical values.

*Corresponding Author

Dr. Ajeet Kumar

Associate Professor, Department of
History, Kirori Mal College University
of Delhi, Delhi India.

Keywords: Manusmriti, Human nature, Dharma and law, Varna system, Brahmanical ideology.

Introduction

Manava-dharmasastra or manusmriti enjoys a prime position among ancient Indian normative texts ^[1]. In contemporary time also it is very controversial as well as popular text. The colonizers played a very important role in creating its paramouncy as the most valid law book of the Hindus ^[2]. The text mainly contains primary law and was composed by a Brahmin elite or group of such people ^[3]. Olivelle has rightly called the Brahmin householder as the lynchpin of the text ^[4]. The existence of human nature was not a topic of debate in pre-modern times as it is today ^[5]. Every religion and society do considered something as human nature. The notion of human nature was very closely entangled with norms and laws of particular society. Some laws were made according to human nature others were used to suppress it. While not going to debate about whether society and culture constructs what we call human nature or whether there is something really that can be called the innate nature of humans. I just want to focus on what this text considers as human nature and how these consideration effects the purpose of text. The questions what I am going to address in this paper is whether there is a notion on human nature in Manusmriti or not? Then I am going to discuss some of the human nature accepted in this text and

their effects in construction of laws and lastly how it helps us in understanding some concerns of these elite Brahmins of that time.

¹ Here, I have used human nature as the feelings and behaviors common to most of the humans in a society.

² The popularity of manusmriti in ancient and mediaeval India is understood by the fact that it has the highest number of commentaries i.e. 9 among dharmasastras and is also the most quoted text in brahmanic traditions.

³ The early indologists decided the authenticity of a text based on the date of composition, the older the text the more authentic it was.

⁴ Donald r.davis,jr introduction in Patrick Olivelle and Donald r.davis, jr edited, *a oxford history of Hinduism, Hindu law, a new history of dharmasastra*, oxford university press ,2008.he discusses the topic of authorship in detail.

⁵ Patrick Olivelle, *social and literary history of dharmasastra: the foundational texts* in Patrick Olivelle and Donald r.davis, jr edited,*a oxford history of Hinduism, Hindu law, a new history of dharmasastra*, oxford university press, 2008.

Human Nature in Ancient India

It is beyond the capacity of this paper to discuss the various notions of human nature in ancient India but two extreme

ends were of Advait Vedanta and charvaka for the former human nature was completely spiritual and for the latter it was completely material. Between these two lies the notions of Samikhya, Mimamsa, Buddhists, Jains etc. [6] But it cannot be proclaimed that Manusmriti directly subscribe the notion of human nature to any of these philosophical school rather the ideas and terminology used in the text takes from many different tradition preceding it [7]. However, two philosophical positions of Manusmriti can be clearly stated that (i) it belonged to Astika traditions (ii) it also subscribed to idea of Iswarvada [8] which are very important for our discussion of human nature but let begin with the greatest suspicion in the text regarding human nature that is the creation of four social classes directly from mouth, arms, thighs and feet of the lord which means humans and their social class were created same time unlike the Judeo-Christian world where first humans were created and later due to a curse the nature of men and women were distinguished. The whole text follows this classification and hierarchy established by this creation verse. So, it gives us impression that there is different nature of social classes and no such thing like human nature which is free from class and gender categories and so every class is assigned different dharma following which the social order remains perfect. Now to prove that the text really believed in human nature some examples has to be given which applies to all the four varnas and womens. But before going to specific example one important thing need to be discussed that many of the claims by dharmasastra author cannot be considered as reflection of ancient Indian society and especially in the matter of varna system. Here I would like to quote Patrick Ollivele to give more weightage to this argument

“One may question the need for Brahmanical theologians to assert aggressively the varna system, be not just old but also reflecting the social reality of the ancient Indian society. I think this is a mistake because all the evidence presented for this claim comes from Brahmanical sources, which generally sought to shape rather than simply reflect social reality. Asokan inscriptions constitute one of the few independent sources, and they are completely silent on the varnas, the very term is absent in them and so are terms for three of the four varnas: ksatriya, vaisya and sudra. They do mention the Brahmana but not as varna but another sect” [9].

So if varna society was what they wanted to achieve then what was the real society they were encountering and that what were the notion of human nature that they wanted to shape. One of the clearest examples of that is

“There is no fault in eating meat, in drinking liquor, or in having sex, that is natural activities of the creatures. Abstaining from such activity, however, brings greater rewards” (Ollivelle 5.56) [10]

Here Creatures is clearly use to denote humans because no other creature can do all these three activities. The word used for natural activity in the text is ‘pravritti’. This first part of verse is clearly a generalized notion of something that was very much prevalent in society and the second part is moral tone of author in dealing with what he considered as human nature. So this verse clearly stands in stark contradiction with earlier creation verse in the context of human nature. More such verses are present in the text. Since it is established that the concept of human nature do exist in the text. I can do a careful analysis of some of the elements of human nature present in text.

Desire as Human Nature

In the philosophy of Isavarvada desire is the root cause of creation. So desire even exists before human creation. In the context of human nature desire is perceived as both good and bad by Manusmriti and the text proclaims that it is impossible to be free from desire [11]. Desire is necessary because it prompts vedic study and performance of vedic rites. Some kinds of desire are not recommended and it should be controlled like sexual desire outside marriage. There are many instances in the text where sexual desire can lead to corruption of both men and women.

⁶ For more detailed discussion, see steven pinker, *the blank slate, the modern denial of human nature*, penguin,2002.

⁷ J Keith ward, Introduction, Religion and Human nature, Calaredon Press, oxford 1998

⁸ For greater details on influences of man dharmasastra se P. V Kana, History of Dharmasastra, vol. 1 pg.-154

⁹ Here the astika tradition means which believes in the authority of vedas. Iswarvada philosophy believes in god as the creator and moral governor of the world, for more details, see, Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya, Indian Atheism, Peoples publishing house.

¹⁰ Ollivele, social and literary history of dharmasastra. The foundation

¹¹ Patrick Ollivele, Manu’s code of law, critical edition and translation of the Manavadharmasastra, Oxford university press 2005.

Intellect as Human Nature

‘Among creatures, living beings are best, among living being there who subsist by intelligence, among those who subsist by intelligence, human being and among human being, Brahmins-so the traditions declares’ (Ollivel 1.96) [12]

The above quoted verse clearly shows that manu do recognizes intelligence in every human being but among human beings the Brahmins are the best and in the next verse manu further elaborate this hierarchy declaring the best among brahmanas are vedic sevant followed by Brahmins who take vow and then learned Brahmins. This is very crucial point because in the text many times it is mentioned that a Brahmin who is not following daily rites and is not learned is no better than shudra and unfit to be called for any offerings. That means knowledge of Veda learning daily rituals and vows is what makes Brahmins superior to other humans and all these things are to be learned or followed by Brahmins in material world none of these things came with Brahmin from birth onwards. But one major problem that the author of this text recognizes that there are shudras and women’s who are learned and even know vedas and in the case of adversity a brahmin can accept a shudra teacher who has knowledge of vedas but on the hand at normal times the text asserts that in no case the shudras and women should be taught vedas. This assertion seems to come from the fear that women and shudras do have necessary intellect to grasp vedic knowledge. So it is very evident that Manu not only recognizes intellect as human nature but also uses his belief in constructing some laws of prohibition especially for shudras and women.

¹² I bid (2.2)

Emotions as Human Nature

Emotions like desire are twofold both good and bad anger, envy and grief are said to be controlled by brahmanas. In the discussion on the behavior of kings pleasure is said to create 10 vices while wrath crates 8 vices. The mixed classes like suta, ugra and vaidika are said to be full of anger and envy. These emotions are common to every social class and womens are also full of good and bad emotions but special moral tone is given in the case of Brahmanas to control it in several occasions.

The Three Attributes

The three attributes that are goodness vigor and darkness are very important in discussions of human nature because it discusses the human feelings. An act about which a man is ashamed after he has committed it, while he is committing it and also he is full of confusion with an unclear object, he should recognize it as darkness. But when someone perceives himself in the condition full of joy and know with his heart and is not ashamed to perform this is a mark of goodness and when it is full of pain and anguish to himself is an act of vigor. There are the classifications entirely based on human experiences and their feelings during a particular kind of work (karma). However in further discussion the author further goes to classify various creatures according to their these attributes and establish hierarchies in them but as we have already discussed this is the artificial assertion of the author upon the natural tendencies of humans the fulfill their motives.

Although Olivelle has rightly pointed out some of the concerns of these Brahmin elites to produce the text dharmasastric texts in the first five centuries. The causes pointed by Olivelle are the legacy of Asokan rule, the pressure from heterodox sects like Buddhism and Jainism and the establishment of Kushana rule in north-western India and their patronage to Buddhism which definitely created a pressure to reform in Brahminical system^[13] but some of the inner weaknesses of Brahminical society and especially the Brahmins were also responsible for formulation of text like Manusmriti. It is very evident that during this time many Brahmins were embracing other heterodox sects due to lack of patronage and also the ideas of these sects were more acceptable to the people. Secondly, the texts itself hint towards the lack of Brahmins knowledgeable in Vedas like in this verse.

‘He should search far and wide for a Brahmin who had mastered the Veda. Such a man is the proper recipient of divine and ancestral offering, and tradition call him a “guest”^[14].

It is clear that there was a big question on quality of Brahmins which is evident in the text. Surely there inner weakness may have prompted those Brahmin elite to compose such a text by which a good breed of Brahmins comes into existence in future which is very different from other humans in most of the aspects because the major audience of this text were Brahmins themselves. So, it was an attempt to differentiate Brahmins from some of the natural tendencies of humans as perceived by author or add something more to these tendencies to make Brahmins supreme in all aspects. In doing so they were also very practical because they described every small procedure of conduct from day to day activities to even great occasions. In most part of the text the main focus is never on the attributes and the capabilities of a Brahmin with which he is born but rather it is in training him through asserting to follow his norms, rituals, and gain knowledge of Vedas.

¹³ I bid

¹⁴ I bid (3.130)

Conclusion

This paper derives mainly three conclusions first Manvadharmastra do have a notion of human nature and it contradicts the creation verse of the text according to which social classes and human were created at the same time. While the assertion on Varna society is about how the Brahmin elites wanted to shape the society. Their observation

on human nature was more true observations of society. Secondly, Desire, emotions, intellect and feelings are part of human nature in Manusmriti they also are important factors shaping the arguments in the text and lastly one of the prime concerns of the author of the text was to shape the behavior of Brahmins very different from other sections of society so that it can affirm its supremacy.

References

1. Olivelle Patrick. *Manu's code of law, a critical edition and translation of the Manavadharmastra*; Oxford University Press, 2005.
2. Davis, Donald R, Olivelle Patrick (edited). *The Oxford History of Hinduism, Hindu law, a new history of Dharmastra*, Oxford University Press, 2018.
3. Chattopadhyaya, Debiprasad. *Indian Atheism*, People's publishing house, New Delhi.
4. Kane PV. *History of Dharmastra (Ancient and Medieval Religions and Civil law)*, 1.
5. Pinker Steve. *The blank slate, the modern denial of Human nature*, Penguin, 2002.
6. Ward, Keith, *Religion and Human nature*. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1998.