

Manusmriti

August 26, 2022

In news– Recently, the Vice Chancellor of Jawaharlal Nehru University, Santishree Dhulipudi Pandit has criticised the Manusmriti, the ancient Sanskrit text, over its gender bias.

A brief history of Manusmriti-

- The **Mānavadharmasāstra, also known as Manusmriti or the Laws of Manu**, is a Sanskrit text **belonging to the Dharmaśāstra literary tradition of Hinduism**.
- **Composed sometime between the 2nd century BCE and 3rd century CE**, the Manusmriti is **written in sloka verses**, containing two non-rhyming lines of 16 syllabus each.
- **The text is attributed to the mythical figure of Manu**, considered to be ancestor of the human race in Hinduism.
- There has been considerable debate between scholars on the authorship of the text. Many have argued that it was compiled by many Brahmin scholars over a period of time.
- **The Manusmriti is encyclopedic in scope, covering subjects such as the social obligations and duties of the various castes and of individuals in different stages of life**, the suitable social and sexual relations of men and women of different castes, on taxes, the rules for kingship, on maintaining marital harmony and the procedures for settling everyday disputes.
- At its core, the text **discusses life in the world, how it is lived in reality**, as well as how it ought to be.
- It is argued that the text is about **dharma, which means duty, religion**, law and practice. **It also discusses aspects of the Arthashastra, such as issues relating to statecraft and legal procedures**.
- **It deals with cosmogony; the definition of the dharma; the sacraments (samskaras); initiation (upanayana) and the study of the Vedas (the sacred texts of Hinduism);**

marriage, hospitality, funeral rites, dietary restrictions, pollution, and means of purification; the conduct of women and wives; and the law of kings.

- As per the historians, the aim of the text is to present a blueprint for a properly ordered society under the sovereignty of the king and the guidance of Brahmins.
- According to historians, by the early centuries of the Common Era, Manu had become, and remained, the standard source of authority in the orthodox tradition for that centrepiece of Hinduism, varṇāśrama-dharma (social and religious duties tied to class and stage of life).
- They argue that it was a very significant text for Brahmin scholars – **it attracted 9 commentaries by other writers of the tradition**, and was cited by other ancient Indian texts far more frequently than other dharmaśāstra.
- European Orientalists considered the Manusmṛiti to be of great historical and religious significance as well.
- It was the **first Sanskrit text to be translated into a European language, by the British philologist Sir William Jones in 1794.**
- Subsequently, it was translated into French, German, Portuguese and Russian, before being **included in Max Muller's edited volume, Sacred Books of the East in 1886.**
- In 1772, **Governor-General Warren Hastings decided to implement laws of Hindus and Muslims that they believed to be "continued, unchanged from remotest antiquity".**

Why is it controversial?

- The **ancient text has 4 major divisions:**
 - Creation of the world.
 - Sources of dharma.
 - The dharma of the four social classes.
 - Law of karma, rebirth, and final liberation.

- The third section is the longest and most important section.
- The text is deeply concerned with maintaining the hierarchy of the four-fold varna system and the rules that each caste has to follow.
- For the author of the text, the Brahmin is assumed to be the perfect representative of the human race, while Sudras, who are relegated to the bottom of the order, are given the sole duty of serving the 'upper' castes.
- Some verses also contain highly prejudicial sentiments against women on the basis of their birth.
- There are many verses in the text that are considered controversial, including a few mentioned below:
 - Chapter 8, sloka 21: "When a Sudra interprets the Law for a king, his realm sinks like a cow in mud, as he looks on helplessly"
 - Chapter 8, sloka 129: "Even a capable Sudra must not accumulate wealth; for when a Sudra becomes wealthy, he harasses Brahmins."
 - Chapter 8, sloka 371: "When a woman... becomes unfaithful to her husband, the king should have her devoured by dogs in a public square frequented by many."
 - Chapter 5, sloka 148: "As a child, she must remain under her father's control; as a young woman, under her husband's; and when her husband is dead, under her sons'. She must never seek to live independently"
 - Chapter 2, sloka 13: "It is the very nature of women here to corrupt men. On that account, prudent men are never off guard in the presence of alluring young women."
 - (Above slokas cited from Manu's Code of Law, translated by Patrick Olivelle and Suman Olivelle, 2004)
- On December 25, 1927, Dr B R Ambedkar had famously

burned the Manusmṛiti, which he saw as a source of gender and caste oppression.