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Social Values as reflected in the Manusmrti and its relevance

Abstract

The Manusmrti, which is divided into twelve chapters, deals almost every aspect of human behaviour of the individuals of the human society. The life of an individual is a well-planned scheme, and for a better harmony and progress of the society. Every individual should maintain his life according to this scheme. Likewise, every individual should perform his duties according to his inborn merit and ability for the smooth progress of the society. This is the philosophy behind Manu's *Varna* and *Asrama* systems of life. Everybody should do his enjoined duties in his course of life and, this is, what is called *dharma*. *Dharma* is a guiding force of life which is, if protected protects and the vice versa. Social, political, economic and religious aspects of human life are governed by this *dharma*. *Dharma* is not some mere observances of some religious rites preached and practised by some religious heads but a discipline of life of an individual which is a prime need for preserving values in human society. It is an essential condition for regulating the conduct of human life in a right direction. It is an inextricable part of life for an individual and thereby it is the central theme behind all the rules of the Manusmrti. Manu's rules cover almost every aspect of human behaviour. We shall, therefore, try to find out in this paper some universal social values or ideals as revealed in the Manusmrti.

Keyword: Manusmrti, *Dharma*, observances, economic

Introduction

Values in the Manusmrti

In Manu's rules we observe the following principles which tend to regulate human behaviour in the society for the better interest of human life.

I) Truthfulness in speech:

The central theme of Manu's codes is *dharma* or moral duty. Truthfulness in speech is one of the essential requirements for upholding *dharma* in the society. Manu is aware of advocating the truthfulness in speech. Truthfulness has power of its own. Manu says that it is truth that purifies the mind and one should speak only those words which are refined by truth.¹ It is truth which increases faith among the members of the society and falsehood increases betrayal. For a better human relationship, truthfulness in human conduct is a demanding factor. Manu says that he, who desires virtue, should always use sweet words.² Manu upholds the value of truthfulness in speech saying that one should not speak an unpleasant truth which increases the mental agony of others. According to Manu, this is the eternal virtue (*sanatana dharma*).³

In the matter of dispensing justice, truthfulness in speech has a great role to play. Judges are to depend on statements of the plaintiff, defendant and the witness. Finding out of the exact truth behind a law suit depends upon the true statements delivered by each of the above parties and particularly of the witness in front of a judge. Therefore, truthfulness in speech is the guiding force for a court of justice. Manu was aware of this fact and therefore, he says that rather one should not attend a court of justice, but once someone attends there, he must speak the truth. One, who keeps silence or speaks a lie or falsehood in a court of justice, becomes guilty of vice.⁴ In a court of justice truth should not be pierced by untruth. Therefore, a witness should never speak a falsehood in a court of justice. Otherwise he shall go to the hells after his death.⁵

II) Non-Violence (*ahimsa*):

Ahimsa (non-violence or non-injury to others) is an universal belief which is deeply rooted in Indian tradition. *Ahimsa* is such an ideal

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which sustains some other noble ideals in human mind such as forgiveness (*ksama*), compassion (*daya*), truth (*satya*) etc. And above all it brings purity of mind. The doctrine of *ahimsa* (non-injury) in Manu's rule is well established is evident from several references found in the 5th chapter of his law-book. Manu says that meat cannot be obtained without killing living beings which is detrimental to the attainment of heavenly bliss and hence one should avoid eating meat.⁶

Manu says that he is a great sinner who, though not worshipping the gods and manes, wants to increase the bulk of his own flesh by taking the flesh of other animated beings. Though Manu sanctions some lawful slaughterings of animals in some special religious practices and which he terms as divine acts and is free from vices, yet he shows much lenient view towards not killing and taking of animal's flesh.⁷ Manu says a lot in favour of his lenient view towards not killing of animals for flesh. Manu's etymological significance of the term '*mamsa*' (flesh or meat) shows his utmost devotion to *ahimsa*.⁸

The etymological significance of the term '*mamsa*' is otherwise a psychological menace to them who are involving unlawful killing of animals for meat. In another content Manu states that animals like horse, elephants etc. which are used for travelling should be of sound health and they should not be whipped as far as possible (Manusmṛti, IV.68). Manu is even concerned over cutting or destroying of trees and plants without a lawful reason. Manu treats this kind of activity as *himsa*.⁹

ii) Dharma (moral duty): *Dharma* plays an important role in Manu's social theory. In the Manusmṛti, the term *dharma* is frequently used in several senses. Out of these, the two senses of the term are noteworthy. Firstly, *dharma* represents justice or righteousness. Justice consists in application of law in eighteen titles of law suits which may arise among the subject.¹⁰ *Dharma*, in the sense of justice or righteousness is a sustaining force, which, if it is violated, destroys, and if it is preserved, preserves us, and therefore, *dharma* should not be violated.¹¹ Secondly, it represents duty, the duty of every member of the four social orders. For instance Manu says that whatever may be the relation, either a father or a priest, a king should punish him who does not discharge his own duty (*svadharma*) in social life.¹² In another context Manu says *danda* (rod of divine law) is *dharma*.¹³ It is *danda* which is the chief instrument of upholding *dharma*. It is above all and even a king is not above it.¹⁴

The sense of one's own duty (*svadharma*) and righteousness, on which Manu emphasizes more by the term *dharma* in his great law-book, are two urgent needs for which our society is crying for. We would like to refer to the comment made by C.S. Venkateswaran while he observes "*Dharma* contributes to the preservation, progress and welfare of human society, and in a wider sense, of the whole world."¹⁵ In short, *dharma*, according to Manu, is not mere pretext with some badges but right conduct of

human behaviour for the welfare of the whole creatures.¹⁶

IV) Good conduct : The purity in conduct of life of every individual is a primordial condition for preserving values. Manu's term for 'good conduct' is *sadacara* which has been handed down from generation to generation among the twice-born castes and the mixed castes.¹⁷ Good conduct (*sadacara*) has a positive role in moulding and regulating human character. According to Manu right conduct is the root of progress of life. It is good conduct through which one achieves the desired objects and a man of bad conduct is condemned in this world and suffers perpetual misery.¹⁸

Manu's codes for good conduct are not confined only among the subjects but also applicable to the king. Manu says that a king should diligently avoid ten bad habits originated from lust and other eight bad habits originated from anger, because these open the path of destruction.

V) Honesty: Honesty is one of the universal values which plays an important role in uplifting human values. It teaches one to be just in conduct. Honesty represents cultivation of some virtues which tend to moral and intellectual growth and lead one to the path of righteousness. We observe that honesty is highly inculcated while Manu frames the codes of conduct. Honesty remains in good conduct. Manu's rule for the conduct of the four stages of life for different social orders (*Varnas*), the rules framed for the conduct of a king and all other rules which are framed for regulating the conduct of social and individual life highly uphold honesty in its truest sense. None should deviate from the respective rules of conduct of its own.¹⁹ Manu stresses on honesty in speech, in testimony, in trade and commerce, in married life and so on. Because, value remains in honesty. Manu tries to remove all evils from the society. This is possible when the individuals of the society maintain honesty in their conduct. Gambling with dice and betting, thefts, drinking of wine etc. are some evil practices which decay the standards of morality and honesty among the members of the society and ultimately it degrades value. Manu tries to discourage these evil practices by his rules.²⁰

VI) Tolerance: The spirit of tolerance is one of the principal values enshrined by Indian tradition. It is a virtue which tends to cultivate mental and moral progress in human mind. Herold H. Titus comments— "Tolerance is a disposition to recognise and permit beliefs and practices differing from one's own. ...Without a degree of tolerance, mental and moral progress is impossible."²¹ It is a virtue in human mind which teaches to respect the whole creatures of the universe. It teaches to respect others. Manu's codes are aware of in this respect. Manu says—someone should not hurt the feeling of others even though he is oppressed by others. One should not spell even a single word to anybody which is harsh and pauses the door to heaven.²²

VII) Human feeling to the disabled and distressed person:

Human feeling towards the disabled and distressed persons also finds place in Manu's rules. Manu says that one should not ridicule those who are physically handicapped, illiterate, old, devoid of physical beauty poor and of low birth for their destitution.²³ A person, who taunts men of deformity, is liable for punishment by the king.²⁴

VIII) Checking of covetousness:

Checking of covetousness is another important factor which tends to uphold values in the society. Excessive greed or covetousness causes decay in morality and increases corruption and exploitation in society. It decays not only the morality but also destroys the balance of the Nature. In this regard we would like to refer to Swami Yuktananda while he observes –“It is man who is now accused of causing damage to the ecosystem by his domination, his greed for instant gain. When man is motivated by a value drive of instant gain he is pushed to the edge of destruction; abundance turns into scarcity affecting all. The desire to become richer at any cost drives him to self-destruction”.²⁵ Manu's consciousness against a covetous way of life is available in his law book. Manu says that real happiness remains in self-contentment and discontentment leads to misery. Therefore, a seeker for real happiness must restrain himself from pursuing of more wealth except his minimum need.²⁶ It seems to indicate that real happiness remains in simple and honest way of life. The four social orders are enjoined with some specific duties and professions of its own and they should perform their respective duties and follow their ordained professions.²⁷ None should follow the professions of others motivated by greed or covetousness.²⁸ Manu enjoins that one should live by doing even vile works allotted according to his own order than to accept the profession of a superior order for his livelihood.²⁹ Manu was apprehensive of the evil effect that may arise in social life from hoarding of wealth by an unworthy person.³⁰ It seems that Manu wanted to check the unhealthy competition that may arise out of greed for hoarding wealth among the four social orders of the society. The duties and profession ordained for the four social orders are for the good of the society and not for hoarding wealth.

IX) Charity (*Dana*) :

Charity or *danakarma* is a pious activity which promotes the high ideal of human values. It benefits both the giver and the bonafide receiver and promotes peace and harmony in the society by favouring economic equilibrium.³¹ Manu says that charity is the highest *dharma* in the *kaliyuga*.³² Charity or *danakarma* increase the feeling of compassion in human mind which is a prime need for preserving social values. The Manusmrti enumerates different kinds of charity (*dana*) and the meritorious results of it.³³

X) Respect for the elders:

Respect for the elders has a great value towards the cause of humanity. The older section of the society, especially in ancient times, when knowledge was handed down through informal communication and personal experience, was the

repositories of knowledge and experiences.³⁴ Manu enjoins to pay due respect to this section of people. The Manusmrti suggests to respect the aged people even by a king.³⁵ One should not disregard a preceptor, a father, a mother and an elder brother.³⁶ A son is highly indebted to his parents which could not be repaid even in a course of hundred years. Manu enjoins a lot of duties to be performed by a son to his preceptor and parents.³⁷ The contribution of the elders to the society and to the mankind could not be denied. Respect to the elders is an essential condition for a healthy human society. They are the valuable source or treasure of knowledge and experiences. Manu was aware of this side and enjoins to pay due respect to the elders.

XI) Value attached to Manu's code of punishment and expiatory Rites:

Manu's rules for punishment and the expiatory rites are some positive measures to check evil practices and moral degradation in the society. Prof. V.S. Agrawal comments –“ Crime committed at any level in society deserve to be dealt with severely and the codes of Manu propounds an unmistakable attitude in this respect..... The majority of Manu's dicta, found in the twelve Books of his code, are of a very edifying nature aiming at the highest exaltation of moral and spiritual values as they become incarnate in the choicest section of the people.”³⁸ Gambling of dice, drinking, stealing of others property, accepting of bribes by royal officers, adultery and many more evil practices cause degradation or erosion of moral values in the society. Manu enjoins sufficient measures to check these evil practices.⁴⁰ In Manu's rule, an offender had to suffer double punishment for an offence. An offender had to suffer punishment first according to the rule of law as well as expiatory rites according to the rule of *Karmaphala*. An offender seems to commit a sin as well as crime. By inflicting double punishment, an offender is warned of not to commit an offence by means of both the rules of law as well as the rule of god or *Karmaphala*.⁴¹

XII) *Varna* and *Asrama* system and work culture:

Manu says that men are the highest amongst the intellectual creatures.⁴² Being the highest of all creatures, they should have some responsibility towards the human society as well as towards the living beings. In fact the existence of the whole creation of the world depends upon the just and positive activities of the members of the human society. Manu's *varna* and *asrama* system uphold that each of the four *varnas* should perform its own duties according to its inborn merits and qualities for the smooth running of the social machinery. The central theme behind the scheme of *varna* and *asrama* was obligation towards one's own duty. None should deviate from the path of its own duties according to the *varna* and *asrama*.⁴³ The *varna* and *asrama* scheme of life is a division of labour according to the merit and skill of the four groups of the society in their different stages of life. Kewal Motwani holds view that division of four social groups results an integrated social order in which all the needs of a harmonious life are provided for.⁴⁴ J.R. Gharpure comments that

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civilization is founded upon mutual service and each of the four groups of the society serves the society by its particular capacity.⁴⁵

XIII) *Rajadharma* and Political norms:

S.N. Gupta comments—“If life is to be valued, economic means will have to be managed for its sustenance and a well ordered society and a good government are to be managed for a peaceful social living.”⁴⁶ For a good government, the Political norms should be well guided with the notion of servicing attitude to the subjects. Manu’s kingship (*rajadharma*) plays an important role towards the right direction in this respect. The duty of a king is to follow and discharge all the duties related with kingship and to employ all his servants in doing good to his subjects.⁴⁶ The duty of a king should be guided by righteousness which is the preservative force of all. A king is not above the rule of law.⁴⁷ Manu visualises the idea of a good government represented by an ideal king within the frame of righteousness for the welfare of the human society.

Over and above these noble ideals, we have found in Manu’s rules some other ideals which have some everlasting values in human society of all ages. These are prohibition against taking liquor, righteousness honesty in acquiring wealth, due respect and due protection of women-folk, equal treatment to a daughter as well as a son, prohibition against exploitation etc.

Conclusion :

Manu’s rules for governing social organizations are based on some principles which have some everlasting values towards the cause of humanity. It may be spiritual, moral, ethical, economic, political or social value. But, each of these values tends to uphold values in the human society. The observances of these principles of great values are some conditions for the maintenance of social good as well as the social organizations. Manu, through his codes, teaches that members of the society should cultivate these virtues of eternal value. These principles may be some positive helps for moulding human character and conduct. A man of right conduct is expected to devote himself for the cause of human interest. Someone may ask what is the benefit from these values in this century? We would like to answer that without cultivating these values a man can not claim himself to be a perfect man. Values or good ideals never become old. Most of the rules of Manu advocate some ethical, moral and spiritual values which are some pressing needs of our society. Individualism has been the growing tendency of our present society. Today, the inclination to excessive individualism results extreme consumerism. As a result, the present society seems to run after a philosophy of extreme materialism. Today, the idea of human or social welfare is given a secondary importance and personal interest or gain has been given the primary importance. This philosophy of the individuals of the society is certainly detrimental to the human society. In this context, the universal ideals of the Manusmrti may be some positive guidelines to recover the good ideals of

ancient past which uphold the interest of human society. Truthfulness, non-violence, work culture, good conduct, human feeling to the disabled and distressed persons, honesty in every sphere of life, charity, observances of one’s own *dharma* (duty) etc. are some universal ideals which have some everlasting relevancy in all ages of human history for upgrading social interest.

Reference

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6. sabham va na pravestaryam vaktavyam va samanjasam/ abruvanbibruvanvapi nara bhavati kilvisi//
7. Ibid, VIII.13
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10. saksi drstasrutadanyadvibruvnnarya samsadi/ avangarakamabhyeti pretya svargacca ksiyate// Ibid,VIII.75
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