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The Status and Empowerment of Women in the eyes of Manu

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Abstract: This paper examines the status, rights, responsibilities, and social position of women in the Manusmṛti. It critically analyses Manu's apparently ambivalent attitude towards women, highlighting both restrictions on female independence and the considerable respect accorded to women within family and society. The study discusses women's importance in the Gārhasthāśrama, their role in household management, childbearing, religious activities, economic responsibilities, and the maintenance of family welfare. It also examines matrimonial ideals, protection of women, remarriage, social duties, chastity and personal freedom. Although certain Manusmṛti provisions restrict women's autonomy, other passages emphasize their dignity, protection, happiness, and indispensability to family prosperity. The paper argues that Manu's regulations should be understood within their historical and socio-cultural context. Overall, the study presents a balanced assessment of women's position in ancient Indian society as reflected in the Manusmṛti.

Key Notes: Women's Status; Strīdhana; Women's Rights; Matrimonial Ideals; Gārhasthāśrama; Protection; Social Responsibility; Female Independence; Family Welfare.

Introduction:

The human family with these is two men and women. Men and women are two parts of the Supreme Being. Except for one, the other is incomplete. A society that wants to make men weak by making women ignorant, wants to paralyze one half of the supreme man and move forward with only one part of him. This respect for women can also be seen in the era of Manusmṛti. Many discussions of Manu's high regard for women, especially married women, are found in the Manusmṛti. Many consider Manu a misogynist. They think that Manu did not respect women. He looks at women with eyes of neglect. But there are also passages in the Manusmṛti where Manu did not abridge the respect of women, but showed them considerable respect. It is true that he introduced some rules and regulations to keep pace with the times, but he wanted to create a beautiful environment in the society. There is no question of reducing the respect of women.

In this research paper, Manu's ambivalence about the female has been highlighted. At the same time, the status of women has been highlighted through analysis. Manu has highlighted the respect of women in society at that time.

Women's Rights in Āśramadharma:

In Gārhasthyāśrama, however, the three categories of religion (dharma), money (artha) and kāma are under the control of women. So everyone should show due respect to their spouse. According to the description of Manusmṛti, if the wife is not respected, no ritual in the household is fruitful. Because when the woman is pleased, the deity is pleased, and when the deity is pleased, the rites of the householder have appropriate results. It is also found in Manusmṛti that in a family if the wife, daughter-in-law, daughter-in-law etc. suffer and repent, then the family is destroyed in a short time. And if the women of the family are happy, then the family grows.¹ Therefore, Well-wishing people should please women in various ways. From all these discussions in Manusmṛti it is known that women had status in the family even in ancient times. At that time, women were the main housekeepers of the family.

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One more thing can be noticed in Manusmṛiti. At the time of brahmachari upanayana, the first alms of life are received from mother, sister and aunt.² Manu spoke about the women race without talking about any man there. Even through this, Manu showed immense respect for the women race. Because it was Manu's firm belief that women would never reject him. Again, in the mother's absence, the elder sister looked after the younger brothers.

The age of Smritis increased the strictness of marriage, but the rights of women were relatively narrowed. In the Vedic age, if the husband died or if there was enmity and separation between the husband and wife for any reason, the wife was free to remarry. Although that right was curtailed at the time of the Manusmṛiti, women still had the freedom to remarry. In the earlier days of Manu, husband had the right to divorce his wife, wife had the right to leave her husband if he was guilty. However, even though it was narrowed down during the Manusmṛiti period, that right was still there for women.

Matrimonial ideals:

In Manusmṛiti, a good relationship between husband and wife can be observed. Through marriage ceremony, husband and wife are bound in sacred bond and through the union of two souls, oneness is realized. In Manusmṛiti too, the role of women is important for the welfare of a family. It is said there that - in the clan where the husband is satisfied and loved by the wife and the wife by the husband, i.e. if there is mutual love between the husband and the wife, all the welfare of the family remains intact and increases every day.³

There is an order to satisfy the wife with clothes and ornaments. Because if the husband cannot give pleasure to his wife, it is not possible to produce children due to unhappiness.⁴ Ācārya Manu said - If the wife is adorned with embellishment, then all the clans will be adorned. And if the wife is unadorned, then all the clans will become unadorned.⁵ Manu's generous words about women reveal his liberal ideas about women.

The heavy weight of all the responsibilities of a family rests on a woman. Women are the most fortunate in the society. Because it is women who give birth to children and raise them by taking care of them. Therefore, the respect of women is very high in humanism. According to Manu this is why women deserve so much respect by giving them clothes etc. It is not possible to entertain relatives in the house without women. It is for this reason that woman is called the light or manifestation of the house in the Manusmṛiti. So women always deserve respect. At home wife and prosperous – there is no difference between them. As a house without decorous is not beautified, a house without a wife is not beautified.⁶

In a family, it is the women who perform the family work properly such as child bearing, child rearing, hospitality etc. Birth, religious ceremonies, faithful services, highest happiness (uttamarati) and the ascension of the husband and his forefathers etc. are done by women.⁷ Therefore, the importance of women in the world is more. From all these discussions, it is clear that Ācārya Manu wanted to show women as noble and worshipful in the eyes of the society

rather than neglecting them.

Protection of women and freedom of women:

Manu also talked about protecting women from lawlessness in various situations. It is a duty of a father to give property to her daughter. However, it is the duty of the father to protect the daughter until the inheritance is given. It is the husband's duty to protect the woman if she is married. A widow should be protected by her son.⁸

Many people think that women's freedom has been curtailed in this case. But according to Medhatithi, women's lack of freedom is not being talked about in this case. Women are weak and soft mined naturally. So he thinks about the morality of protecting her from all sides. Today there is no one to look after a woman in her old age. As a result, no matter how big things are said about women's freedom, there are questions about its reality. In that case the relevance of Manu's law becomes necessary today.

In some cases, we find women's independence. Be it a girl or a young woman or an old woman, a woman cannot do any work independently according to Manusmṛiti. Women can never live independently. He will always be protected by father or husband or son. They will never even be able to spend money freely.⁹ In this case, the interference of women's freedom can be observed naturally. However, in the ninth chapter, the liberal view of women's individuality can be observed again. Forcibly confining a woman to a house has been condemned. Regarding the protection of women, it is said that if a woman is able to protect herself, then that woman is properly protected.¹⁰ In the society women used to go out of the house at will, no one can forcefully protect her.¹¹

Women's right to social responsibility:

At that time women were assigned several important responsibilities in the society. The money earned by the father or husband was properly calculated by the women and the accumulated money was kept by them. They also had full freedom to spend the earned money. Manu directed that women should be encouraged to lead a moderate and regular life by engaging them in cleaning household items, organizing religious activities, cooking etc.¹² Manu may be given all these rules to prevent women from committing adultery. But in this case, as the freedom of women can be seen on the one hand, on the other hand, a woman has been given the right to organize a family completely. Manu was very careful about protecting women's purity and chastity. The women were instructed not to engage in six things: drinking alcohol, associating with bad people, separating from their husbands, wandering about unnecessarily, sleeping untimely, and staying at a relative's house for a long time.¹³ Because these six adulterous sins make women jealous in their heart.

At all times there are wanton women in the society. Responding to their sexual appeals, many weak-minded men stumble. So Manu said to behave with restraint with the wife of Teacher (Guru) especially young wife of the teacher.¹⁴ In the world, women naturally attract men's minds.¹⁵ Everyone in the world is subject to lust due to body and religion. And if the woman desires, the learned

man is also misled.¹⁶ So in Manusamhitā no man should live in a solitary house even with his mother, sister or daughter.¹⁷ From these discussions it may seem that Manu looked down upon women at that time. But on a deeper look, it is understood that all these rules and regulations were necessary due to the need of the time. Manu may have seen many examples or made these rules to protect women in the society. There it is said to respect the Guru's wife as well as the Guru. It is simply said that Teacher's wife should always be respected and she will always be worshipped.

Matrimonial ideals and women:

A family is complete in the love of man and woman. According to Manu, marriage is the main reformation of women. Manusamhitā does not find strict reformation of women like men.

For women, marriage itself is considered their Upanayana. After marriage, service to the husband is their residence in the teacher's house (Gurugṛha), and the performance of domestic duties is their tending of the sacred fire.¹⁸ So marriage is absolutely essential for women. In fact, the role of women was essential in maintaining peace and order in the family. So perhaps Manu instructed women's religious behavior through family activities.

However, the importance of both men and women is found in Manusamhitā for the well-being of the family. Manusamhitā also discusses punishments for both men and women so that no one commits adultery. In Manusamhitā, a man is always instructed to be devoted to his wife.¹⁹ Likewise, a woman should be devoted to her own husband. If a woman abandons her husband in her pride and has a relationship with a foreigner, the discussion of severe punishment for her is found in Manusamhitā.²⁰ Similarly, it is said that the adulterous man who harbors another woman should be put on a bed of hot iron and burned with a pile of wood.²¹ Manu mentions strict punishment for a brātya woman who indulges with many men.²² Therefore, the discussion that no man or woman in the society is adulterous can be found in Manusamhitā. Divorce is strictly prohibited by Manu, which is very important to keep the family in order in the social order.

Although marriage is a special duty for women in the society, it is the duty of a husband to make good arrangements for the maintenance of a virtuous woman.²³ According to Manu, a woman's real purpose is in marriage and her purpose is in motherhood. The creation of men and women is for maintaining the family.²⁴ Manu was a supporter of niyogavidhi. If a man dies childless, his wife can bear children by appointment by a man of the same caste. Not only that, the son born by appointment a person of same family would inherit all the wealth of his deceased father.²⁵

If the husband had to go abroad for some work, he had to arrange for his wife's food to go abroad. Because due to the lack of food, even virtuous women do not become corrupt, perhaps Manu gave this provision.²⁶ However, if he goes abroad without proper provision of food, he told the woman to earn her livelihood by doing handicrafts suitable

for the country. She is never said to be a bitch in Manusamhitā. Through this, but in recent times, a little independent spirit is found in women's livelihood.

The wife had to wait for a certain period of time if the husband went abroad. Then, if she is not found, the freedom of that woman to marry a man of the same family can also be observed in Manusamhitā. According to Manusamhitā, if a husband goes abroad for religious work, his wife should wait for eight years, if she goes abroad for education, she should wait for six years, and if she goes abroad for earning money, she should wait for three years. Then the wife went to where her husband had gone and if she could not find him, she could wait for husband. But there is no clear that how the woman should that time. But it may be said that the woman could marry any other man of the same caste.²⁷

In the era of Manusamhitā, men had arbitrary freedom in the society to divorce. If the wife was jealous of her husband for a year, then the husband could voluntarily leave her. However, if the husband is insane, depraved, ill-disposed, even if the wife hates him, the husband could not divorce her. Through this, as the purity of women in the society was protected on the one hand, no man could have a second marriage without taking permission from a virtuous woman. As a result, women's freedom existed in the society at that time.

In a family, husband and wife will mutually desire Dharma, artha and Kāma without hypocrisy and in good faith – this is Manu's intention.

Strīdhana and rights of women: — (The exclusive property of the woman)

In the field of wealth, women have been given considerable rights in the Constitution. The property in which the woman has full rights, her husband does not have the right is called strīdhana. Women have full rights in strīdhana. Six types of strīdhana are mentioned there – adhyagni, adhyāvahanika, prītidatta, bhrāṭṛdatta, mātṛdatta and pitṛdatta. Dowry received from father, mother etc. at the time of marriage is called Adhyagni. The wealth earned when bringing a daughter from her father's house to her husband's house after marriage is Adhyāvahanika. The money given by the husband to his wife during the night or at any other time is prītidatta. Wealth obtained from father, mother, husband, paternal family, husband's family after marriage is unstopable wealth (anvādheya).

If a woman dies, her sons and unmarried daughters will get equal share of her remaining wife's wealth.²⁸ But if he has a married daughter, then her daughter and granddaughter also get a share of her grandmother's property. Although the husband has the right over the wealth of wife's obtained from the four types of marriages of Brāhma, Daiva, Ārṣa and Prājāpātya, the husband has no right over the dowry obtained from the three types of marriages such as Asura, Rākṣas and Paisāca. If she dies childless, her mother becomes the first possessor of the wealth of that woman, and in the absence of the mother, her father becomes the possessor of that property.²⁹

During the time of Manusamhitā, a wife in a joint family

could not usually take anything from the wealth to spend or build ornaments. She could not even spend her husband's wealth without his permission. However, all the ornaments which the wife wears with the husband's permission while the husband is alive, after the death of the husband, it is completely in her possession, no one can accept them.³⁰ Even at that time, women were not deprived of wealth. Its influence can be seen to some extent in modern society today.

Although the memoirists condemned women in some places, almost all of them accepted the duty of showing respect to women (socialist) Samajpatis like Manu have given respect to women.³¹ Medhātithi and Kullukavatta also support it Manu instructed that women should be treated with regard to relationship and age and respect should be shown to upper castes. It says that aunts, mother's sister, maternal uncle's wife, mothers-in-law and father's sister are worshiped like mothers. They have been told to show respect like the Guru's wife.³² It has been said to greet older brothers-in-law by touching their feet. Even when returning home from Nair, first bow to wife of father's elder brother, mother-in-law is prescribed.³³ Addressing unrelated women as sister or subhagā is also found in Manusmṛiti.³⁴ Even at that time it was prescribed to treat the Guru's wife and the daughter-in-law of the Guru equally. Women should be respected even if there is no relationship. Manu also said that - father, husband, brother-in-law, brother all will show respect to women. Manu asked to respect women but could not talk about freedom.

Although there is a mention of the women joining the Sabha Samiti in the Vedic period, there is no mention of it in the Smṛiti Shāstra period. No matter how narrow the social rights of women were in terms of proper life in Manu's time, the respect of women as an ideal is heard again and again.

Conclusion:

The conception of women in the Manusmṛiti presents a complex and multifaceted picture that cannot be adequately understood through a purely positive or negative interpretation. Manu assigns women an important place within the family and social order and recognises their dignity, protection, and well-being as significant concerns. His injunctions regarding the duties of husbands, the responsibilities of wives, marital fidelity, domestic harmony, and the protection of family life reveal that women were regarded as essential to the continuity and stability of society. At the same time, Manu's prescriptions are firmly situated within the patriarchal social structure of ancient India. His emphasis on female chastity, sexual regulation, widowhood, and obedience to the husband places substantial restrictions on women's individual autonomy. Consequently, the idea of "women empowerment" in Manu cannot be equated with the modern concept of gender equality, individual freedom, or independent decision-making.

Nevertheless, a critical reading of Manu reveals that his primary concern was the regulation of social and familial relationships through prescribed duties and ethical conduct.

His injunctions concerning women should therefore be examined within their historical, cultural, and religious context rather than judged solely through modern categories. The Manusmṛiti contains both elements of protection and restriction, dignity and control. A balanced study of Manu consequently enables us to understand not only the position assigned to women in ancient Indian society but also the historical evolution of ideas concerning women's dignity, responsibility, rights, and empowerment. Thus, **"The Status and Empowerment of Women in the eyes of Manu"** is best understood as a historically conditioned conception of women's dignity and social responsibility, rather than as an equivalent of contemporary gender empowerment.

Endnote:

- ¹ śocanti jāmāyo yatra vinasātyāśu tat kulam |
na śocanti tu yatraitā vardhate tad hi sarvadā ||
Manusmṛiti, 3. 57
- ² mātaraṃ vā svasāraṃ vā māturvā bhaginīm nijām |
bhikṣeta bhikṣāṃ prathamam yā cainam nāvamānayet ||
Manusmṛiti, 2. 50
- ³ santuṣṭo bhāryayā bhartā bhartrā bhāryā tathaiva ca |
yasminneva kule nityam kalyāṇam tatra vai dhrumam ||
Manusmṛiti, 3. 60
- ⁴ yadi hi strī na roceta pumāṃsam na pramodayet |
apramodāt punaḥ pumsaḥ prajānam na pravartate ||
Manusmṛiti, 3. 61
- ⁵ striyām tu rocamānāyām sarvam tad rocate kulam |
tasyām tvarocamānāyām sarvameva na rocate ||
Manusmṛiti, 3.62
- ⁶ prajānārtham mahābhāgāḥ pūjārṇā grhādīptayaḥ |
striyaḥ śriyaśca geheṣu na viśeṣo'sti kaścana ||
Manusmṛiti, 9.26
- ⁷ utpādanamapatyasya jātasya paripālanam |
pratyaham lokayātrāyāḥ pratyakṣam strī nibandhanam ||
Manusmṛiti, 9. 27
- ⁸ apatyam dharmakāryāṇi śuśrūṣā ratiruttamā |
dārā'dhīnastathā svargaḥ pitṛṇāmātmanaśca ha ||
Manusmṛiti, 9. 28
- ⁹ pitā rakṣati kaumāre bhartā rakṣati yauvane |
rakṣanti sthavire putrā na strī svātantryamarhati ||
Manusmṛiti, 9. 3
- ¹⁰ pitrā bhartrā sutairvā'pi necched virahamātmanah |
eṣām hi virahena strī garhye kuryādubhe kule ||
Manusmṛiti, 5. 147 ||
- ¹¹ sadā prahrṣṭayā bhāvyam grhākārye ca dakṣayā |
susamskr̥topaskarayā vyaye cāmuktahastayā ||
Manusmṛiti, 5. 148
- ¹² yasmai dadyāt pitā tvenām bhrātā vā'numate pituḥ |
tam śuśrūṣeta jīvantam samsthitam ca na laṅghayet ||
Manusmṛiti, 5.149
- ¹³ maṅgalārtham svastyayanam yajñāścāśam prajāpateḥ |
prayujyate vivāhe tu pradānam svāmyakāraṇam ||
Manusmṛiti, 5.150
- ¹⁴ asvatantrāḥ striyaḥ kāryāḥ puruṣaiḥ svairdivānīsam |
viśayeṣu ca sajjantyāḥ samsthāpyā ātmano vaśe ||
Manusmṛiti, 9.2
- ¹⁵ na kaścid yoṣitaḥ śaktaḥ prasahya parirakṣitam |
etairupāyayogaistu śakyāstāḥ parirakṣitam ||
Manusmṛiti, 9.10

- ¹² arthasya saṅgrāhe caināṃ vyaye caiva niyojayet ।
śauce dharme'nnapaktyāṃ ca pārīṇāhyasya vekṣaṇe ॥
Manusamhitā, 9.11
- ¹³ pāṇaṃ durjanasaṃsargaḥ patyā ca viraho'tanam ।
svapno'nyagehavaśaśca nārīsandūṣaṇāni śaṭ ॥
Manusamhitā, 9.13
- ¹⁴ gurupatnī tu yuvatirnābhivādyaiha pādayoḥ ।
pūrṇavimśativarṣeṇa guṇadoṣau vijānatā ॥
Manusamhitā, 2.212
- ¹⁵ svabhāva eṣa nārīṇāṃ narāṇāmiha dūṣaṇam ।
ato'rthānna pramādyanti pramadāsu vipāścitaḥ ॥
Manusamhitā, 2. 213
- ¹⁶ avidvāṃsamalaṃ loke vidvāṃsamapi vā punaḥ ।
pramadā hyutpathaṃ netuṃ kāmakrodhavaśānugam ॥
Manusamhitā, 2. 214
- ¹⁷ mātṛā svasrā duhitṛā vā na viviktāsano bhavet ।
balavānindriyagrāmo vidvāṃsamapi karṣati ॥
Manusamhitā, 2. 215
- ¹⁸ vaivāhiko vidhiḥ strīṇāṃ saṃskāro vaidikaḥ smṛtaḥ ।
patisevā gurau vāso gṛhārtho'gniparikriyā ॥
Manusamhitā, 2.67
- ¹⁹ ṛtukālābhigāmī syāt svadāranirataḥ sadā ।
paravarjaṃ vrajēcaināṃ tadvrato ratikāmyayā ॥
Manusamhitā, 3.45
- ²⁰ bhartāraṃ laṅghayed yā tu strī jñātiḡṇadarpiṭā ।
tām śvabhiḥ khādayed rājā saṃsthāne bahusaṃsthite ॥
Manusamhitā, 8.371
- ²¹ pumāṃsaṃ dāhayet pāpaṃ śayane tapta āyase ।
abhyādadhyaśca kṣāṭhāni tatra dahyeta pāpakṛt ॥
Manusamhitā, 8.372
- ²² saṃvatsarābhīśastasya duṣṭasya dviguṇo damaḥ ।
vrātyayā saha saṃvāse cāṇḍālyā tāvadeva tu ॥
Manusamhitā, 8.373
- ²³ devadattāṃ patirbhāryāṃ vindate necchayā'tmanaḥ ।
tām sādhvīm bibhṛyānnityaṃ devānāṃ priyamācaran ॥
Manusamhitā, 9. 95
- ²⁴ prajanārthaṃ striyaḥ sṛṣṭāḥ santānārthaṃ ca mānavāḥ ।
tasmāt sādharmaṇo dharmāḥ śrutau patnyā sahoditaḥ ॥
Manusamhitā, 9.96
- ²⁵ saṃsthitasyānapatyasya sagotrāt putramāharet ।
tatra yad rikthajātaṃ syāt tat tasmin pratipādayet ॥
Manusamhitā, 9.190
- ²⁶ vidhāya vṛttim bhāryāyāḥ pravaset kāryavānnaraḥ ।
avṛttikarṣitā hi strī praduṣyet sthitimatyapi ॥
Manusamhitā, 9.74
- ²⁷ vidhāya proṣite vṛttim jīvenniyamamāsthitaḥ ।
proṣite tvavidhāyaiva jīvetśilpairagarhitaiḥ ॥
Manusamhitā, 9.75
- ²⁸ proṣito dharmakāryārthaṃ pratīkṣyo'sṭau naraḥ samāḥ ।
vidyārthaṃ ṣaḍ yaśo'rthaṃ vā kāmārthaṃ trīṃstu vatsarān ॥
Manusamhitā, 9.76
- ²⁹ jananyāṃ saṃsthitāyāṃ tu samāṃ sarve sahodarāḥ ।
bhajeraṃ mātṛkaṃ rikthaṃ bhaginyaśca sanābhayaḥ ॥
Manusamhitā, 9.192
- ²⁹ yat tvasyāḥ syād dhanam dattaṃ vivāheṣvāsuraḍiṣu ।
aprajāyāmatītāyāṃ mātāpitrostadiṣyate ॥
Manusamhitā, 9.197
- ³⁰ na nirhāraṃ striyaḥ kuryuḥ kuṭumbād bahumadhyagāt ।
svakādapi ca vittād hi svasya bharturanājñayā ॥
Manusamhitā, 9.199

- patyau jīvati yaḥ strībhiraṅkāro dhṛto bhavet ।
na taṃ bhajeraṃ dāyādā bhajamānāḥ patanti te ॥
Manusamhitā, 9.200
- ³¹ nāmadheyasya ye ke cidabhivādaṃ na jānate ।
tān prājño'hamiti brūyāt striyaḥ sarvāstathaiva ca ॥
Manusamhitā, 2.123
- ³² mātṛśvasā mātulānī śvaśrūratha pitṛśvasā ।
sarpūjyā gurupatnīvat samāstā gurubhāryayā ॥
Manusamhitā, 2.131
- ³³ bhrāturbhāryaupasaṅgrāhyā savarṇā'hanyahanyapi ।
viproṣya tūpasaṅgrāhyā jñātisambandhiyoṣitaḥ ॥
Manusamhitā, 2. 132
- piturbhaginyāṃ mātūśca jyāyasyāṃ ca svasaryapi ।
mātṛvad vṛttimātiṣṭhen mātā tābhyo garīyasī ॥
Manusamhitā, 2.133
- ³⁴ parapatnī tu yā strī syādasambandhā ca yonitaḥ ।
tām brūyād bhavātītyevaṃ subhage bhaginīti ca ॥
Manusamhitā, 2.129

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