

Manu Dharmaśāstra : Questions of Gender and Varṇa Identities

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Caste and gender had been an integral part of Indian patriarchal structure. The two exist in symbiotic relationship to each other. The very idea of disparity on the basis of these two social constituents finds itself rooted in the concept of varṇa purity, the fundamental concept of brahmanical-patriarchal society. The ancient period of Indian history provides a unique platform for the interplay of these two factors and allows them to converge and become a force which is exploitative and socially determining in nature. The ancient textual sources became the medium to spread this divisive consciousness. More specifically the Puraṇic and Śāstric texts are replete with such ideology. In their form and content, they appear to be consciously created texts for the promulgation of this overarching ideology. The patriarchal and brahmanical ideology was the major structural arrangement whose genesis could be traced back to the four-fold varṇa arrangement of the Vedic-Śāstric society. The four varṇas - Brāhmaṇa, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya and Śūdra - were hierarchically placed in these texts and this arrangement was supposedly maintained by endogamous exchange of women in marriages.

The varṇa stratification of society, in early historical period, was more of a theoretical model applied to an urbanizing society facing challenges of co-existence of multi-cultural and pluralistic traditions. The varṇa-vyavasthā evolved from professionally demarcated social categories of Vedic Samhitās to hierarchical social categories, bifurcated into higher and lower varṇas in the Śāstric textual tradition. The higher varṇa categories, Brāhmaṇa and Kṣatriya, enjoyed hegemony over knowledge and power. Vedic ritualistic knowledge was projected as supreme knowledge used for legitimizing the authority of the 'Kṣatriya chief' by the 'Brāhmaṇa priest'. Access to knowledge led to control over resources in turn creating a centre of power. On the other hand, this knowledge had no practical use for the 'viś', later 'vaiśya' and 'śūdra' involved in production and trading and providing various

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