

# Manu: The Meaning of *Svātantrya* and Its Implications for Women's Freedom

Sanjay Kumar, *McGill University*

The appeal of freedom, or independence, is universally rooted in the experience of frustration in the face of countless limitations imposed by natural and unnatural causes. No one would willingly be prevented from acting to achieve desired ends. Manu, a Hindu lawgiver whose teachings were compiled in *Manusmṛti* some time between the second century B. C. E. and the second century C. E., believed that the happiness arising from freedom exceeds all other sorts of happiness. He discussed the distinction between happiness and unhappiness: "Whatever is under someone else's control—that is suffering; whatever is under one's own control—that is happiness."<sup>1</sup> Self-sufficiency was as much admired by early societies as by modern ones. It was prescribed by Manu himself as a way of avoiding pain: "He should carefully avoid all activities that are under someone else's control, and diligently pursue those that are under his own control."<sup>2</sup> But because all things in this world are interdependent, perfect autonomy is impossible. This restriction arises not only because of external circumstances but also because people seek their own highest ends, which they can accomplish only by impeding those of other people. And they do so often, maybe always, by applying psychological, physical, political, or economic power. The purpose of the state, according to Manu, is therefore to save society from falling into chaos.<sup>3</sup> In other words, the purpose of law is to make sure that the weak can live happily without being overpowered by the strong. To ensure safety at a very personal level, he considered everyone an inseparable constituent of society and accountable to it; the latter, in turn, would be responsible for the behavior of its members within the larger unity. Abbé Dubois, who spent much of his life in the Deccan and the Madras Presidency as a missionary, observed this interrelationship and the need to maintain

---

1. Olivelle 4.160.

2. Olivelle 4.159.

3. Olivelle 7.3.

order in connection with the caste system: "The shame which would reflect on a whole caste if the faults of one of its individual members went unpunished guarantees that the caste will execute justice, defend its own honour, and keep all its members within the bounds of duty. . . . Thus it is caste authority which, by means of its wise rules and prerogative, preserves good order, suppresses vice, and saves Hindus from sinking into a state of barbarism."<sup>4</sup>

My goal here is not to defend the caste system but rather to demonstrate the extent to which social norms contributed to social stability. Today, technological advancements have brought a great deal of security and order; every individual is a complete entity, free and independent to manage his or her personal affairs. But that individualistic approach was almost impossible in earlier times. Listen to Dubois: "Of all kinds of punishments the hardest and most unbearable for a Hindu is that which cuts him off and expels him from the caste."<sup>5</sup> The right to practice freedom regularly, as a way of life, was clearly defined more narrowly and strictly than it is now. Traditionally, Indian society considered the family, rather than the individual, as the main social unit;<sup>6</sup> nearly everything was governed by family and local traditions<sup>7</sup> according to which all members of the community would watch over each other's conduct. Because individualism threatened social harmony, it had to be condemned.

In our time, *svātantrya* (derived from *svatantra*) has connotations of self-sufficiency and enough power to manage one's personal affairs. But in earlier times, this word suggested an unrestrained or dissolutely self-willed person, not a self-sufficient person.<sup>8</sup> The application of *svatantra*, however, entailed acting unrestrictedly. This transition in meaning influenced the interpretation of early Indian writings, particularly some of Manu's verses about women's freedom.<sup>9</sup> In this

---

4. Dubois 32.

5. Dubois 38.

6. Basham 155.

7. Manu preached "The timeless Laws of regions, of hereditary groups, and of families" (Olivelle 1.118), and the king was supposed to govern in accordance with these Laws (Olivelle 8.41).

8. Olivelle rightly notes that "the term *svatantra* ('independent') also has specifically legal connotations and is used with reference to a person who can act independently to enter a legally binding contract" (note on 5.147). I will explore this in another article.

9. Many of these verses are found in the *Mahābhārata* (Dandekar 13.19–22). It might very well be concluded from the context of sexual self-indulgence in which these verses

essay, I will examine the meaning of svatantra and related words and their implications for women's freedom.

The word svatantra is derived from two words: *sva* (one's own) and *tantra* (the main, or essential, part of something). The latter can be derived from two roots: *tanu vistāre*<sup>10</sup> (to stretch, extend),<sup>11</sup> and *tatri kuṭumbadhāraṇe*<sup>12</sup> (to rule, control; to support or maintain family, to keep in order).<sup>13</sup> When used together in the *bahuvrīhi* compound, both words acquire a connotation that is not expressed by either separately. In his *Amarakośa*, a prominent and frequently quoted Sanskrit thesaurus, Amarasimha, submitted the following synonyms for svatantra:<sup>14</sup> *apāvṛta* (free, unrestrained, self-willed);<sup>15</sup> *niravagraha* (free from restraint, unrestrained, unchecked, uncontrolled, irresistible);<sup>16</sup> *svacchanda* (self-willed, uncontrolled, wanton);<sup>17</sup> and *svairī* (self-willed, wanton, unrestrained).<sup>18</sup> None has a positive meaning.

The *Mudrārākṣasa* of Viśākhadatta (a drama of the seventh or eighth century C.E.) indicates clear disregard for svātantrya, the state of being svatantra or freedom of will, even on a king's behalf. Cāṇakya, the king's preceptor and prime minister, plans to stage a disagreement with his disciple, King Chandragupta, in order to uncover enemy spies in his court. Acting independently, albeit with the goal of revealing their ruse in mind, Chandragupta expresses his psychosomatic distress:

Moreover, it is the advice of my revered preceptor that I should pick a sham quarrel with him and manage matters independently for some time. I accepted it with great difficulty as if it were a sin; or rather, with my mind properly guided by His Honour, I am always independent. For: In this world a pupil, acting in the right way, experiences no check (from his preceptor); when, however, he strays from the proper path through infatuation, the preceptor becomes a goad to him; hence *good* men who delight in acting

---

are cited that the restrictions on women's freedom were proposed mainly to prevent adulterous affairs.

10. Sāyaṇācārya 8.1.

11. Apte 757.

12. Sāyaṇācārya 10.125.

13. Apte 759.

14. Amarasimha 3.1.15.

15. Apte 154.

16. Apte 907.

17. Apte 1737.

18. Apte 1744.

according to instruction are ever free from restraint; we for our part are averse to any independence beyond this.<sup>19</sup>

Accordingly, svātantrya implied a certain lack of moral discipline. Restraint in religious and social manners was highly prized, whereas uncontrolled freedom was perceived as licentious self-indulgence in both sexes. According to Manu, “a well-disciplined Brahmin, although he knows just the Sāvitrī verse, is far better than an undisciplined one who eats all types of food and deals in all types of merchandise, though he may know all three Vedas.”<sup>20</sup> Because a svatantra person considers his or her way of the utmost importance, I propose that the word svātantrya suggests “individualism,” a modern “political and social philosophy that places high value on the freedom of the individual and generally stresses the self-directed, self-contained, and comparatively unrestrained individual or ego.”<sup>21</sup> In his time, with its unstable social and political climate, it was clearly improper for people to conduct their lives according to personal wishes only. Equating restraint with moral and virtuous deeds, however, was not peculiar to India. Many Western thinkers have valued self-control, or lack of svātantrya, and condemned licentious behaviour.<sup>22</sup>

---

19. Viśākhadatta 3.6.

20. Olivelle 2.118.

21. *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

22. According to Aristotle: “freedom means the doing of what a man likes. In such democracies every one lives as he pleases, or in the words of Euripides, ‘according to his fancy.’ But this is all wrong; men should not think it slavery to live according to the rule of the constitution; for it is their salvation” (Aristotle 512). Epictetus likened unrestrained freedom to madness, what could be called “freedom madness”: “‘What then,’ he asked, ‘is freedom madness?’ Certainly not: for madness and freedom do not consist. ‘But,’ you say, ‘I would have everything result just as I like, and in whatever way I like.’ You are mad, you are beside yourself. Do you not know that freedom is a noble and valuable thing? But for me inconsiderately to wish for things to happen as I inconsiderately like, this appears to be not only not noble, but even most base. For how do we proceed in the matter of writing? Do I wish to write the name of Dion as I choose? No, but I am taught to choose to write it as it ought to be written. And how with respect to music? In the same manner. And what universally in every art or science? Just the same. If it were not so, it would be of no value to know anything, if knowledge were adapted to every man’s whim. Is it, then, in this alone, in this which is the greatest and the chief thing, I mean freedom, that I am permitted to will inconsiderately? By no means; but to be instructed is this, to learn to wish that everything may happen as it does” (Epictetus 119).

Regarding women, these words often connote loose morality. One use of *svātantrya* can be found in Kālidāsa's *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*. Rejected by King Duṣyanta as his legitimate wife and abandoned by her family, Śākuntalā leaves her husband and follows her relatives instead. But her friend reproachfully accuses her of clinging to independence (*svātantryam*).<sup>23</sup> Śākuntalā protests Duṣyanta's refutation of her secret marriage to him and blames him for defaming her as a wanton woman (*svacchandacārīṇī*).<sup>24</sup> *Devalasmṛti* applied the word *svātantrya* to indicate non-independence and free will. After having declared non-independence of a woman,<sup>25</sup> it authorized her, whether married or widowed, the right to choose a husband only for the purpose of procuring offspring; she could not exercise her independence or free will in this regard (*na svātantryeṇa*).<sup>26</sup> The *Brahmapurāṇa* used the adjective *svatantrā*, in fact, to describe a woman who violated dharma. When the Moon's daughter married independently, without his consent, he condemned her: "Though fathered, since, independent [and] having given up dharma, she chose [husbands in marriage], may she become a river."<sup>27</sup> Tārānātha Bhaṭṭācārya, composer of the *Vācaspatyam*, a comprehensive Sanskrit dictionary, quoted a verse from Nārada: "Women, born even in a good family, are destroyed by independence (*svātantryāt*); hence the creator lord pronounced their non-independence (*asvātantryam*)."<sup>28</sup>

---

23. Kālidāsa, dialogue before verse 5.27.

24. Kālidāsa, dialogue before verse 5.24. I deduce from the love story of Duṣyanta and Śākuntalā that concealed unions were risky, because they could be refuted by publicly unidentified husbands; that would endanger the credibility and future of wives. In the fifth act of the *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*, Kālidāsa greatly succeeded in illustrating the likelihood of painful outcomes for these relationships as well as why the wife's relatives must have realized a great need to protect her against an impetuous liaison. This story was originally told in and adopted from the *Mahābhārata* (Sukthankar 1936, 1.64–69). Wedding rituals demonstrate that the purpose of inviting many respected friends and members of society was not merely to celebrate a happy event but also to certify that the couple took vows of mutual responsibility as life-partners. This ensured the genuine nature of the relationship and that it was not a hasty arrangement swayed by momentary passion or personal greed. Therefore, precautions in this matter were very elaborate. People assumed that relationships based exclusively on impulse were likely to cause domestic and communal disorder. And that in turn, they realized, would cause noble ancestral traditions to collapse.

25. *Devalasmṛti* 102.

26. *Devalasmṛti* 1550.

27. *Brahmapurāṇa* 219.16–17. In this context, the river symbolizes a downfall: *Nimnagā* refers to a river, which flows downward. See Apte 904, and Bhartṛhari 8.

28. Bhaṭṭācārya 5346.

I return now to the words *svātantrya* and *svatantra* and their implications, beginning with the most frequently quoted verses of Manu:

Even in her own home, a female—whether she is a child, a young woman, or an old lady—should never carry out any task independently [*svātantryeṇa*]. 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. She must never want to separate herself from her father, husband, or sons; for by separating herself from them, a woman brings disgrace on both families.<sup>29</sup> Day and night men should keep their women from acting independently [*asvatantrāḥ*]; for, attached as they are to sensual pleasures, men should keep them under their control. Her father guards (*rakṣati*) her in her childhood, her husband guards in her youth, and her sons guard her in her old age; a woman is not qualified to act independently.<sup>30</sup>

In the first statement, Manu seems to advise extreme male supremacy. Statements of this kind have long been understood, in India and abroad, as a clear declaration of the absolute dependence of women on their male relatives. This interpretation has caused suffering for generations of Indian women. It has caused modern scholars, moreover, to portray Manu as a misogynist.<sup>31</sup> Noticeably, Vātsyāyana's statement in the *Kāmasūtram*, that the wife should always take responsibility for her family affairs according to the wishes of her husband,<sup>32</sup> is very close to what Manu said. But Yaśodhara, an authoritative commentator on the *Kāmasūtram*, explained this by adding that "family affairs" referred to external business (related to the home),<sup>33</sup> thereby confirming the wife's position of authority over matters of family and domicile. This attitude made families aware of the need to provide secure surroundings for their female members. This led to a division of family life into two domains: internal and external. Men assumed financial and protective

29. Olivelle 5.147–149.

30. Olivelle 9.2–3. Bühler's translation of the latter half of 9.2 is closer to Manu's text, "... and, if they attach themselves to sensual enjoyments, they must be kept under one's control" (Bühler 9.2). For further implications of *rakṣati* ('guards'), see Mitter 107–109.

31. Olivelle rightly notes that these verses "have become a cause célèbre in anti-Manu rhetoric, even though these or similar provisions are encountered in numerous other legal texts" (note on 5.147).

32. Vātsyāyana 4.1.2.

33. Yaśodhara on Vātsyāyana 4.1.2.

obligations and women domestic responsibilities. On the one hand, this attitude restricted women's independence in public; on the other hand, it ensured women an honorable status at home. As Klostermaier has rightly noted, "it also created for them 'a room of their own,' an area of competence and a sphere of authority, which guaranteed her considerable power in domestic concerns."<sup>34</sup> In addition, this 'room of their own' promised absolute freedom from danger. Dubois noted: "A house inhabited solely by women is a sanctuary which the most shameless libertine would not dream of violating."<sup>35</sup>

Manu's ideal of women's dependence on male relatives did not imply that every female act should be discharged under male control. Manu advised control over women's activities in two situations only: (1) attachments to worldly or sensual objects,<sup>36</sup> and (2) sexual relationships with men of inferior classes.<sup>37</sup> After proposing that women should be protected from even minute sensual attachments, he mentioned six activities in particular: drinking, associating with bad people, living away from the husband, travel, sleep, and staying in the houses of others.<sup>38</sup> These activities symbolize steps toward adulterous relationships. According to the *Mahābhārata*, a husband could exercise authority over his wife with regard to her sexual relationships only, and she might, at all other times, exercise her own choice.<sup>39</sup> This corroborates the idea that women lost their freedom only with respect to activities that violated the family's unity, which included marriage without permission from authoritative relatives. And the variety of protections provided by her family helped.

How could men protect their female relatives? Although protection did entail some restrictions on the protected, these restrictions did not add up to control. Manu's statement concerning the safeguarding

---

34. Klostermaier 364.

35. Dubois 340.

36. Olivelle 9.2. See footnote 30.

37. Although pre-marital and extra-marital relationships were to be avoided at all times (9.101–102), Manu maintained that "[n]o fine should be imposed on a virgin who falls in love with a man superior to herself; but if she makes love to a man inferior to herself, she should be put under restraint and confined to her house" (Olivelle 8.365). Manu's aspiration for procuring high-class citizens might have prompted him to take this position, because a wife took on the qualities of her husband after marriage (Olivelle 9.22), and she bore a son resembling the man she loved (Olivelle 9.9).

38. Olivelle 9.13.

39. Sukthankar 1.1.13.26.

and independence of women<sup>40</sup> is incomplete without the following verse in which he explains the concept and role of protection: "A father is reprehensible, if he does not give her away at the proper time; a husband, if he does not have sex with her at the right time (3.45n.); and a son, if he fails to guard his mother when her husband is dead."<sup>41</sup> It is clear that a father's protection of a girl required bringing her up safely and giving her away to a deserving man at marriageable age. He would safeguard his daughter from the improper advances of licentious men; and he would not marry her to a man lacking virtues. According to Manu, excellence and superiority in a suitor were of utmost importance: "When there is a suitor who is eminent, handsome, and of equal status, one should give the girl to him according to rule, even if she has not attained the proper age."<sup>42</sup> A father was not supposed to postpone his daughter's marriage for long after she had reached puberty. If he failed to marry her off within three years of her attaining puberty, his authority in this matter was annulled.<sup>43</sup> Manu gave the daughter a right to find herself a husband of equal status<sup>44</sup> without incurring any sin.<sup>45</sup> For Manu, girls fully developed at the age of about sixteen. They could make their own decisions, particularly with regards to their sexuality, without depending on their male relatives.

Finding an eminent suitor was more important for a girl's happiness than getting her married at the proper time. Marrying a girl to an undeserving man would jeopardize her entire life: "Even if she has reached puberty, a girl should rather remain at home until death; one should never give her to a man bereft of good qualities," said Manu.<sup>46</sup> Because girls could marry at the young age of twelve,<sup>47</sup> the importance of protecting them from undeserving wife-seeking or depraved men could not be over-emphasized. The father, as a girl's trustee for her future husband, was supposed to keep her blameless.<sup>48</sup>

---

40. Olivelle 9.3.

41. Olivelle 9.4.

42. Olivelle 9.88.

43. Olivelle 9.93.

44. Olivelle 9.90.

45. Olivelle 9.91.

46. Olivelle 9.89.

47. Olivelle 9.94.

48. The Brahmin who must offer a family member for demon *Bakāsura*'s meal prefers to offer himself instead of his wife, daughter, or son. "The great-spirited creator," he laments, "has left her with me in trust for her husband." Offering herself, his wife points

Because personal behavior reflected family reputation, a disreputable girl would not only lose hope of finding a good suitor for herself, she would also endanger the prospects of good mates for other unmarried members in the family, both female and male.

Marriage was essential for the maintenance of social structure and ethnic purity and therefore a cornerstone of Manu's well-ordered society. Manu highly recommended mutual love as an important foundation for marriage in the lower three classes.<sup>49</sup> Even in arranged marriages, a girl's consent to both the marriage and the chosen groom was of utmost importance. He declared it a demonic wedding if the groom took his bride from his own desire (*svācchandyāt*) in exchange for a financial donation to the bride and her relatives.<sup>50</sup> However, early Hindu writers realized that the human mind is volatile;<sup>51</sup> hence, Vyāsa, the earliest known commentator on Patañjali's *Yogasūtras*, observed that attachment to one person does not suggest aversion to others: "The fact is that in the one his [or her] attachment has manifested itself, while in others it can be active in the future."<sup>52</sup> Therefore, Manu reinforced the marriage bond by involving gods as patrons of the wife. A person might have succeeded in marrying his or her beloved, but, in Manu's viewpoint, gods facilitated the marriage itself. The contemporary expression that a match is made in heaven has its sanguine rationale in *Manusmṛti*: "A husband marries a wife given to him by gods, not from his own desire" and should therefore, "always support that good woman, thereby doing what is pleasing to the gods."<sup>53</sup>

---

out her helplessness in protecting children. "When our daughter is wooed by selfish and arrogant suitors, unworthy of being allied to you, how shall I be able to save her? Just as the birds snap up a piece of raw meat that is thrown out on the ground, so all men snap up a woman without a man. . . . Unworthy men will bully me and seek after your fatherless daughter as the serfs seek after the sacred sound of the *Veda*. If I refuse to give her, since she will be strengthened by your virtues, they may carry her off by force, as crows carry off the oblation from the sacrifice. And when they see your son grown up so unlike yourself, and your daughter at the mercy of unworthy men, people will despise me. I won't know myself with arrogant men, O Brahmin, and I shall die, no doubt of that. My young children, deprived of me as well as yourself, will doubtless perish, like two little fish when the river dries up. Without a doubt all three of us will perish this way when we are deprived of you" (van Buitenen, 1973, 304–308).

49. Olivelle 3.35.

50. Olivelle 3.31.

51. Vātsyāyana 5.3.6; *Bhagavadgītā* 6.34.

52. Prasāda 2.4.

53. Olivelle 9.95.

Here, *Vācaspatyam* quotes an explanatory remark of *Madanaratna*, that by not supporting her, a man would experience gods' wrath.<sup>54</sup> Their fidelity to each other was imperative: "Fidelity to each other should be observed until death"—this should be recognized as the highest Law between husband and wife put in a nutshell. A husband and wife, after they have completed the marriage rite, should always work hard so as to prevent them from being unfaithful to each other and thus being split apart."<sup>55</sup> Their companionship transcended the corporal bond: "his wife and son are his own body."<sup>56</sup> Ideally they both became one: "Wife, self, and offspring—that is the full extent of 'man'. Brahmins, likewise, proclaim this: 'The husband, tradition says, is the wife.'"<sup>57</sup> Hence, a man unaccompanied by his wife was considered incomplete, one who lacked qualification to perform some rituals.

The order of householders built on a strong foundation of mutual appreciation between a husband and a wife was the supreme constituent of Manu's society; social harmony depended on householders:

"As all living beings exist dependent on air, so people in other orders of life exist dependent on the householder. Because it is householders who sustain people in all three orders of life everyday by giving them knowledge and food, the householder represents the most senior order of life.<sup>58</sup> Among all of them, however, according to the dictates of vedic scripture, the householder is said to be the best, for he supports the other three. As all rivers and rivulets ultimately end up in the ocean, so people of all the orders ultimately end up in the householder."<sup>59</sup>

A family's happiness and prosperity depended on mutual gratification of husband and wife:

Good fortune smiles incessantly on a family where the husband always finds delight in his wife, and the wife in her husband . . . When the wife sparkles, so does the entire household; but when she ceases to sparkle, so does the entire household.<sup>60</sup> On account of offspring, a wife is the bearer of many blessings, worthy of honour, and the light within a home; indeed, in a home no distinction at

---

54. Bhaṭṭācārya 5348.

55. Olivelle 9.101–102.

56. Olivelle 4.184.

57. Olivelle 9.45.

58. Olivelle 3.77–78.

59. Olivelle 6.89–90.

60. Olivelle 3.60, 62.

all exists between a wife (*strī*) and Śrī, the Goddess of Fortune. She begets children; and when they are born, she brings them up—day in, day out, the wife, evidently is the linchpin of domestic affairs. Offspring, rites prescribed by Law, obedient service, the highest sensuous delights, and procuring heaven for oneself and one's forefathers—all this depends on the wife.<sup>61</sup>

Consequently, Manu condemned an independent act of either sex that would violate traditional values or endanger the family's integrity in any respect. Taken together, these decrees ensured the satisfaction of both partners and thus discouraged both rape and adultery. Bearing in mind the dire possibilities for family traditions, Manu maintained that "by carefully guarding his wife, a man guards his offspring, his character, his family, himself, and the Law specific to him."<sup>62</sup> Elsewhere, he says that "a wife bears a son resembling the man she loves; to ensure the purity of his offspring, therefore, he should carefully guard his wife."<sup>63</sup> These regulations were endorsed in order to prevent the confusion of classes and the procreation of illegitimate children; any sexual act, with or without mutual consent, was likely to result in childbirth in the absence of fail-safe contraceptives. To prevent confusion, men who violated the wives of other men were banished and their bodies disfigured: "For such violations give rise to the mixing of social classes among the people, creating deviation from the Law that tears out the very root and leads to the destruction of everything."<sup>64</sup> The *Mahābhārata* praised motherhood because only a mother knows the family and the father of her born child.<sup>65</sup>

Even though Manu advocated the dependence (*asvātantrya*) of women on their male relatives—fathers, husbands, and sons—this could have been the most effective way of protecting them in those times. The political history of Manu's India is rife with catastrophe.

---

61. Olivelle 9.26–28.

62. Olivelle 9.7.

63. Olivelle 9.9.

64. Olivelle 8.353.

65. Belvalkar 12.258.33. Anderson and Zinsser further elaborate this idea in *A History of Their Own: Women in Europe From Prehistory to the Present*, "Motherhood gives a woman value and a function; fatherhood is far less significant in most cultures. Women know that their children are their own; men must rely on more indirect proof of their paternity. Even when clear on his role in conception, a man cannot be positive of his paternity. As Erik Erikson has written, 'Behind man's insistence on male superiority there is an age old envy of women who are sure of their motherhood while man can be sure of his fatherhood only by restricting the female'" (Anderson and Zinsser 12).

About the beginning of the Common Era, parts of India, particularly northern, were attacked and ruled by alien kings, and established socio-religious practices were shaken with the rise of unconventional spiritual movements such as Buddhism and Jainism, which preached extreme asceticism. Political instability and an emphasis on asceticism posed direct threat to familial and societal institutions. The political instability of Manu's time is described by A.S. Altekar as a phase of foreign conquest of India:

The period of 500 years between 200 B.C. and 300 A.D. was a very dark and dismal one for Northern India. The fertile plains of the Punjab and the Gangetic valley were subjected during this period to one foreign invasion after another. First came the Greeks, who under Demetrius and Menander (*c.* 190–150 B.C.) were able to penetrate right up to Patna in Bihar. Then came the Scythians and the Parthians (*c.* 100 B.C. to 50 A.D.) whose frightful wars of conquest reduced Hindu population by one half, 25 percent being killed and 25 percent being enslaved and carried away. These barbarians were followed by the Kushāṇas, who succeeded in overrunning practically the whole of northern India by the middle of the 2nd century A.D. Political reverses, war atrocities and the decline of population and prosperity naturally produced a wave of despondency in society.<sup>66</sup>

To save families from destruction, it was considered necessary to protect female members, at least, by all possible means. The greatest danger that women have faced over the course of history, particularly during wartime, is rape.<sup>67</sup> All early civilizations, therefore, tried hard to protect women, which led them, unfortunately, to control most or all of the activities of women. Unprotected by responsible male relatives, women could be subjected to psychological and physical abuse by stronger individuals. After loosing the second dice game, when Pāṇḍavas failed to protect their wife Draupadī from Duryodhanā's abuse, she considered herself devoid of male relatives. She complained to Kṛṣṇa: "I have got no husbands, no sons, Madhusūdana, not a brother

---

66. Altekar 350.

67. Heinous crimes against women during the wars of the last century—the invasion of Nanking by the Japanese (1938), the battle for Bangladeshi independence, the Vietnam War, and Bosnia—are not new phenomena in the history of war. The practice of rape as a weapon of war has been recorded throughout the centuries and all over the world. Although this has unequivocally been defined as a war crime now, women in all civilizations still continue to suffer.

nor a father, nor you, nor friends, if you mercilessly ignored me when I was plagued by the vulgar.”<sup>68</sup> While in exile, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa must remain vigilant at nights to safeguard Sītā,<sup>69</sup> who was later, while unattended by both of them, abducted by the demon king Rāvaṇa. As a result, Manu suggested that a woman should not want to leave her father, husband, or sons.<sup>70</sup>

Manu’s emphasis on the protection of women is founded in his view of their role in the establishment of his most highly prized societal institution. Women were the core of the household. This point can be further explained by a symbolic debate among body limbs that revolves around which limb is superior to the others. The answer of Brahmā, the Lord of creatures, is very explicit: “[T]hat one of you is the most excellent after whose departure this body is thought to be worse off.” Speech, eye, ear, mind, and the genital organs departed from the body for a year, each in turn, but the body continued functioning in spite of its reduced capacity. As the vital life force is about to depart, it uproots the organs from their seats, and they accept the *Prāṇa* (breath) as their superior.<sup>71</sup> Manu recognized women as life-giving components of the family. The future of many generations to come depended primarily on their safety.<sup>72</sup> The happiness of a family, therefore, necessitated that of its women:

If they desire an abundance of good fortune, fathers, brothers, husbands, and brothers-in-law should revere their women and provide them with adornments. Where women are revered, there the gods rejoice; but where they are not, no rite bears any fruit. Where female relatives grieve, that family soon comes to ruin; but where they do not grieve, it always prospers. When female relatives, not receiving due reverence, curse any house, it comes to total ruin, as if struck down by witchcraft. If men want to become prosperous, therefore, they should always honor the women on joyful occasions and festive days with gifts of adornments, clothes, and food.<sup>73</sup>

Clearly, Manu assigns important roles and responsibilities to women. A man was supposed to avoid even arguing with his female

---

68. van Buitenen, 1975, 251.

69. Pollock 2.47.3.

70. Olivelle 5.149.

71. Radhakrishnan 306–308.

72. Olivelle 9.7.

73. Olivelle 3.55–59.

relatives; if assailed by them he must bear it without resentment.<sup>74</sup> Only their happiness, arising from freedom and independence in safe surroundings and the protection of male relatives, could bring stability to both the family and society.

I deduce Manu's appreciation of freedom and self-determination from his previously noted definitions of pleasure and pain<sup>75</sup> and from his earnest advice to "carefully avoid all undertakings that are under someone else's control, and diligently pursue those that are under his own control."<sup>76</sup> Interpreting Manu's concept of women's *asvātantrya* as the absolute supremacy of males over their female relatives would create a severe contradiction within his laws. According to his definitions of pleasure and pain, the complete dependence of women on their male relatives would place them in a state of perpetual suffering. The result would be to contradict not only the honour that he ascribed to women but also the principle that a family, cursed by dishonoured and discontented women, perishes as quickly as if struck down by witchcraft. On the contrary, Manu said: "Good fortune smiles incessantly on a family where the husband always finds delight in his wife, and the wife in her husband."<sup>77</sup> This condition presupposed happiness of the husband and especially of the wife, because the happiness of family depended on her. The need for consistency in Manu's text, then, mandates that words such as *svātantrya* be interpreted contextually. Avoiding all undertakings depending on others, from Manu's point of view, implies the practice of freedom whenever possible. Men must provide women with both psychological and physical safety. Responsible women were supposed to restrict themselves to areas where their safety could be ensured and practise modesty around men other than their male guardians. A Sanskrit poet's words illustrate Manu's viewpoint:

She wanders freely through her courtyard  
but hides herself from my sight.  
To others, fortunate, she gives full glance  
but gives half glance to me.

---

74. Olivelle 4.180–181.

75. Olivelle 4.160.

76. Olivelle 4.159.

77. Olivelle 3.60.

With others she converses  
but with me she silence keeps.  
My love has set me far apart  
from even common folk.<sup>78</sup>

To conclude, I suggest that a consistent interpretation of Manu's verses must take into account his own environment. No civilization is static; even if preserved ardently, civilizations go through tremendous changes over time. Modern technological advancements and socio-political conditions require new laws, which could not have been afforded two thousand years ago. Similarly, not all laws observed two millennia ago are well-suited to modern society. We have reason to believe that not even Manu would expect us to implement the exact system that he prescribed in the *Manusmṛti*. He said:

“There is one set of Laws for men in the *Kṛta* age, another in the *Tretā*, still another in the *Dvāpara*, and a different set in the *Kali*, in keeping with the progressive shortening taking place in each Age.”<sup>79</sup>

---

78. Ingalls, poem number 494.

79. Olivelle 1.85. *Kṛta*, *Tretā*, *Dvāpara*, and *Kali* are the four divisions of time in Hindu cosmology. In the *Kṛta* æon, dharma exists in its complete form; in subsequent æons, however, it declines progressively (Olivelle 1.81–84).

## References

- Altekar, A.S. *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1999.
- Amarasimha. *Amarakośa: With the unpublished South Indian commentaries*, vol. 2, ed. A. A. Ramanathan. Madras: Adyar Library and Research Centre, 1978.
- Anderson, Bonnie S. and Judith P. Zinsser. *A History of Their Own: Women in Europe From Prehistory to the Present*, vol. 1. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Apte, Vaman Shivaram. *The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2003.
- Aristotle. *The Works of Aristotle*, vol. II. Vol. 9 of *Great Books of the Western World*. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 1977.
- Basham, A.L. *The Wonder That Was India*. Delhi: Rupa & Co, 2003.

- Belvalkar, S.K., ed. *The Śāntiparvan: Being the twelfth book of the Mahābhārata*. Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1961.
- Bhagavadgītā with Śānnikarabhāṣya*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988.
- Bhartr̥hari. *Subhāṣitatriṣaṭī*. Delhi: Chaukhambha Sanskrit Sansthan, 1987.
- Bhaṭṭācārya, Tārānātha Tarkavācaspati. *Vācaspatyam*, vol. 6. Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1969.
- Brahmapurāṇam*—Sanskrit text in PDF format from the website: <http://sanskrit.gde.to>
- Bühler, G., trans. *The Laws of Manu*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1967.
- van Buitenen, J.A.B., ed. and trans. *The Mahābhārata: The Book of the Forest*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975.
- , ed. and trans. *The Mahābhārata: The Book of the Beginning*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973.
- Dandekar, R.N., ed. *The Anuśāsanaparvan: Being the thirteenth book of the Mahābhārata*. Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1966.
- Devalasmṛti: Reconstruction and Critical Study*, ed. Mukund Lalji Wadekar. Delhi: Koshal Book Depot, 1996.
- Dubois, Abbé J.A. *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, ed. and trans. Henry K. Beauchamp. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936.
- Encyclopædia Britannica Online*: <http://www.search.eb.com/eb/article?tocId=9042327>, 11 Dec. 2004.
- Epictetus. *The Discourses of Epictetus*. Vol. 12 of *Great Books of the Western World*. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 1977.
- Ingalls, D.H.H., trans. *An Anthology of Sanskrit Court Poetry: Vidyākara's "Subhāṣitaratnaśa"*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965.
- Kālidāsa. *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*, ed. and trans. C. R. Devadhar and N. G. Suru. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1991.
- Klostermaier, K. Klaus. *A Survey of Hinduism*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994.
- Mitter, Dwarka Nath. *The Position of Women in Hindu Law*. Delhi: Inter-India Publications, 1989.
- Olivelle, Patrick, trans. *The Law Code of Manu*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Pollock, Sheldon I., trans. *The Rāmāyana of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India*, vol. 2. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986.

- Prasāda, Rāma, trans. *Patanjali's Yoga Sutras: With the commentary of Vyāsa and the gloss of Vāchaspati Miśra*. Allahabad: The Pāṇini Office, 1912.
- Radhakrishnan, S. ed. and trans. *The Principal Upaniṣads*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1953.
- Sāyaṇācārya. *The Mādhavīyā Dhātuvṛtti*, ed. Swami Dwarikadas Shastri. Varanasi: Tara Book Agency, 2000.
- Sukthankar, Vishnu S. ed. *The Āraṇyakaparvan: Being the third book of the Mahābhārata*. Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1942.
- , ed. *The Ādiparvan: Being the first book of the Mahābhārata*. Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1933.
- Vātsyāyana. *Kāmasūtram of Śrī Vātsyāyana with the Commentary Jayamaṅgalā by Śrī Yaśodhara*. Edited with *Manoramā* Hindi commentary by Parasa Nath Dwivedi. Varanasi: Chaukhamba Surbharati Prakashan, 1999.
- Viśākhadatta. *Mudrārākshasa of Viśākhadatta with the Commentary of Dhundirāja*, ed. and trans. M. R. Kale. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1991.