INDIAN POLITICAL THOUGHT

Manu: Social Laws and Dharmic Government

By **Brajabandhu Mahanta** • November 18, 2026 • 21 min read



In the study of Indian political thought, **Manu** stands at the beginning of the tradition of **dharmashastra** — normative texts that lay down rules of right conduct for individuals, social groups and rulers. The **Manusmriti** (also called the **Manava Dharmashastra** or *Laws of Manu*) is the most famous and most influential of these texts. It presents a complete vision of an ordered society and a righteous state, in which social laws and government are both grounded in **dharma**.

Manu is important for students of political thought for three reasons:

- He offers one of the earliest systematic Indian accounts of the **origin of the state, the nature of kingship, the functions of government, law and punishment**.
- His text shaped Hindu law and social norms for centuries, and was adopted by British courts as an authority of “Hindu law” in the colonial period.
- He is the most **contested** figure in Indian thought: revered by some as a lawgiver of a harmonious social order, condemned by others — above all by **Dr B. R. Ambedkar** and **Jyotirao Phule** — as the architect of caste hierarchy and the subordination of women.

A good answer on Manu must therefore explain his ideas carefully and also assess them critically.

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Manu and the Manusmriti

Who was Manu?

In Indian tradition, **Manu** is the mythical first man and progenitor of humanity (the word *manava*, “human”, derives from his name), and the first king and lawgiver. The text presents itself as the teaching of Manu, narrated by the sage **Bhrigu** to a gathering of seers. Modern scholars treat “Manu” as an **authorial persona** rather than a historical individual; the text was composed by one or more Brahmin scholars.

Date and composition

- Scholars generally place its composition between the **2nd century BCE and the 2nd–3rd century CE**. **Patrick Olivelle**, its leading modern editor, dates it to around the **2nd century CE** and argues it was the work of a single, highly skilled author (or a small group) rather than a slow accumulation.
- It drew on earlier **Dharmasutras** (Gautama, Baudhayana, Apastamba, Vasishtha) and on the **Arthashastra** tradition.
- It was written in a period of political change after the Mauryas, when Brahmanical scholars were seeking to reassert the varna order and the authority of the Veda against the challenge of Buddhism and other heterodox movements.

Structure

The text has **12 chapters** and about **2,685 verses** in the *shloka* metre. Broadly:

- **Chapter 1**: creation of the world and the origin of the four varnas;
- **Chapter 2**: sources of dharma, the student stage (*brahmacharya*);
- **Chapters 3–5**: the householder (*grihastha*): marriage, rituals, food, purity, women;
- **Chapter 6**: the forest-dweller and renouncer (*vanaprastha* and *sannyasa*);

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- **Chapters 7–9**: **rajadharma** — the duties of the king, administration, law and justice (*vyavahara*), the eighteen titles of law;
- **Chapter 10**: mixed castes and the conduct permitted in times of distress (*apaddharma*);
- **Chapter 11**: penances (*prayashchitta*);
- **Chapter 12**: karma, rebirth and liberation.

Commentaries and later life of the text

Important commentaries include those of **Medhatithi** (c. 9th–10th century), **Govindaraja** and **Kulluka Bhatta** (c. 13th–15th century). In the colonial period, **Sir William Jones** translated it as *Institutes of Hindu Law* (**1794**), and the British treated it as a basic source of "Hindu law" in their courts, giving it an authority it may not have had in practice before.

Sources of ancient Indian political thought

- **Literary — religious**: Vedas (sabha, samiti, the rajasuya), Brahmanas, Upanishads; epics (*Mahabharata* — Shanti Parva; *Ramayana*); Puranas.
- **Literary — legal and political**: Dharmasutras and Dharmashastras (Manu, Yajnavalkya, Narada); Arthashastra; Kamandaka's *Nitisara*; *Shukranitisara*.
- **Buddhist and Jain texts**: Digha Nikaya (Aggañña Sutta — the Mahasammata, an elected king), Jatakas, Vinaya Pitaka (procedures of the sangha); Jain texts on non-violence.
- **Archaeological**: inscriptions (Ashoka's edicts, Kharavela's Hathigumpha, Rudradaman's Junagadh inscription), coins of the ganas (republics).
- **Foreign accounts**: Megasthenes (*Indica*), Fa-Hien, Hiuen Tsang.
- **Limitations**: religious bias, uncertain dates, the view of the elite; yet together they show a rich tradition of statecraft.

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The Concept of Dharma

Dharma is the central concept of Manu's thought. It means the cosmic and moral order, duty, law and right conduct all at once. For Manu, dharma is eternal, given by the Veda, and specific to each person's position — his varna (social class), ashrama (stage of life) and gender. This is called **svadharma** (one's own duty) and **varnashrama dharma**.

Sources of dharma

Manu lists four sources of dharma (Manusmriti 2.6, 2.12), in descending order of authority:

- **Shruti** — the Veda (revealed knowledge), the root of all dharma;
- **Smriti** — the remembered tradition (texts like the Manusmriti itself);
- **Sadachara** (*shishtachara*) — the conduct of good and learned people;
- **Atmatushti** — what is pleasing to one's own conscience (where the other sources are silent).

He adds that **custom** (*achara*) of regions, castes and families should be respected where it does not conflict with the Veda. This allowed a degree of flexibility and local variation.

Dharma above the king

A crucial feature of Manu's thought is that **dharma is above the ruler**. The king does not create law; he upholds and enforces the dharma that already exists, as interpreted by learned Brahmins. In this sense, Manu's idea of government is a **dharmic** (rather than secular or absolutist) one: political power is legitimate only when it protects the dharmic order.

Significance of dharma in ancient Indian political thought

- **Meaning**: from *dhri*, to hold or sustain — the moral order that sustains society; includes duty, law, justice and righteousness.

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- **Dharma above the king**: the king is not the source of dharma but its protector (*dharmapalaka*); this limits royal power — an Indian idea of the rule of law.
- **Rajadharma** (Mahabharata, Shanti Parva): protection, justice, welfare; the king who fails may be resisted or replaced (the story of Vena).
- **Svadharma and varnadharma**: each person's duty according to station; it gives order but also sanctions hierarchy.
- **Buddhist dhamma**: an ethical, universal version; Ashoka's dhamma as a policy of tolerance and welfare.
- **Danda and dharma**: danda (force) exists to protect dharma — the two are complementary.
- **Conclusion**: dharma gave ancient Indian thought its ethical character and the idea of a limited, duty-bound ruler; critics point to its link with varna inequality.

Manu's Social Laws

Manu's social laws aim to create a **stable, hierarchical and harmonious** society in which each group performs its own duty. The two pillars are **varna** and **ashrama**.

The varna order

In the creation account (1.31, 1.87–91), drawing on the *Purusha Sukta* of the Rig Veda, Manu says the four varnas were created from different parts of the creator's body — the **Brahmin** from the mouth, the **Kshatriya** from the arms, the **Vaishya** from the thighs and the **Shudra** from the feet — and assigns each its duties:

Varna	Duties prescribed by Manu
Brahmin	Studying and teaching the Veda, performing and officiating at sacrifices, giving and receiving gifts
Kshatriya	Protecting the people, giving gifts, sacrificing, studying the Veda, avoiding attachment to sensual pleasures

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Vaishya	Tending cattle, giving gifts, sacrificing, studying, trade, money-lending, agriculture
Shudra	Serving the three higher varnas “without resentment”

Key features:

- **Hierarchy and inequality**: the Brahmin is described as the highest of beings, lord of all creation by right of birth and Vedic knowledge. The first three varnas are **dvija** (“twice-born”) through the *upanayana* initiation; Shudras are excluded from Vedic study and rituals.
- **Graded punishments**: penalties for the same offence vary by varna. A Shudra who insults a Brahmin receives harsh corporal punishment, while a Brahmin who insults a Shudra pays a small fine. Brahmins are exempt from capital punishment and from taxation.
- **Occupational fixity**: each varna must follow its own occupation; Manu famously says it is better to do one’s own duty imperfectly than another’s well. But in times of distress (*apaddharma*), a person may adopt the occupation of a lower varna.
- **Mixed castes** (*varnasankara*): Manu explains the origin of the many jatis as the result of marriages between varnas — **anuloma** (higher-varna man with lower-varna woman, tolerated) and **pratiloma** (lower-varna man with higher-varna woman, condemned). The offspring of a Shudra man and a Brahmin woman, the **Chandala**, is placed at the very bottom, outside the village, in a position of extreme exclusion.

The ashrama system

For men of the twice-born varnas, life is divided into four stages:

- **Brahmacharya** — celibate studentship with a teacher;
- **Grihastha** — householder life: marriage, children, ritual duties, economic activity. Manu calls it the **most important** ashrama, since all the others depend on it.
- **Vanaprastha** — retirement to the forest;
- **Sannyasa** — renunciation in search of liberation (*moksha*).

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The ashrama scheme is linked to the four **purusharthas** (goals of life): **dharma, artha, kama, moksha**. Manu holds that dharma should guide the pursuit of artha (wealth/power) and kama (pleasure).

Four purusharthas in Indian tradition

The four aims of human life: **dharma** (moral duty and righteousness), **artha** (wealth and power), **kama** (desire and pleasure) and **moksha** (liberation). The first three (*trivarga*) belong to worldly life and should be pursued in harmony, with dharma guiding artha and kama; moksha is the final goal. Political significance: the state exists to create conditions in which people can pursue the purusharthas; Manu gives primacy to dharma, Kautilya to artha ("dharma and kama depend on artha"). A. J. Parel uses the purusharthas to interpret Gandhi — politics (artha) guided by dharma and aimed at moksha.

Women and the family

Manu's views on women are notoriously ambivalent:

- **Respect**: "Where women are honoured, there the gods rejoice; where they are not, all rituals are fruitless" (3.56). Women of the household must be kept happy, and the family where women suffer perishes.
- **Dependence**: "Her father guards her in childhood, her husband in youth, her sons in old age; a woman is never fit for independence" (9.3; *na stri svatantryam arhati*). Women are to be under the control of male relatives at every stage.
- **Duties**: the wife's dharma is service and devotion to the husband, even if he lacks virtue; she should manage the household.
- **Marriage**: Manu lists **eight forms of marriage** — *Brahma, Daiva, Arsha, Prajapatya* (approved) and *Asura, Gandharva, Rakshasa, Paishacha* (disapproved). He favours marriage of girls at a young age and disapproves of widow remarriage, though he discusses (and partly condemns) **niyoga** (levirate).

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- **Property**: women have limited property rights; **stridhana** (gifts given at marriage and by relatives) is recognised as a woman's own property.
- Women (and Shudras) are excluded from Vedic study and ritual on their own.

Law, crime and punishment

In Chapter 8, Manu lists **eighteen titles of law** (*vyavaharapadas*), the grounds of legal disputes, including: non-payment of debts, deposits, sale without ownership, partnership, resumption of gifts, non-payment of wages, breach of contract, rescission of sale, disputes between owners and herdsmen, boundary disputes, verbal assault, physical assault, theft, violence (*sahasa*), adultery, duties of husband and wife, partition of inheritance, and gambling. This list became the standard framework of later Hindu law.

He also describes procedures for **witnesses, oaths, ordeals**, and the rules of evidence.

Dharmic Government: Manu's Political Ideas

Manu's political thought is found mainly in **Chapter 7** (*rajadharma*, the duties of the king), **Chapter 8** (administration of justice) and **Chapter 9** (law, the state's elements and the king's conduct).

Main political ideas of the Manusmriti at a glance

- **Origin of kingship**: in the absence of a king, the strong would devour the weak like fish (*matsyanyaya*); so the Creator made the king out of the eternal particles of the gods (Indra, Vayu, Yama, Surya, Agni, Varuna, Chandra, Kubera) — a divine theory, but tied to the function of protection.
- **Rajadharma**: the king's first duty is protection of the people and of the varna order; he must be disciplined, follow dharma and consult ministers (seven or eight) and learned Brahmins.
- **Danda**: punishment is the real ruler; it protects all, keeps everyone in their duty; but it must be used justly — unjust punishment destroys the king.

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- **Saptanga**: Manu also lists the seven limbs of the state (king, minister, capital, territory, treasury, army, ally).
- **Law and justice**: eighteen titles of law (*vyavahara*); the king as the final judge, assisted by Brahmins; punishments graded by varna.
- **Varna and gender**: a hierarchical social order with Brahmins at the top; restrictions on Shudras and women ("a woman is not fit for independence").
- **Foreign policy**: the six-fold policy and the circle of states, like Kautilya.
- **Contribution**: the classic statement of the dharmic theory of the state; it influenced law and custom (British courts used it as 'Hindu law'). Criticised by Phule and Ambedkar (who burnt it in 1927 at Mahad) for sanctioning caste and gender inequality.

Origin of the state: from matsyanyaya to kingship

Manu explains the origin of kingship by describing a condition without a king:

- When the world was **without a king** (*arajaka*), people were scattered in fear in all directions. The strong oppressed the weak, like big fish eating small fish — the condition called **matsyanyaya** ("the law of the fishes").
- To protect all beings, the Lord created the **king** by taking eternal particles of **eight guardian deities** — **Indra, Vayu (Anila), Yama, Surya (Arka), Agni, Varuna, Chandra and Kubera** (7.3–4).
- Therefore the king surpasses all beings in splendour; **even a child-king must not be despised**, thinking him a mere mortal, for he is "a great deity in human form" (7.8).

This is a **theory of divine creation of kingship**, combined with a **functional justification**: the king exists to protect people and end anarchy. It is often compared with **Hobbes's** state of nature ("war of all against all"), though Manu has no idea of a social contract — the king is created by divine will, not by the agreement of the people.

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Is Manu’s king absolute?

At first sight Manu’s king looks absolute: he is divine, and disobeying him is a grave sin. But several limits restrain him:

- **Dharma is above the king**: he must rule according to the shastras and customs; he cannot make law at will.
- **Brahmins** as interpreters of dharma: the king must honour learned Brahmins, consult them and appoint a Brahmin as his chief adviser (*purohita*) and judge.
- **Moral self-discipline**: the king must conquer his senses; Manu lists **18 vices** born of desire (hunting, gambling, sleeping by day, slander, women, drink, dancing, singing, music, useless travel) and anger (cruelty, violence, envy, jealousy, injustice to property, harsh speech, harsh punishment). A king without self-control perishes — Manu cites kings like **Vena, Nahusha and Nimi** who were destroyed by lack of humility.
- **Danda turns against the unjust king**: punishment, wrongly applied, destroys the king himself and his family.

So Manu’s monarchy is best described as a **limited, dharmic monarchy** — absolute in its powers over subjects, but morally and religiously bound by dharma and by the Brahmin order. Scholars like **U. N. Ghoshal** speak of a theory of the “divinity of the king” balanced by the “supremacy of dharma”. Unlike the Western divine right of kings, Manu’s king is divine because of his **function**, and a tyrannical king loses his divine character.

Danda: the theory of punishment

Danda (punishment, coercive authority) is the core of Manu’s theory of government:

- The Lord created **Danda**, the son of the king, as the protector of all creatures, made of the glory of Brahman (7.14).
- “**Punishment alone governs all created beings, punishment alone protects them, punishment watches over them while they sleep**; the wise declare punishment to be dharma” (7.18).

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- If the king did not punish the guilty, the strong would roast the weak like fish on a spit; the crow would eat the sacrificial cake; ownership would not remain with anyone; and all varnas would be corrupted.
- But danda must be applied **justly, after due consideration**, according to the place, time, ability and knowledge of the offender. Unjust punishment destroys the king's reputation and kingdom.

Thus danda is not mere force: it is the instrument through which the king maintains the **varna order and dharma**. Manu's political theory is therefore **instrumental to his social theory** — the state exists to uphold the hierarchical social order.

Saptanga: the seven elements of the state

In Chapter 9 (9.294–97), Manu lists the **seven limbs** (*saptanga*) of the state, in order of importance:

- **Swamin** — the king;
- **Amatya** — the ministers;
- **Pura** — the fortified capital;
- **Rashtra** — the territory and people;
- **Kosha** — the treasury;
- **Danda** — the army / coercive power;
- **Mitra (Suhrit)** — allies.

The same list appears in Kautilya's Arthashastra (Topic 2). Manu says each element is important in its own sphere; the state functions like a body or like the three staves of an ascetic's tridanda supporting each other.

Duties and qualities of the king

The king's primary duty is **protection** (*rakshana*) of his subjects, their property and their dharma. Other duties include:

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- **Maintaining varnashrama dharma**: making each varna follow its own duty and preventing “mixing” of varnas;
- **Administration of justice**: hearing cases daily, personally or through a learned Brahmin judge assisted by three assessors;
- **Collecting taxes** fairly: a king may take one-sixth, one-eighth or one-twelfth of grain, and smaller shares of other produce; taxes should be light, “as the leech, the calf and the bee take their food little by little” (7.129); Brahmins learned in the Veda are exempt;
- **Supporting** learned Brahmins, the poor, the aged, widows and the helpless;
- **Daily routine**: rising early, consulting ministers, inspecting the army, receiving spies’ reports, worship;
- **Education**: the king should learn the three Vedas, the science of government (*dandaniti*), logic (*anvikshiki*) and the knowledge of the self (*atmavidya*), and practical arts from the people.

Ministers, administration and local government

- The king should appoint **seven or eight ministers** (*sachivas*) of hereditary service, learned, brave, skilled and of tested loyalty; and other officials for revenue, mines, and the palace.
- He should consult them individually and jointly, in a secret place, but take final decisions himself after consulting his most learned Brahmin adviser.
- An **ambassador** (*duta*) should be loyal, honest, skilled and able to read others’ intentions; the ambassador is the source of peace and war.
- **Local administration** is organised hierarchically: heads of **1, 10, 20, 100 and 1,000 villages**, each reporting to the one above, with a superintendent in each town.
- The king should use **spies** extensively to watch officials and the enemy.

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Foreign policy

Manu adopts the **mandala** theory of inter-state relations (the circle of states: enemy, friend, neutral, intermediary) and the **six-fold policy** (*shadgunya*): **sandhi** (peace), **vigraha** (war), **yana** (march), **asana** (halt), **dvaidhibhava** (dual policy) and **samshraya** (seeking protection). He recommends the four **upayas** — **sama** (conciliation), **dana** (gifts), **bheda** (division) and **danda** (force) — in that order, with war as the last resort. War should follow the **rules of dharma** (no poisoned weapons, no attack on the unarmed, the surrendered, the sleeping or those who flee). These ideas are developed more fully by Kautilya.

Rajadharma and apaddharma

The king’s duties together form **rajadharma**, which Manu considers the highest dharma since it protects all other dharmas. In times of crisis (*apad*), the king may set aside normal rules to save the kingdom — for example, collecting a quarter of the crop in an emergency.

Critical Assessment

Critiques

- **Dr B. R. Ambedkar** regarded the Manusmriti as the legal and ideological foundation of caste and untouchability. On **25 December 1927**, during the **Mahad Satyagraha**, he and his followers publicly **burned the Manusmriti**. In works like *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), *Philosophy of Hinduism* and *Riddles in Hinduism*, he argued that Manu’s law sanctified **graded inequality** — an “ascending scale of reverence and a descending scale of contempt” — denied education and property to Shudras and women, and could not be reformed from within.
- **Jyotirao Phule** (*Gulamgiri*, 1873) saw Manu’s code as a Brahmin invention to enslave the Shudras and Ati-Shudras.
- **Feminist critiques** (Uma Chakravarti, *Gendering Caste*, 2003) argue that Manu’s control over women’s sexuality and marriage was central to maintaining caste purity — “Brahmanical patriarchy”.

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- **Liberal-democratic critique**: Manu denies **equality before law**, prescribes punishments by varna, makes birth the basis of status, and gives the king and Brahmins power without popular consent. The **Constitution of India** (Articles 14–17) rejects these principles, abolishing untouchability.
- **Historical critique**: scholars question how far the Manusmriti was actually applied before colonial courts made it authoritative; it was a normative ideal of Brahmin authors, not a description of practice.

Defences and alternative readings

- Traditionalists and some nationalists (for example, K. P. Jayaswal in *Manu and Yajnavalkya*, 1930) presented Manu as a great jurist whose code ensured social order, division of labour and the rule of dharma over rulers.
- Some argue that varna was originally based on **guna and karma** (qualities and actions) rather than birth, and that later interpolations distorted the text.
- Manu's emphasis on **rule by law** (dharma above the king), **just punishment**, **light taxation** and **welfare of the helpless** is seen as an early theory of limited government.
- Western thinkers like **Friedrich Nietzsche** praised the Manusmriti's aristocratic social order (*Twilight of the Idols*), which has itself been criticised.

Manu compared with Kautilya

Point	Manu	Kautilya
Nature of text	Dharmashastra (normative-religious)	Arthashastra (political-economic, pragmatic)
Basis of authority	Dharma and Veda	Artha, power and dandaniti
Origin of kingship	Divine creation to end matsyanyaya	Contract-like story (Manu chosen by people) plus need to end matsyanyaya

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Role of Brahmins	Supreme; king subordinate to dharma as they interpret it	Important advisers, but king's own decree (*rajashasana*) can prevail
Focus	Social order (varna, ashrama, family)	Statecraft, administration, economy, diplomacy, espionage
Common ideas	Saptanga, mandala, shadgunya, danda, upayas	Same, developed in much greater detail

Dharmashastra and Arthashastra on state power

- **Dharmashastra**: the state exists to protect dharma and the varna order; the king is under sacred law; Brahmins interpret law; state power is limited and morally bound.
- **Arthashastra**: the state exists for security, wealth and welfare; the king's edict (*rajashasana*) is decisive when sources of law conflict; state power is more secular and wider.
- Both accept monarchy, danda, saptanga and varna; the difference is of emphasis — dharma versus artha. (See the Kautilya notes for detail.)

Conclusion

Manu's Manusmriti presents a comprehensive vision in which **social laws** and **government** are united by dharma. The state exists to end the anarchy of matsyanyaya and protect a hierarchical social order; the king is divine in function but bound by dharma and guided by Brahmins; danda is the instrument of order. For political theory, Manu offers early Indian ideas of the origin of the state, the elements of sovereignty, limited monarchy, justice and inter-state relations. Yet the same text sanctified caste inequality and the subordination of women, which is why it became the symbol of oppression for Ambedkar and the anti-caste movement. A balanced study must recognise both its place in the history of Indian political ideas and the reasons why modern India's constitutional order rejects its social laws.

Quick Revision

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Concept	Key point
Text	Manusmriti / Manava Dharmashastra; 12 chapters, ~2,685 verses; c. 2nd BCE–2nd CE
Sources of dharma	Shruti, Smriti, Sadachara, Atmatushti
Social order	Varna (4), Ashrama (4), Purusharthas (4)
Women	“Na stri svatantryam arhati” (9.3) vs “Yatra naryastu pujyante” (3.56)
Marriage	Eight forms; four approved, four disapproved
Law	Eighteen titles of law (vyavaharapadas)
Origin of state	Matsyanyaya ended by divine creation of king from 8 deities
Danda	“Punishment alone governs all beings” (7.18)
Saptanga	Swamin, Amatya, Pura, Rashtra, Kosha, Danda, Mitra
Taxes	1/6, 1/8 or 1/12 of grain; leech–calf–bee analogy
Foreign policy	Mandala, shadgunya, four upayas
Critics	Ambedkar (burned it, 25 Dec 1927, Mahad); Phule; feminists

Memory aids

- 8 deities in the king: **“I V Y S A V C K”** — Indra, Vayu, Yama, Surya, Agni, Varuna, Chandra, Kubera.
- Saptanga: **“S A P R K D M”** — Swami, Amatya, Pura, Rashtra, Kosha, Danda, Mitra.
- Upayas: **Sama, Dana, Bheda, Danda** (“SaDa-BhaDa”).

Exam Practice

Long-answer questions

- Explain Manu’s concept of dharma and its sources. How does dharma limit the authority of the king?

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- Discuss Manu’s theory of the origin of the state. Compare it with Hobbes’s state of nature.
- Examine Manu’s views on kingship. Is Manu’s king absolute or limited?
- Analyse Manu’s theory of danda and its place in his political thought.
- Critically examine Manu’s social laws relating to varna and women.
- “Manu’s political theory is subordinate to his social theory.” Discuss.
- Evaluate Ambedkar’s critique of the Manusmriti.

Short-answer questions

- What is matsyanyaya?
- Name the seven elements of the state according to Manu.
- What are the four sources of dharma according to Manu?
- What are the eighteen titles of law?
- What did Manu say about taxation?
- What is the shadgunya policy?
- What are anuloma and pratiloma marriages?
- What is apaddharma?
- Why did Ambedkar burn the Manusmriti?
- List the eight forms of marriage in Manu.

Multiple-choice questions

- **The Manusmriti is also known as:** (a) Arthashastra (b) Manava Dharmashastra (c) Nitisara (d) Shukraniti. *Answer: (b)*
- **According to Manu, the king was created from the particles of how many deities?** (a) Five (b) Seven (c) Eight (d) Ten. *Answer: (c)*
- **“The law of the fishes” refers to:** (a) Danda (b) Matsyanyaya (c) Mandala (d) Saptanga. *Answer: (b)*

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- **Which of the following is NOT one of Manu’s four sources of dharma?** (a) Shruti (b) Smriti (c) Sadachara (d) Rajashasana. *Answer: (d)*
- **Ambedkar burned the Manusmriti in:** (a) 1924 (b) 1927 (c) 1930 (d) 1936. *Answer: (b)*
- **Match the following:** (A) Sandhi – (B) Vigraha – (C) Yana – (D) Samshraya. (1) War (2) Seeking protection (3) Peace (4) March. Correct code: (a) A-3, B-1, C-4, D-2 (b) A-1, B-3, C-4, D-2 (c) A-3, B-4, C-1, D-2 (d) A-2, B-1, C-4, D-3. *Answer: (a)*
- **The first English translation of the Manusmriti, *Institutes of Hindu Law*, was by:** (a) Max Müller (b) William Jones (c) H. T. Colebrooke (d) N. B. Halhed. *Answer: (b)*
- **Assertion (A):** Manu’s king is not completely absolute. **Reason (R):** Manu places dharma above the king. (a) Both true, R explains A (b) Both true, R does not explain A (c) A true, R false (d) A false, R true. *Answer: (a)*
- **According to Manu, the most important ashrama is:** (a) Brahmacharya (b) Grihastha (c) Vanaprastha (d) Sannyasa. *Answer: (b)*
- **“Punishment alone governs all created beings” — this idea relates to Manu’s theory of:** (a) Dharma (b) Danda (c) Varna (d) Mandala. *Answer: (b)*

Previous Years’ Questions

These are questions actually set in earlier examinations. UPSC questions are from the Civil Services Mains, Political Science and International Relations (PSIR) Optional, Paper I; the year is given in brackets.

UPSC Civil Services Mains (PSIR)

- Comment: The main political ideas contained in the Manusmriti. (2003)
- Comment: Four Purusharthas in Indian tradition. (2004)
- Compare and contrast Dharmashastra and Arthashastra with reference to State power. (2010)
- Examine the significance of Dharma in ancient Indian political thought. (2013)

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- Explain the sources of ancient Indian political thought. (2020)
- Dharmashastra presents a duty-centric worldview for individuals and communities. Comment. (2024)

State PSC examinations

- Contribution of Manu in the Ancient Indian Political Thought. (J&K PSC, KAS Mains 2012, Political Science Paper I)

Answer pointers: “Dharmashastra presents a duty-centric worldview” (UPSC 2024)

- Begin with the meaning of dharma as duty linked to one’s varna, ashrama and role (*svadharma*); rights are not the starting point.
- Show duties at three levels: the individual (purusharthas, ashramas), the community (varna, family) and the king (*rajadharma*: protection, danda, upholding the social order).
- Use Manu’s examples: the king’s duty to punish (*danda*), the duties of each varna, and the idea that order rests on everyone doing their own duty.
- Critique: hierarchy, unequal duties by caste and gender, and the critiques of Phule and Ambedkar; contrast with the modern rights-based approach, while noting Gandhi’s revival of the duty idea (“the true source of right is duty”).
- Conclude: duty-centrism gave stability and moral restraint on power, but it fixed inequality; modern constitutionalism balances rights (Part III) with fundamental duties (Article 51A).

Suggested Readings

- Patrick Olivelle, *Manu’s Code of Law: A Critical Edition and Translation of the Mānava-Dharmaśāstra* (OUP, 2005).
- Wendy Doniger and Brian K. Smith (trans.), *The Laws of Manu* (Penguin, 1991).
- U. N. Ghoshal, *A History of Indian Political Ideas* (OUP, 1959).

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- V. P. Varma, *Studies in Hindu Political Thought and Its Metaphysical Foundations* (Motilal Banarsidass).
- K. P. Jayaswal, *Manu and Yajnavalkya* (1930).
- B. R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste* (1936); *Philosophy of Hinduism*.
- Uma Chakravarti, *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens* (Stree, 2003).
- Thomas Pantham and Kenneth Deutsch (eds.), *Political Thought in Modern India* (Sage, 1986).
- Himanshu Roy and M. P. Singh (eds.), *Indian Political Thought: Themes and Thinkers* (Pearson, 2017).

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