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Social Unity As Described In Manusmṛti: A Philosophical And Sociological Inquiry

Dr. Seema Rani Rath**Abstract**

The *Manusmṛti* or the *Mānava Dharmaśāstra*, stands as one of the earliest legal and moral codes in ancient Indian literature, believed to have been compiled between 200 BCE and 200 CE. Often criticized for reinforcing hierarchical structures through the *varṇa* system, the *Manusmṛti* also contains deep philosophical insights into the structure, function, and cohesion of society. This paper seeks to offer a holistic examination of how social unity is conceived and maintained in *Manusmṛti*. It investigates the principles of mutual dependence, ethical conduct, *varṇa* duties, the role of kingship, gender norms, and universal values. Drawing upon textual analysis, this study attempts to go beyond the superficial reading of caste stratification to explore how ancient Indian society envisioned social harmony through an integrated system of dharma, justice, and interdependence. The article also contrasts these values with modern concepts of social integration and civic unity, making the analysis both historically informed and contemporarily relevant.

Keywords: *Manusmṛti*, *Dharmaśāstra*, social harmony, *varṇa* system, interdependence, ethical duties, Indian philosophy, justice, ancient Indian society.

Introduction

The *Manusmṛti* occupies a foundational position within the vast corpus of *Dharmaśāstra* literature in ancient India. Ascribed to the mythical lawgiver Sage Manu, it is traditionally considered the earliest and most authoritative *Dharmaśāstra* text, composed sometime between 200 BCE and 200 CE, though its oral tradition and core principles may date back even earlier. The *Manusmṛti* comprises over 2,600 verses organized into twelve chapters, each dealing with aspects of cosmology, law, ethics, caste duties, gender roles, governance, and religious practices. Unlike mere legal codes, the *Dharmaśāstra* texts combine jurisprudence with metaphysics, ritual with ethics, and individual morality with collective well-being.

I. Manusmṛti and Its Place in Indian Social Thought

The *Manusmṛti* was not merely a rulebook for personal conduct but a comprehensive social charter designed to regulate all aspects of human life. It proposed a normative social framework, integrating the principles of dharma (righteous duty), *artha* (material order), and *kāma* (desire), all under the overarching goal of *mokṣa* (liberation). Its emphasis on social obligations, reciprocal duties, and communal stability indicates that social unity was a fundamental concern, even if it is not described using modern terminologies like “social integration” or “social cohesion”.

Although contemporary interpretations often focus on its rigid *varṇa* (caste) divisions and gender norms, which have been the subject of considerable debate and reformist critique, it is crucial to recognize that the *Manusmṛti* also functioned as a civilizational template aimed at preserving social harmony during periods of transition. The early centuries CE in India saw a shift from Vedic tribal structures to settled agrarian societies, demanding a codified order that could manage growing social complexity. *Manusmṛti* responded to this need by establishing an intricate web of duties and expectations social, familial, legal and spiritual that collectively maintained a vision of ordered living.

Social unity or *sāmājika ekatā* is not articulated as a singular doctrine in *Manusmṛti*, but it is deeply embedded in its structural logic. It appears through the doctrines of *paraspara-sambandha* (mutual interdependence), *varṇa-dharma* (class-based duties), *gr̥hastha āśrama's* social responsibilities, the concept of *rajanīti* (just governance), and

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the moral compass provided by universal ethical principles such as truthfulness, non-violence, and compassion. These elements collectively create a symbiotic model of society, where every individual and institution play a defined role in sustaining the whole.

The structural unity envisioned in *Manusmṛti* is not predicated on equality in a modern democratic sense, but rather on functional harmony, where the proper performance of one's *dharma* ensures both personal merit (*puṇya*) and collective well-being (*loka-kalyāṇa*). The idea is that unity does not arise from sameness, but from dutiful diversity, wherein each constituent of society contributes to a greater cosmic and social order.

Thus, the purpose of this paper is to explore how the *Manusmṛti* conceptualizes and institutionalizes social unity through its unique framework of ritual order, social function, ethical regulation, and political governance. It investigates the implicit philosophy of interconnectedness, the institutional mechanisms to prevent disorder, and the ethical teachings that aim to promote social trust, compassion, and cooperative living. By placing *Manusmṛti* within its historical, textual, and philosophical context, this study offers a more nuanced reading one that recognizes both its limitations and its aspirations for a unified human society.

II. The Foundation of Unity: Dharma as Social Glue

The concept of *dharma* lies at the very heart of the *Manusmṛti*, functioning not merely as a moral guideline but as the fundamental organizing principle of society. Unlike legal systems based solely on punitive measures, *dharma* in the *Manusmṛti* integrates cosmic law (*ṛta*), social ethics, and personal responsibility. It is the adhesive that binds together individual conduct, social roles, political duties, and metaphysical ideals, forming a seamless order where personal life and public life are intricately interwoven.

आचारः परमो धर्मः श्रुत्युक्तः स्मार्त एव च ।

तस्मादस्मिन्सदा युक्तो नित्यं स्यादात्मवान्द्रिजः ॥

“Dharma is the supreme authority (*dharmo hi paramo loke*); the Vedas are its source, and the practice of those who know the Vedas follows from it¹.”

This statement elevates *dharma* above all temporal considerations. *Dharma* is not a human invention; it is eternal, divinely sanctioned, and universally binding. The Vedas, being *apauruṣeya* (not of human origin), are the fountainhead of *dharma*, and hence their teachings form the bedrock of any legitimate social system. For Manu, the observance of *dharma* is what differentiates human civilization from animal existence it is the mark of civilization (*saṃskṛti*).

Dharma as Individual and Collective Duty

Dharma is inherently relational and contextual in the *Manusmṛti*. It is not a uniform set of laws applicable to all, but a differentiated system of duties based on one's age, sex, social class (*varṇa*), and stage of life (*āśrama*). This has been referred to as *varṇāśrama-dharma*, where different individuals have different roles to play in society, and fulfilling these roles contributes to both self-realization and societal welfare. For instance, a *brāhmaṇa* is expected to teach, perform rituals, and maintain spiritual purity; a

kṣatriya must protect and govern with justice; a *vaiśya* should engage in commerce and agriculture; and a *śūdra* must assist the higher *varṇas* through service. At the same time, each of these classes is expected to adhere to basic moral tenets like truthfulness (*satya*), non-violence (*ahimsā*), and charity (*dāna*), which cut across all divisions.

This tiered but interconnected system of *dharma* creates an ecosystem where each class contributes to the survival and flourishing of the other. Thus, *Manusmṛti* constructs a symbiotic model of unity, grounded in function rather than equality, but nonetheless aiming at an ordered and cooperative social whole.

Dharma and Social Equilibrium

According to the *Manusmṛti*, when individuals uphold their prescribed *dharma*, social harmony (*sāmājika śānti*) naturally follows. Conversely, the neglect or transgression of *dharma* leads to *adharmā*, which results in social chaos, disorder, and moral decline.

संकल्पमूलः कामो वै यज्ञाः सकल्पसंभवाः ।

व्रतानि यमधर्माश्च सर्वे संकल्पजाः स्मृताः ॥

“Where *dharma* is destroyed, destruction follows; where *dharma* is preserved, preservation follows. *Dharma*, therefore, should not be abandoned, lest the abandoned *dharma* abandon us².”

Here, the text emphasizes the reciprocal nature of *dharma* just as individuals preserve *dharma*, *dharma* in turn preserves them and their communities. This is a powerful ideological device that internalizes social responsibility unity and survival are not enforced by fear of law but by a sacred duty to the collective order.

Dharma and Cosmic Order

In addition to its social implications, *dharma* is portrayed as an extension of the cosmic principle of *ṛta*, the universal law that governs the functioning of the universe. Just as planets follow their orbits and seasons their cycles, human beings must follow their *dharma*. Disruption in any part of this grand chain results in the collapse of the whole system, linking ethical life with cosmic balance. Thus, social unity in *Manusmṛti* is not simply a political or administrative concern it is rooted in metaphysical order, moral causality, and spiritual responsibility.

The Inclusiveness of Sādhāraṇa Dharma

While the *Manusmṛti* advocates role-specific duties, it also mentions *sādhāraṇa dharma* the general moral obligations binding on all individuals regardless of class or status. These include:

- *Ahimsā* (non-violence)
- *Satya* (truthfulness)
- *Asteva* (non-stealing)
- *Śauca* (cleanliness/purity)
- *Indriya-nigraha* (sense-control)

These virtues are intended to create a moral baseline across society, ensuring that despite differences in function, all individuals share a common ethical platform, thereby reinforcing social trust and moral unity. In essence, the *Manusmṛti* presents *dharma* as a multi-layered doctrine individual and social, religious and ethical, functional and spiritual. It is this central concept that holds society together in *Manusmṛti's* vision. *Dharma* ensures that

individuals act not out of selfish desire, but in accordance with a higher law that serves the well-being of all. In this way, the *Manusmṛti* establishes dharma as the social glue that maintains harmony, cooperation, and collective endurance, especially in times of change and moral uncertainty.

III. The Varṇa System: A Functional Vision of Unity

Manusmṛti's varṇa system divides society into four classes: *Brāhmaṇa* (priests), *Kṣatriya* (warriors), *Vaiśya* (merchants), and *Śūdra* (servants). While modern readers often interpret this as rigid casteism, *Manusmṛti*'s original context presents it more as a division of functions and responsibilities necessary for maintaining the social order. Manu writes-

“To ensure the prosperity of all beings, He (the Creator) created the *brāhmaṇa* from His mouth, the *kṣatriya* from His arms, the *vaiśya* from His thighs, and the *śūdra* from His feet³.”

The metaphorical association with body parts signifies not inferiority or superiority, but interdependence just as all limbs are essential to the body, all varṇas are indispensable to society.

“By fulfilling their respective duties without jealousy or interference, the four varṇas uphold the whole world⁴.” Social unity, then, is achieved not by uniformity but through specialized cooperation, much like organs in a body working in tandem.

IV. Duties of the Householder and Community Integration

The *Manusmṛti* emphasizes the householder (*grhastha*) as the linchpin of societal functioning. The household stage sustains society economically, morally, and ritually. Manu declares-

“Of all the āśramas, the householder is the highest, for he supports the others⁵.”

A householder is enjoined to practice hospitality, charity (*dāna*), sacrifice (*vajña*), and earning through righteous means, all of which bind him to the larger society. *Manusmṛti* instructs:

“A guest must never be turned away; he must be honoured with food, water, and words of respect⁶.”

Such rituals foster trust, remove isolation, and promote a sense of belonging essential aspects of social unity.

V. Ethical Conduct: The Universal Path to Harmony

Beyond class-specific duties, *Manusmṛti* emphasizes universal ethical conduct applicable to all individuals. Manu writes:

“Speak the truth, practice *dharma*, control your senses, and be compassionate this is the way to mokṣa and social peace⁷.”

The cultivation of *satya* (truth), *ahimsā* (non-violence), *śauca* (cleanliness), and *dama* (self-restraint) is deemed necessary not just for spiritual liberation but for communal peace and interpersonal trust. These universal ethics serve as bridges across class, caste, and occupation, enabling the moral unity of all.

VI. Role of the King in Maintaining Unity

The *Manusmṛti* devotes an entire section to the responsibilities of the king, emphasizing that political authority must work to uphold *dharma* and social stability.

“The king should be impartial like *Dharma*, punishing evildoers and protecting the righteous, thereby maintaining harmony among all classes⁸.”

The king as the enforcer of *dharma* and justice, ensures that no one oversteps their duty or exploits the other. Justice and punishment are not merely retributive but restorative, aiming to reintegrate the offender into the moral and social fold. The king's duty extends beyond law enforcement he is the moral exemplar, whose personal conduct influences the ethical behaviour of his subjects. Further, the king is expected to consult with learned *Brāhmaṇas*, uphold scriptural guidance, and perform statecraft with fairness and compassion. A righteous ruler, guided by *dharmaśāstra*, becomes the keystone of social unity by preventing *adharmā* (disorder) and fostering collective welfare. In this view, governance is a sacred trust not a personal entitlement grounded in moral obligation and the welfare of all beings.

VII. Gender Roles and Domestic Harmony

One of the most debated aspects of the *Manusmṛti* in modern scholarship is its stance on gender roles, particularly its treatment of women within the domestic and social order. The text has been subject to considerable criticism for its patriarchal structure, wherein women's autonomy appears limited and their primary identity is closely tied to their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers. Yet, amidst this patriarchal framework, the *Manusmṛti* also acknowledges the vital role of women in sustaining social and familial harmony, thereby linking the idea of domestic stability with broader societal unity. In Manu asserts:

“Where women are honoured, the gods rejoice; where they are not, all acts become fruitless⁹.”

This verse is often cited to indicate that women's dignity and societal reverence are central to dharmic life. The *Manusmṛti* thus projects the home centred around the woman as the moral nucleus of society. It implies that no ritual, social duty, or religious merit can be fruitful if the domestic sphere, symbolized by the woman, is neglected or dishonoured. This can be interpreted as the text's recognition of the spiritual and cultural capital women bring to the household and by extension to society.

Women and the Family Unit: The Bedrock of Social Unity

The *Manusmṛti* consistently underscores the importance of family cohesion. A woman is often depicted as the guardian of household virtues (*grha-lakṣmī*) responsible for raising children, managing domestic affairs, upholding ritual purity, and supporting the spiritual aspirations of her husband. In *Manusmṛti* said:

“Women must be honoured and adorned by their fathers, brothers, husbands, and brothers-in-law, who desire their own welfare¹⁰.”

The implication is clear: the well-being of men is tied to the respectful treatment of women. By emphasizing this mutuality, *Manusmṛti* attempts to integrate gender harmony into the matrix of social unity. A home devoid of mutual respect becomes the seedbed of discord, which eventually spills into the broader social realm. Thus, domestic harmony is not a private matter alone but a public

good, a foundational requirement for social balance and unity.

The Role of Women in Religious and Social Continuity

Women are also assigned significant roles in religious continuity, especially through their capacity for motherhood and transmission of cultural values. Though restricted from Vedic learning and performance of sacrifices in most instances, their contribution to maintaining dharma through proper upbringing of children is emphasized. In *Manusmṛti*, it is said:

“The teacher is the image of Brahmā, the father of Prajāpati, and the mother of the earth. Therefore, they are to be worshipped like the gods¹¹.”

While men are often credited as spiritual teachers, the mother is exalted as a moral guide and an object of reverence. This sanctification of the maternal role aligns with the idea that mothers are the primary transmitters of moral values, emotional balance, and spiritual impressions (*saṃskāras*). In a society where oral tradition and family centred rituals were central to cultural preservation, women’s role in sustaining such continuity was not only valued but deemed essential for the collective dharmic order.

Limitations and Patriarchal Constraints

Despite the passages that seem to honour and elevate women, *Manusmṛti* remains deeply embedded in a patriarchal worldview. *Manusmṛti* states:

“A woman must never be independent her father protects her in childhood, her husband in youth, and her sons in old age¹².”

Such verses severely limit a woman’s autonomy and agency, placing her perpetually under male guardianship. Her education, spiritual access, and property rights are significantly curtailed compared to men. While her role is venerated, it is veneration within limitation a sacred yet subservient position. This paradox between idealization and restriction typifies much of ancient patriarchal thought and requires careful interpretation in contemporary discussions on gender and justice.

Relevance in the Context of Social Unity

From the perspective of social unity, *Manusmṛti* constructs a model where the home acts as the seedbed of order, and the woman, as the central figure of the home, becomes a symbol of moral and ritual integrity. When family life is stable and dharma is preserved in the domestic sphere, it radiates outward into society at large. This vision of unity is inherently gendered, relying on complementarity rather than equality. Unity is imagined not through identical roles for men and women but through cooperative specialization men as providers and protectors, women as nurturers and moral guides.

In today’s egalitarian frameworks, such ideas demand critical reevaluation and ethical reinterpretation. While the *Manusmṛti*’s emphasis on respect for women and domestic harmony remains a valuable insight, its structural limitations on women’s independence, rights, and civic participation must be scrutinized and revised through modern lenses of gender equity and human dignity.

Towards a Balanced Understanding

A balanced interpretation of *Manusmṛti* requires acknowledging both its affirmative and regressive elements. On

one hand, the text upholds the sacredness of the feminine, viewing the family unit as the nucleus of all social order, and highlighting mutual respect as a key to household and societal peace. On the other hand, it systemically confines women’s roles, which reflects the limitations of its time.

However, in its deeper philosophical currents, the *Manusmṛti* recognizes that no society can achieve harmony unless there is dignity and balance in the gender equation. Modern social thinkers and reformers have thus drawn upon these selectively progressive ideas to reclaim dharmic values in more egalitarian terms, seeking to retain the essence of domestic harmony while rejecting patriarchal domination.

VIII. Conflict Resolution and Law: Tools for Social Balance

Manu lays out a structured legal system to resolve disputes between individuals and groups. Laws related to property, inheritance, contracts, and punishment are intended to reduce friction and restore balance.

“The king should resolve disputes with justice, following dharma, testimony, custom, and royal edicts¹³.”

By promoting predictable and impartial justice, the *Manusmṛti* minimizes the risk of communal strife and builds social trust. Conflict resolution is not only a legal necessity but a social imperative in *Manusmṛti*’s worldview. The legal code serves as a tool to uphold not just order, but harmony rooted in righteousness. The text also encourages arbitration and restitution over vengeance, reinforcing the idea that justice should heal rather than divide. Legal procedures are framed to reflect both the spiritual and temporal dimensions of justice, making the court an extension of *dharma* itself. This integrated legal vision contributes to the text’s broader project of sustaining social unity through ethical jurisprudence.

IX. Criticisms and Contemporary Relevance

Many parts of *Manusmṛti* are understandably contentious, particularly those concerning untouchability, harsh punishments, and gender discrimination. However, if one reads beyond these, there are genuine efforts within the text to weave a harmonious and moral society, guided by duty and ethical interdependence.

Today as we seek unity amid diversity, *Manusmṛti*’s insistence on functional interdependence, moral behaviour rule of law and *dharma* centred leadership offers a framework albeit in need of reinterpretation for fostering social cohesion. The text invites us to reflect on the underlying intent behind its rigid prescriptions a desire to prevent social chaos through structured obligation and ethical discipline.

Rather than dismissing the entire text, contemporary readers and scholars are called to engage in a critical hermeneutics distilling its universal values from its temporal biases. In doing so, *Manusmṛti* can be revisited not as a dogmatic relic, but as a historical dialogue partner in our evolving understanding of justice, unity and ethical governance.

Conclusion

The *Manusmṛti*, when examined contextually and critically, transcends its identity as a mere ancient legal code and emerges as a philosophical treatise on social

organization, ethical behaviour, and moral responsibility. While the text reflects the stratified realities of its time imbued with hierarchical norms and patriarchal structures it nonetheless reveals a profound concern for social cohesion, interdependence, and orderly governance.

At its core, the *Manusmṛti* articulates a vision of society as an interwoven fabric, where every individual and group functions not in isolation, but as part of a cosmic and civic whole. This is most evident in its doctrine of *dharma* a moral compass that guides conduct, sustains order, and nurtures social harmony. Rather than enforcing unity through coercion or homogenization, the *Manusmṛti* emphasizes internalized discipline (*niyama*), mutual respect (*satkāra*), and voluntary observance of duty (*svadharmā*) as mechanisms for cultivating unity.

Moreover, the text's repeated stress on reciprocal duties between the ruler and the ruled, teacher and student, husband and wife, and among castes illustrates a nuanced understanding of functional interdependence albeit within the *varṇa-āśrama* framework. If stripped of its discriminatory applications, this emphasis on cooperative balance mirrors modern ideas of civic responsibility, division of labour, and ethical pluralism.

However, it is equally critical to acknowledge that the *Manusmṛti* includes verses that are incompatible with present-day democratic, egalitarian, and human rights-based values. Elements that justify caste discrimination, gender inequality, and authoritarian punishments must be firmly rejected or treated as contextually bound relics of a particular socio-historical moment. As scholars like P.V. Kane and B.K. Sharma have suggested, we must distinguish between the eternal dharma (*sanātandharma*) that promotes ethical living and the temporal rules (*yugadharmā*) that were suited to the age in which the text was composed.

In today's fragmented world marked by rising social polarization, identity-based politics, and ethical confusion the *Manusmṛti* invites us to reexamine the role of shared moral frameworks in fostering social integration. While the literal applications of its injunctions may no longer be viable, its underlying insights into collective responsibility, lawful coexistence, and value-centred leadership remain pertinent. The emphasis on truthfulness (*satya*), compassion (*dayā*), non-violence (*ahimsā*), and duty (*kartavya*) as foundational virtues offers a moral vocabulary that can enrich modern civic life.

Therefore, a hermeneutic approach one that critically interprets and re-contextualizes ancient wisdom allows us to draw from the *Manusmṛti* not to replicate the past, but to illuminate pathways for a more integrated, ethical, and spiritually aware society. In this sense, the *Manusmṛti*, far from being a relic, becomes a mirror through which we can reflect on our contemporary values, social structures, and the eternal quest for unity amidst diversity.

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Footnotes

1. Manusmṛti 1.108.
2. Ibid. 2.3.
3. Ibid. 1.88-91.
4. Ibid. 1.94.
5. Ibid. 3.77.
6. Ibid. 3.56.
7. Ibid. 6.92.
8. Ibid. 7.17.
9. Ibid. 3.56.
10. Ibid. 9.11.
11. Ibid. 2.145.
12. Ibid. 9.2.
13. Ibid. 8.12.