

A.R. TRIPATHI

THE CONCEPT OF SHUDRAS IN MANU SMRITI:
A REAPPRAISAL

Manu Smriti comprises codes of Hindu life. They are based on the teachings of Vedas. Manu in the second chapter of *Manu Smriti* proclaims that 'whatsoever *dharma* was proclaimed by Manu for anyone, that is all directed in Vedas'¹. Further, he says that 'Veda is the supreme authority'². Now it is clear that the content of *Manu Smriti* has its base in *Vedas*. While propounding the doctrine of *Chaturvarna* Manu takes the help of the ninetieth Hymn of the tenth Mandal of *Rig-Veda* known as *Purusha Sukta*. It belongs to the later Vedic period. It is a theory of the origin of universe. While giving the origin of *Chaturvarna* it says: 'Brahmin was his mouth, Rajanya was made by his thighs and Shudra sprang from his feet'. This theory of the origin of *Chaturvarna* has been accepted by *Kathaka Samhita* (XXXI, 2), *Matrayani Samhita* (III, 1, 1, 10), *Apastamba Dharma Sutra* (*Prasna* 1, *Patala* 1, *Khanda* 1, 4-5 Sutra) and *Satapatha Brahmana* (III, 1, 1, 10). Manu presents a similar view by saying that 'For the prosperity of the world the Creator from his mouth, arm, thigh and feet created the Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra'³. Here two things have to be analysed, first, early Vedic text does not mention the concept of *Chaturvarna*. *Satapatha Brahmana* (II.1.4.11) and *Taittiriya Brahmana*

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1. *Manu Smriti* - 7/II.
 2. *Manu Smriti*- 13/II.
 3. *Manu Smriti*- 31/I.

(III, 12 9.2) both speak of the creation of the three *Varnas* only. They do not speak of the creation of *Shudras* as a separate *Varna*. *Atharva Veda* (IV 6.1; XV. 8.1) mentions only three *varnas*. Even in *Rig-Veda* *Shudras* have not been mentioned separately. But the later Vedic text mentions this word quite often. It shows that the concept of *Shudra* was originated during the later part of the Vedic period. Second thing is that the fourth caste known as *Shudra* was created for the prosperity of the world. In fact *Smritis* have prescribed injunctions (*Vidhi*) and prohibitions (*Nishedha*) keeping in mind a particular social surrounding. The society kept on changing from time to time and new *Smritis* have to be compiled keeping in view the new changes taking place in the society. The old Vedic concept of *Trivarna* lost its relevance and it was thought necessary to have the fourth *Varna*. Now the question arises what were the reasons for creating a new caste of *Shudras*? The critical analysis of the code of conduct prescribed in *Manu Smriti* for four *Varnas* reveals that it was essentially based on the *Dharma* which emphasises on leading a life of righteousness. *Manu* says ‘*Dharma* slain verily slays, but *Dharma* protected protects; therefore *Dharma* is not to be injured. The injured *Dharma* may slay us’⁴. The introduction of caste system was an effort to develop a society free of vices by regulating its conduct. The actions that are rational are considered as virtues, and vices are opposite of virtues. Caste system introduced by *Manu* is not just a social structure but it was meant to create a society in accordance with *Dharma*. Duties were assigned for each and every caste for the upliftment of the society. It was an ethical order aiming at making everyone a perfect one by following the path of *Svadharmas*. Therefore no one was allowed to meddle with the assigned *Dharma*. People of three upper classes causing omission of prescribed duties were considered as *Adharmika* (irreligious) one or *Vrishala* (a person causing injury to *Dharma*). *Manu* states, ‘Lord *Dharma* is a bull and God takes one who injures him to be an outcaste or *Vrishala*’⁵. The word *Vrishala* has been derived from the root *Vrish* with *alach* as suffix meaning a ‘*Shudra*’. As such it is clear that people of three upper classes harming *Dharma* were put under the category of *Shudra*. It

4. *Manu Smriti*- 15/VIII.

5. *Manu Smriti*- 16/VIII

was the denial of duties, lacking faith in spiritual life, misconduct and getting attached to sensual life, which brought the downfall of *Brahmins* and *Kshatriyas* to the fourth *Varna*.

Indian tradition gave more value to intellectual strength than the physical strength of arms. It was acquired only by people having perfect control over their sense organs. They are the people who were possessing the super ability of knowing the Brahman and were devoted to truth and morality. It was the class of Brahmins – the priestly caste. This caste was worshipped as god because of its spiritual perfection. The moral actions of a Brahmin should be inspired by inner conviction and not by outer compulsions. If a Brahmin misuses his abilities and gets involved in earthly comforts and happiness, surely he will lose his potentiality and will not be in position to pursue *Dharma*. Under these circumstances his downfall is sure. Manu states that ‘A Brahmin who does not study the Vedas is quenched like a fire in grass, to him the oblation to the god is not to be given, for one does not sacrifice on ashes’⁶. It is the *Shudra* alone who is to be excluded at god's feast where the Havya (oblation) is offered. It is a clear indication that Brahmins not observing their duties were treated like Shudras⁷. It can be proved with an example cited in *Manu smriti*. Shukalina who was the son of great sage Vasistha was a *Shudra*. He has been referred as the forefather of *Shudras*.

Brahmins were the controlling power of the society as they themselves were self-restrained and were free of common worldly shortcomings. Society gave them abundant leisure as they were engrossed in deep meditation and higher thoughts. But if they possess anger, malice, passion, retaliation, intolerance and narrow-mindedness no more they can be treated as Brahmins. Manu clears this doubt by stating, ‘One desirous to bring his family to eminence should ever form relation with the best and should avoid the low’⁸. The virtuous one is he who knows and follows his duties and he should be considered as

6. *Manu Smriti*- 168/III.

7. *Shudrapitarah Sukalino Vashisthasya Putrah*

Govindraj comm. on *Manu Smriti*- 185/IV.

Sukalaino Vasisthasutah shudranampujyasmrita

Ramchandra comm. on *Manu Smriti*- 158 /IV.

8. *Manu Smriti*- 244/IV.

the best. The company of a best man is always needed. Even a Brahmin having a bad company may lose his status. Manu says that 'A Brahmin who resorts to the best and avoids the low, reaches eminence and if he does contrary to this, he reaches the state of *Shudra*'⁹. It indicates that even a Brahmin not pursuing the path of truth and rectitude can be treated as *Shudra*. Brahminhood represents the highest of which human nature is capable. The lack of that highness may easily convert a Brahmin to a *shudra*. At the same time a Brahmin has to make the proper use of his eminence. If he is departing from his class duties he has no right to be called as Brahmin. It has been mentioned in *Manu Smriti* that 'A priest living as cowherd, trader, workman, actor, servant and money lender, one should treat him like a *Shudra*'¹⁰. A Brahmin doing other jobs proves that he is more concerned about his livelihood leaving behind his rare natural ability and thus he becomes *Shudra*.

Manu's concept of *Dharma* was inspired by transcendental ideals and Brahmins were the people who were practising it. He says that 'Wealth, kindred, age, sects, knowledge as the fifth; those are the causes of respect, but the most important is the last one'¹¹. Brahmins were respected because of their knowledge. But if they do not possess knowledge they could be known as *Shudras*. According to Manu 'A Brahmin falls at once through selling meat, lac and salt, in the course of three days he becomes *Shudra* through selling milk'¹². Thus it is amply clear that Brahmins not observing their prescribed duties were placed under the category of *Shudras*.

Kshatriyas, the ruling class, were placed second in the social order presented by Manu. They were allotted the work of preserving the justice and order in the society. They too had to practise deeper penance by controlling their senses. They also have to contain evils by inflicting punishment. While describing the duties of a king Manu says that 'A king should protect everyone according to justice and should also receive the *vedic* initiations'¹³.

9. *Manu Smriti*- 245/IV.

10. *Manu Smriti*- 102/VIII.

11. *Manu Smriti*- 136/II.

12. *Manu Smriti*- 92/X.

13. *Manu Smriti*- 2/VII.

Kings are like parents to society and subjects are the king's children. A king should rule them with justice and impartiality. He should also take care of their welfare. The king is the centre of all types of resources. He has to increase them and has to give them back to the community for its good. But if he fails to do so, his downfall is inevitable. While putting forth the code of conduct for kings, Manu says that 'The fame of a king who does so, though he lives by gleaning is spread in the world like a drop of oil on the water, but if he does the contrary to it that may congeal in the world like a drop of *Ghee* (clarified butter) in the water' ¹⁴. A sinful king had no right to be considered as *Kshatriya* and may be treated as *Shudra*. Manu has pointed out very clearly the degradation of *Kshatriya* as a *Shudra*. He says that, 'Gradually through the loss of sacred ceremonies and by violating the rules ordained by Brahmins a *Kshatriya* reaches the condition of a *Shudra*' ¹⁵. The families of *Paundrakas*, *Odras*, *Dravidas*, *Kambojas*, *Yavanas*, *Cakas*, *Paradas*, *Pahlavas*, *Kiratas*, *Daradas* and *Khacas* and many others were *Kshatriyas* but age by age they ascend by virtue of austerity and lofty seed to high position but descend by their sinful conduct to the condition of *Vrsalas* ¹⁶ (the status of *Shudra*).

Kshatriyas were given godship and they had authority over the people as long as they acted as the guardian of law. But if they start sucking the blood of their people their crownship may be flung away. Manu has cited many references of different kings who were considered as *Shudra* kings. Brahmins were prohibited to stay in the kingdom ruled by a *Shudra* king. 'A Brahmin may not dwell in the kingdom of a *Shudra* king, nor in one full of unrighteous people' ¹⁷. It indicates that the kings those were not practising the righteousness were known as *Shudra* kings. In *Manu Smriti* there is a reference of many well known kings who had fallen from their status and were known as *Shudras*. 'Vena was ruined by his bad conduct and also king Nahusha, Sudas Pajavana, Sumukha and Nemi' ¹⁸. These are the names of the kings

14. *Manu Smriti*- 33-34/VII.

15. *Manu Smriti*- 43/X.

16. *Manu Smriti*- 42,44/X.

17. *Manu Smriti*- 61/IV.

18. *Manu Smriti*- 41/VII.

who were relegated to the position of *Shudras* because of their unrighteousness. The story of king Vena has also been described in *Harivamsa Purana*. Vena was the king of Atri race and was the grandson of Kala (the god of death). Owing to the taint derived from his maternal grandfather he threw his duties behind his back and started to establish an irreligious system of conduct. He also tried to change the ordinances of *Vedas* and was engaged in to all types of lawlessness. The proud king was cursed by *rishis* and became the founder of the race of Nishadas and Dhivaras. In *Manu Smriti* (10/X) the name of Vena appeared as mixed caste. The next king who received the status of *Shudra* was Nahusha, the grandson of Pururavas. The story of Nahusha has been mentioned twice in *Mahabharata*, once in *Vana Parva* and again in *Udyoga Parva*. King Nahusha was leading a virtuous life but after getting the position of Indra (the king of gods) he was addicted to amusement and sensual pleasure and even aspired for Indrani, the wife of Indra. His understanding was enveloped in darkness resulting his downfall. The name of Sudas Paijavana as a *Shudra* has been mentioned in *Mahabharata*, *Shanti Parva* (Verse 38-40, Chapter 60). This name can also be seen in *Rigveda*¹⁹. Yaska in his *Nirukta* has mentioned this name²⁰. *Vishnu Purana* speaks of this name as the descendant of king Sagar²¹. Sudas was a king and his coronation ceremony was performed by Vasistha, a great sage. Sudas was a mighty king but because of his unlawful conflict with Vasistha, a righteous person, he attained the position of *Shudra*. The last episode recorded in *Manu Smriti* where a king was thrown to the status of *Shudra* is of king Nemi. The details of this story is related in *Vishnu Purana*. This king also lost his modesty and was degraded to low caste. These are the cases of the kings of ruling caste who lost their position and were probably treated as *Shudras*. They were mostly cursed by *Rishis* for their immorality. The study of these cases reveals that though these kings were the descendants of high families, but because of their immoral conduct they were treated as *Shudras*. Curse was just a type of punishment inflicted on them. It is a history of conflict

19. R. V., VII, 18, 23, 25.

20. *Nirukta* - ii-24

21. *Vishnu Purana* - Chapter IV

between morality and immorality. It helps to understand as to how *Kshatriyas* were degraded from second to fourth *Varna* of *Shudra*.

The degradation was not just limited to Brahmins and *Kshatriyas*. A man of any caste not observing his duties may fall from his caste. Manu proclaims that 'Better one's own duties incomplete than those of another well performed, for he who lives by the duties of another falls from caste at once'²². The specific duties were allotted to different *Varnas* for bringing a harmony and co-operation in the society. In fact, the classification of the duties aimed at bringing an integration between different castes. As such anyone who deviates from his assigned duties may harm the whole society. Expulsion of such a person becomes must. Manu says, 'He, who does not stand for morning and evening rituals, is to be expelled like a *Shudra* from every ceremony of the twice born (*Dvija*)'²³. The word *Dvija* has been used for Brahmins, *Kshatriyas* and *Vaishyas*. Brahmins being the guardian of the society had the power to degrade other two castes, but they too could be degraded by the society and the king. Manu accepts it by saying that 'Ignobility, selfishness, savageness, laziness, neglecting the prescribed duties reveal here among men, a man of impure origin'²⁴. 'The realm where these caste-debasing mixtures are produced, goes right quickly to destruction'²⁵. The people of impure origin were regarded as *Anarya* or *Shudra*. The word *Anarya* does not mean that they were of different tribe. Any person not following the high treatises of Law can be considered as *Anarya*. Manu says that 'If a *Kshatriya* or *Vaishya* committing adultery with a women of Brahmin caste who is guarded should be punished like a *Shudra*'²⁶. Here it is clear that there is no difference between the meaning of words *Anarya* and *Shudra*.

In spite of these codes prescribed for three upper classes there were several codes of conduct which were essential for each and every caste failing to that a person of any caste may receive downfall to low caste and may be regarded as *Shudra*. Manu says that 'A twice born man who not having gone over to *Vedas* and makes diligence in other

22. *Manu Smriti*- 97/X.

23. *Manu Smriti*- 103/II.

24. *Manu Smriti*- 58/X.

25. *Manu Smriti*- 61/X.

26. *Manu Smriti*- 377/VIII.

matters attains the condition of *Shudras* along with his family members' ²⁷. In fact *Vedas* were the guideline for an ideal life. A person not reading the *Vedas* certainly may move away from those ideals and may be misfit for three upper classes. It has been said in M.S that 'A twice born man marrying a casteless lady out of infatuation surely brings quickly his family and decendants to the status of *Shudras*' ²⁸. 'A Brahmin having taken a *Shudra* woman to his bed goes to the lower course, having begotten on her a son, he is surely deprived of his Brahminhood' ²⁹. A blameless offspring may only arise from a blameless marriage. A blamable offspring may not have all those qualities needed for the welfare of any caste and cannot be accommodated under any caste. Naturally, he will fall under the category of *Shudra*. This class of people may deviate from their prescribed duties because of their impure and sinful nature. *Shudras* were the part of the mixed castes produced by the adultery on the part of the pure caste and by marrying those who ought not to be married. It was itself the violation of the code of conduct. These people were refused for *Upanayana* (a ceremony needed for twice born for entering in *Gurukula*) which played a very important role in Indo-Aryan society. The purpose of *Upanayana* was to initiate a *Brahmacharin* to the study of *Vedas* starting with *Gayatri Mantra* by *Acharya*. The people who could not understand the validity of this *Samskara* because of their sinful nature were deprived of it. Brahmins were prohibited to officiate in the *Upanayana* of a *Shudra*. *Manu* lays down that 'A class of a Brahmins are to be deemed unworthy to partake of oblations to the gods and manes who instruct pupils of *Shudra* caste' ³⁰. The denial of the *Upanayana* by the Brahmins was on legal and religious ground and perhaps the high intellectual tradition of the society needed that. *Manu* says that 'A good seed alone when sown in good land is successfully raised, so the son alone who is born of a noble woman deserves complete initiation' ³¹. Seed sown in poor land is destroyed within that very land ³². So the

27. *Manu Smriti*- 168/II.

28. *Manu Smriti*- 15/III.

29. *Manu Smriti*- 156-157/III.

30. *Manu Smriti*- 156-157/III.

31. *Manu Smriti*- 69/X.

32. *Manu Smriti*- 71/X.

success of initiation depended on the mental ability of a pupil which required noble birth. A teacher's effort will be futile while teaching an unworthy student. *Upanayana* had a spiritual significance and *Shudras* had no faith towards this type of spirituality.

Therefore, the performance of *Upanayana* was not needed for them. The denial of *Upanayana* became a real judging point between three upper castes and *Shudras*. The disparity which has been mentioned in *Manu Smriti* against *Shudras* may be treated as punishment inflicted on them for their upliftment.

It is a fact that because of their incapacities *Shudras* were subjected to innumerable ignominies, but at the same time they enjoyed a moderate social status. It was the duty of a householder to take care of even *Shudras*. While mentioning the duties of householders Manu says that 'If even *Vaishya* or *Shudra* come to the house as guests, one should give them food with the servants with kindness' ³³.

It may be pointed out that *Vaishyas* and *Shudras* were given equal treatment. Both of them had equal right to be entertained. It is an earnest duty of a householder to offer food first to the guest even if he is of a low case. Manu advises that, 'A husband and wife should eat their food only after offering food to Brahmins and servants' ³⁴. As far as social rights are concerned, the privileges assigned to Brahmins were many. But it does not mean that *Shudras* were without any pretension. The social Law presented in M.S. does not discriminate between a Brahmin and *Shudra*. While determining punishment for killing a *Shudra* Manu says that, 'The slayer of a *Shudra* should practise exactly all those observances prescribed for other three castes for six months or he may give to a priest ten white cows and a bull' ³⁵. Manu has suggested *Shudras* to serve Brahmins due to certain reasons. He says that 'A *Shudra* desiring some means of subsistence may serve *Kshatriya*. *Shudra* anxious to support his life may do so by serving a wealthy *Vaishya* not for duty sake but to gain property, whereas while serving a Brahmins he gets both' ³⁶. This statement proves that *Shudra*

33. *Manu Smriti*- 112/III.

34. *Manu Smriti*- 111/III.

35. *Manu Smriti*- 130/XI.

36. *Manu Smriti*- 121/X.

had right to gain property for their own sake. Serving a Brahmin gave them opportunity to receive knowledge and to improve their conduct. Indian tradition always has given chance to sinful persons to improve themselves and an improved one has always been considered a virtuous one. Manu states that any person even of a low caste possessing virtues and knowledge had right to instruct others. 'A faithful man may receive pure knowledge even from a low caste man, the highest virtues from the lowest; a jewel of a women even from a bad family'³⁷. The treatment given to *Shudras* in M.S. was not one sided. Manu has followed the old Hindu theory of making everyone an ideal one for forming a harmonious society. Though *Shudras* were ranked lowest, even then they were given ample opportunity for improving their status. Manu says that 'He who is born of a noble man by an ignoble women might by means of his good qualities become noble, while he who is born of an ignoble man by a noble women remains ignoble'³⁸. It indicates that in spite of low birth one may improve the status by good deeds. It also has been mentioned that 'A *Shudra* attains Brahminship and a Brahmin may attain Shudraship. This may also happen with the offspring of *Kshatriya* and *Vaishyas*'³⁹. The real meaning of Brahminhood was to possess the spirituality and virtues. If a *Shudra* attains knowledge and understands the real nature of *Dharma*, no more he will be considered as *Shudra*. Manu states that 'Those *Shudras* who are desirous of performing meritorious acts (*Dharma*), know the rules of right, and follow the custom of good, obtain praise'⁴⁰. The criteria for obtaining the higher status were to follow the ideals laid down for a virtuous life. The rules like to 'Speak truth, not to steal, not to be angry, to restrain the senses and to be pure were declared by Manu for all four castes'⁴¹. But these virtues cannot be obtained by a *Shudra* in a single generation. Manu says tat 'If a caste produced from a Brahmin by a *Shudra* women keeps reproducing itself by a noble marriage, this ignoble attains a noble family at the seventh union'⁴². If a *Shudra* woman

37. *Manu Smriti*- 238/II.

38. *Manu Smriti* - 67/X.

39. *Manu Smriti* - 65/X.

40. *Manu Smriti* - 127/X.

41. *Manu Smriti* - 63/X.

42. *Manu Smriti* - 64/X.

marries a Brahmin and her daughter does the same and so on to the seventh generation, this last generation acquires Brahminship. It was a process of transformation of the original character of *Shudras* towards good moral character. The Shudrahood may change to Brahminhood which appears to be an universal rule in Hindu society. Here it can be said that Hindu way of life was governed by the concept of moral action. The formation of different caste was just an effort to classify the moral actions according to the requirement of society. It was a bridge to cover the gap between an individual and society. The determination of caste basing on birth makes it easy for a person to know about the exact nature of his duties. The social order presented by Manu is totally based on this very theory. Shudras being the perverted group of people needed certain reformations. That is why they were put in a separate group and were given chance to improve themselves.

Summing up the matter discussed in the paper, it may be said that Manu accepted the doctrine of *Chaturvarna* (the four castes) as propounded during the later Vedic period. The fourth caste, referred to as *Shudra* was created keeping certain logical points in view. Those sections of the people belonging to upper three castes who failed to perform the duties assigned to their respective castes and could not adhere to the codes of conduct prescribed for them were amalgamated to form a separate caste, called '*Shudra*'. It became necessary to allot them jobs according to their capability. Certain codes were also prescribed for them. Nevertheless, it needs to be emphasized in no uncertain terms that they too enjoyed a social life befitting to their calibre. They were given all the opportunities for their mental upliftment to enable them to develop themselves into ideal human beings by acquiring high level of morality. Once they succeeded in changing themselves in the aforesaid manner, they could attain even Brahminhood. They were given a chance to become Brahmins who were considered superior to all other social groups. It is abundantly clear that the caste system in the ancient Hindu society was not so rigid as it is made out to be. It was based on strict codes of conduct and yet it allowed certain amount of flexibility. This philosophy underlying the caste system must not be lost sight of while analysing Manu's concept of *Shudras* in his monumental treatise.

