Review

Nithin Sridhar's Chatuh Shloki Manusmrti: Tradition, Authority, and the Fourfold Framework

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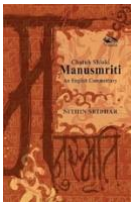
Editor's Note:

This is an extremely well-informed critical review of the smṛti text subtly weaving in the conditions of readership and challenges of the same in the contemporary era. The review essay succinctly points out that the endeavour by Sridhar has been to initiate the interested readers into a careful reading of this śāstra text, abiding by the parameters necessary for doing so. The essay touches upon the recent controversy which embroiled Manusmrti, sharply pointing out the efficacy of Sridhar's decision on the four verses containing the 'philosophical architecture' of the Manusaṃhitā in its embryonic form, and thus projecting a futuristic vision of a full scale bhāṣya of the text.



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After passing through the "Amrit Kaal" of independence, whether for economic or political reasons, Indian society now appears, from a worldly or empirical standpoint, to be deeply engaged in the search for "best practices." In intellectual discourse, this tendency is often described as an exploration of civilisational self-recovery. The aspiration to free ourselves from the influence of the colonial period in the sphere of knowledge is not without basis, for the history of learning in India is *anādi*, its origin untraceable and therefore not bounded by a determinate end. Such a tradition does not merely

belong to antiquity; it continually enables human intelligence to transcend the limits of time and place.

The book under present discussion, *Chatushloki Manusmriti* by Nithin Sridhar, represents one such exploration of civilisational recovery and of social "best practices," and may be regarded as a commendable endeavour in that direction. The work presents the subject matter of the entire *Manusmriti* to new readers through an analysis of its first four verses and through a determination of the *anubandha chatushtaya*, the fourfold framework that defines the scope and purpose of a śāstric text. It may be inferred that one of its aims is to respond, at least in part, to the collective trauma associated with the *Manusmriti* in public memory, recalling, for instance, the public burning of the text in open streets. However, since every branch of Indian knowledge and its rightful domain is traditionally established through the framework of the *anubandha chatushtaya*, it would be appropriate to situate our discussion of this work within that very structure.

Not all forms of knowledge are meant for everyone. Although this statement may initially sound somewhat undemocratic, its essential emphasis lies on the cultivation of preparedness through disciplined engagement. The reason, once again, is the previously mentioned conditioning of space and time. Knowledge that is *pauruṣeya* is composed within a specific historical and cultural context. Therefore, only one who is properly qualified within that particular framework can truly grasp its inner purport. Does this then imply that a text composed two thousand years ago confers no right of access upon present readers? If such a question arises, the answer is simple: it does, and certainly so, but only upon the fulfilment of certain prior conditions.

Beyond reverence and curiosity, there remains another fundamental requirement in becoming an *adhikārī*, a qualified recipient. One must rise above certain deeply embedded internal conditionings and render oneself receptive. A striking example appears in the *Praśna*

Upaniṣad, where even accomplished seekers who had completed their Vedic studies were required to dwell for a full year in austerity and disciplined practice under the sage Pippalāda before their questions were answered. In the case of the *Manusmriti*, therefore, the primary qualification of the reader is familiarity with what may be termed a "muni consciousness," and second, a disposition of *śraddhā* toward dharma. The term *śraddhā* should not be mistaken for mere respect; its Sanskrit sense is closer to an inward offering of the heart and intellect before the subject in question. Indeed, the dialectical traditions of Indian *āstika* thought teach us to transcend the limitations of space and time. Where liberation is the ultimate aim rather than examination or certification, such a mode of study may well appear alien to contemporary sensibilities. This possibility must be acknowledged at the outset.

Nithin is aware that the readers of his book are not already acquainted with this "muni consciousness." Moreover, he consciously seeks to revive the discussion of the *Manusmriti* by moving against prevailing media narratives and reanimating the argument afresh. Among the components of the *anubandha chatushtaya* is *prayojana*, the purpose. After reading the work, one gains the impression that this is indeed Nithin's own purpose as an author. His intended readers, or *adhikārīs*, are not those who have studied the śāstras within a traditional *gurukula*, but rather millennials and members of Generation Z, and perhaps even the emerging Generation Alpha. Through awakening curiosity within them, he seeks to prepare them as potential recipients of the *Dharmaśāstra* tradition. In a broader sense, then, the receptors of this work consists of those who possess curiosity about Indian śāstric thought but lack access to traditional or institutional modes of study. For such readers, the fulfilment of curiosity regarding the *Dharmaśāstra* and entry into its intellectual domain may be regarded as their *prayojana*. If one were to question Nithin's own qualification to compose such a work, one may turn to the confession he offers in the preface at the very beginning of the book.

> "Before 2015, my engagement with Hindu textual tradition was limited to a few Vedantic texts and perhaps some secondary literature on miscellaneous aspects of Hindu dharma… It was in the aftermath of the Sabarimala temple entry issue in 2015–16… that I realised that the epistemological, ontological, ethical, theological, and teleological basis of much of Hindu beliefs and practices lie in the genre of texts called dharmaśāstras, with smṛtis at the core of it… Since then… I have kept going back to the dharmaśāstras to gain clarity and access to proper epistemic tools to understand the Hindu worldview and its practices." (xxxi)

This admission is significant. It reveals that the author's engagement with the *Manusmriti* does not emerge from inherited institutional authority, but from a sustained research-based encounter with questions concerning Hindu identity, socio-cultural practice, and normative thought. His *adhikāra*, therefore, is not grounded in the traditional *gurukula* mode but in intellectual inquiry prompted by contemporary socio-religious debates.

Further, in explaining his method, he clarifies:

> "In this section, I have adopted the traditional technique of bhāṣyas or commentaries which involves a detailed word-by-word examination of each of the verses… This methodology ensures that the present work, though contemporary, is well anchored in the textual tradition and hence, must be seen as a contextualisation and contemporisation of the teachings of the long dharmaśāstra tradition, rather than a new innovation." (xxxiv)

This methodological self-positioning is important. By consciously employing the *bhāṣya* mode, he attempts to situate himself within the

śāstric hermeneutic lineage even while addressing a modern readership.

Having examined the *adhikārī*, the *prayojana*, and their mutual interrelationship, it is now reasonable to turn to the *viṣaya*, the subject matter, and to analyse its relation to the remaining two faculties. However, before doing so, it is necessary to clarify the distinction between *pauruṣeya* and *apauruṣeya*, without which the categorisation of *śruti* and *smṛti* cannot be properly understood.

A śāstra is not studied in the same manner in which we ordinarily read a modern book. In contemporary or Western intellectual frameworks, a book is typically authored by a specific individual situated within a definite historical and geographical context, presenting a distinctive personal perspective on a particular subject. The structure of book–author–reader (and also publisher), does not adequately describe the mode of composition of Indian śāstric literature. A śāstra is not the product of an isolated individual; rather, it is the cumulative outcome of sustained reflection within a community dedicated to a particular branch of knowledge over generations. For this reason, specific authorial attribution is often absent. Even where compilation may have been undertaken by a particular person, authorship is frequently attributed not to an individual ego but to a lineage-consciousness.

The Purāṇic corpus provides a compelling illustration. Even in texts composed long after the historical Vyāsa, the name Vyāsadeva appears as author; yet this signifies less a biographical individual than what may be termed a Vyāsa-consciousness. In the foreword to the present volume, Bharat Gupta perceptively observes:

> "Hence, whereas the *Nicomachean Ethics* is a personal vision of Aristotle on ethical issues, the *Manusmrti* is the product of a school of scholars trained in preserving a tradition or sampradaya of ethics. Whereas Aristotle wished to be original and distinct from others in his

> vision, the śāstrakāras of *Manusmrti* only wished to further embellish a tradition. Whereas Aristotle was concerned with analysing, defining and prescribing eudaimonia or how to achieve uninterrupted happiness, the Indian codifiers were largely descriptive of how people had evolved patterns of ethical behaviour, and how these norms alter as time passes." (xxviii)

If such a framework is to be sustained, preservation becomes central. Within the traditional transmission of knowledge, the aim has always been to minimise diminution. It is precisely in recognition of the inevitability of some degree of loss that the distinction between *śruti* and *smṛti* occupies a crucial place in the Indian knowledge tradition. In the case of *śruti*, the claim is that alteration is minimal, even that its content remains unchanged across millennia. No such claim is made in the case of *smṛti* (nor is that its purpose).

Knowledge here is not conceived merely as a mental faculty of an individual; rather, it is understood as participation in a higher consciousness transmitted into human awareness. This conception itself stands in contrast to modern individualism. The source from which supreme knowledge is said to descend into human cognition is referred to, within the *smṛti* framework, as Brahmā. That which is attributed directly to Brahmā is *śruti*, where diminution is regarded as minimal; hence it is received as *āptavākya* and accepted as *śabda pramāṇa*. In the case of *smṛti*, however, knowledge does not descend directly but is received through lineage and transmission. The present author draws upon what may be described as a reservoir of collective memory; therefore, the text belongs to the category of *smṛti*.

In many verses of the *Manusaṃhitā*, Manu does not present Brahmā's words verbatim but offers interpretative exposition before the assembled sages. Manu, understood as embodying a realised human consciousness, instructs the sages who approach him seeking guidance in dharma. Although such instruction may be regarded as

āptopadeśa, it reaches us through historical transmission and is therefore not available in an unmediated form. Further, while grounded in the Veda, *smṛti* is not beyond the conditions of space and time. For this reason, it does not function as *śabda pramāṇa* in the same sense as *śruti*.

Within this dialogical setting, the sages approach Manu to inquire into the nature of dharma appropriate to the four varṇas, not religion in the modern sense, but context-sensitive normative order. The responses unfold across the twelve chapters of the *Manusaṃhitā*. Yet the essence of this teaching is encapsulated in the first four verses of the opening chapter, within which the *anubandha chatuṣṭaya* lies embedded. Nithin's work undertakes a detailed analysis of these four verses and, through them, presents the entire thematic architecture of the *Manusaṃhitā*.

The structure of the book itself reflects this intention. As the author explains:

> "This book is divided into two sections followed by appendices. The first section is the 'Introduction' which contains three chapters namely, 'Origination, transmission, and authorship of Manusmrti: Is the text a patchwork or a careful construction?', 'Place and function of smrtis and dharmaśāstra in Hindu worldview' and 'Decoding Manusmrti: Some pointers to make sense of dharmaśāstra texts.' … The second section is a commentary on the first four verses of Manusmrti that deal with anubandha catuştayam … In this section, I have adopted the traditional technique of bhāṣyas … This methodology ensures that the present work though contemporary, is well anchored in the textual tradition and hence, must be seen as a contextualisation and contemporisation of the teachings of the long dharmaśāstra tradition, rather than a new innovation." (xxxiii)

Three appendices supplement the main text, addressing the conception of varṇa, critical engagement with revisionist interpretations, and including a *stuti* dedicated to Svāyambhuva Manu along with translation.

The decision to focus on only four verses is not arbitrary. The author situates his work within an established textual convention of writing concentrated studies on foundational opening sections, such as the *Brahmasūtra-Catuḥsūtrī* or the *Catuḥślokī Bhāgavatam*, where a small number of verses are treated as containing the essence of an entire corpus. *Chatuh Shloki Manusmrti*, accordingly, presents itself as a continuation of that hermeneutic tradition.

The smṛti texts are fundamentally prescriptive teachings. Precisely because they are teachings, they are better approached through the triadic structure of upadeśa, upadeṣṭā and upadeśya, that is, instruction, instructor, and the one instructed, rather than primarily through the epistemological schema of pramāṇa, prameya and pramā. Nithin seeks to interpret the dharmaśāstras as śabda pramāṇa, and he provides substantial reasoning in support of this position. Yet in doing so, he renders śabda into the English word "word," a translation that risks narrowing the semantic and epistemic range of the original Sanskrit term. A similar compression is visible in the very verses with which Sridhar opens his preface, the ninth and tenth verses of the second chapter, which he translates as: "in all matters, these two do not deserve to be criticised, as it is out of these that dharma shone forth." The expression in question, amīmāṃsye, carries a meaning that far exceeds this rendering. Rooted in the term mīmāṃsā, which in the Indian philosophical tradition denotes systematic inquiry, interpretive investigation, and epistemic authority, amīmāṃsya does not merely mean that these texts should be spared criticism. It implies that they stand beyond the very mode of rational interrogation that mīmāṃsā represents, that they carry a self-validating, trans-rational authority. This is a theologically and epistemologically significant claim, and its

flattening into "do not deserve to be criticised" drains the passage of its intended doctrinal force. Since these are the verses Sridhar himself places at the threshold of the work, the translation difficulty is not peripheral; the reader encounters it at the very moment of entering the book. It may be more appropriate to consider the dharmaśāstras not strictly as śabda pramāṇa, but as śāstra pramāṇa, authoritative within a normative and pedagogical tradition rather than as an independent means of valid cognition in the same sense as śruti.

Chatuh Shloki Manusmrti is a work that succeeds on several counts. The decision to concentrate on only four verses, reading them as containing the entire philosophical architecture of the Manusaṃhitā in seed form, is not merely a rhetorical convenience but a genuine hermeneutic claim grounded in an established textual convention. It is a disciplined and pedagogically sound choice, and it gives the book a formal coherence that distinguishes it from more polemical engagements with the same text. The three introductory chapters, particularly the one offering practical guidance on how to read a dharmaśāstra, do real preparatory work for a reader who has never encountered this tradition. And by demonstrating that the Manusmriti possesses a carefully constructed internal framework, Sridhar makes it considerably harder to dismiss the text as a loose collection of social prescriptions, which is perhaps his most important contribution to the current public conversation around it.

The present volume may be seen as preparatory in nature. By adopting the *bhāṣya* method in analysing the first four verses, he signals a larger aspiration: to compose a full-scale commentary on the *Manusaṃhitā* in the near future. In that sense, this work not only reopens discussion on dharmaśāstra within contemporary Indian society but also lays the foundation for a more sustained and comprehensive engagement with the text.

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