

Course Title: *The Manusmriti: Text, Context, and Critique*

Level: Advanced High School / Introductory College

Duration: 14 Weeks (modular for trimester adaptation)

Format: 1–2 sessions per week (lecture + discussion)

Course Description

This course offers a critical introduction to the *Manusmriti* (also known as the *Laws of Manu*), a foundational but controversial Sanskrit legal text of ancient India. We will explore its historical context, philosophical content, and enduring influence on Indian society. Thematic focuses will include caste, gender, food practices, law, cosmology, and critiques by reformers and modern scholars.


Learning Objectives

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

- Understand and explain the historical and literary context of the *Manusmriti*
- Analyze key excerpts in translation (Sanskrit optional)
- Critically assess debates around caste, gender, and social order
- Engage with both traditional commentaries and modern critiques and understand how the text was received and understood throughout its history through the present, as well as in the present
- Draw connections and explore relevance/irrelevance between ancient legal codes and contemporary issues

Weekly Schedule

Week 1: Introduction to the Genre, Text, and its Context

- Introduction to the genre of Dharmashastra
- Origins and dating of the *Manusmriti*
- Place within Dharmashastra literature
- Key themes and goals of the course
- **Readings:**
 - Chapter 1 of Hindu Law (Oxford) (For lighter reading focus on pages 23-28)
 - For college students read the introduction of Olivelle's critical edition (pages 1-70)
- **Lecture Slides:**  Week 1: Introduction to the Genre, Text, and its Context

Week 2: Dharma and the Social Order

- Concept of Dharma in the *Manusmriti*
- Four stages of life (ashramas) and their duties
- Discuss the translation of *Dharma* and how not all English versions retain the term untranslated. Explain how to identify *Dharma* in translations, even when the word itself is not used
- Break down the discussion of Dharma in each chapter of the *Manusmriti*
 - CH 1: Origin of Dharma
 - CH 2: Dharma of the four Varnas
 - CH 3: Dharma of students and teachers
 - CH 4: Dharma of householders
 - CH 5: Dharma of purity, impurity, and dietary regulations, particularly concerning forbidden foods and conduct surrounding death
 - CH 6: Dharma of forest dwellers and renunciants
 - CH 7: Dharma of kings
 - CH 8: Law and civil procedure – Application of Dharma
 - CH 9: Dharma of Husband and Wife (women generally), Laws of Inheritance, Duties of a King (additional)
 - CH 10: Mixed castes (specifically how to categorize them) and their respective Dharma
 - CH 11: penance for sinning (going against the dharmic prescriptions)
 - CH 12: Dharma and Moksha (liberation)
- **Readings:**

- *Dharma: Studies in its Semantic, Cultural and Religious History*, edited by Patrick Olivelle
- Horsch, Paul. "From Creation Myth to World Law: The Early History of Dharma." In *Dharma: Studies in its Semantic, Cultural and Religious History*, edited by Patrick Olivelle (1-26)
 - Olivelle, Patrick. "The Semantic History of Dharma the Middle and Late Vedic Periods." In *Dharma: Studies in its Semantic, Cultural and Religious History*, edited by Patrick Olivelle (69-89)
 - Lariviere, Richard. "Dharmashastra, custom, 'Real Law', and 'Apocryphal' Smritis." In *Dharma: Studies in its Semantic, Cultural and Religious History*, edited by Patrick Olivelle (189-205)
- **Lecture Slides:** 📄 Week 2: Dharma and the Social Order

Week 3: Cosmology, Creation, and Authority

- Manu and the origin of the universe
- Mythic framing of authority and hierarchy
- **Readings:**
 - Manusmriti
 - CH 1
 - CH 12
- **Lecture Slides:** 📄 Week 3: Cosmology and Creation Myths

Week 4: Daily Life and Social Norms

- Occupations, clothing, and conduct
- Education and learning by caste
- **Readings:**
 - Manusmriti
 - CH 2
 - CH 3 (verses: 1-118, 122-223)
 - CH 4 (verses: 1-81, 92-98, 186-256)
- **Lecture Slides:** 📄 Week 4: Daily Life and Social Norms

Week 5: Food, Purity, and Pollution

- Rules on diet, ritual cleanliness, and impurity
- Food taboos and caste-related food restrictions
- Readings:

- Manusmriti
 - CH 3 (verses: 84-123, 224-230, 236-272)
 - CH 5 (verses 1-145)
- **Lecture Slides:** 📄 Week 5: Food, Purity, and Pollution

Week 6: Caste (Varna) System I: Origins and Ideology

- Four varnas and their roles
- The ideological justification of social hierarchy
- **Readings:**
 - Purusha Sukta (Rig Veda)
 - History prior to manu (not an explicit reading)
- **Lecture Slides:** 📄 Week 6: Caste (Varna) System I: Origins and Ideology

Week 7: Caste (Varna) System II: Discipline and Punishment

- Rules for inter-varna relations
- Laws and punishments based on caste
- Readings:
 - Manusmriti
 - CH 9 (verses: 371-378, 382-397, 410-420)
 - CH 10
- **Lecture Slides:** 📄 Week 7: Caste (Varna) System II: Discipline and Punishment

Week 8: Shudra and Dalits

- Exploration into the lives and experience of Shudra and Dalits
- Analyzing Caste themed films from Manu's perspective
- Movies: Pariyerum Perumal, Article 15, Lagaan (Pick any number of them)
- **Lecture Slides:** 📄 Week 8: Shudra and Dalits

Week 9: Gender and Women I: Roles and Prescriptions

- Women's duties in household and society
- Marriage and chastity
- **Readings:**
 - Manusmriti
 - CH 2 (re-read if helpful)
 - CH 3(re-read if helpful)

- CH 4 (re-read if helpful)
 - CH 5 (verses: 146-169)
 - Mirch Masala (movie)
- **Lecture Slides:** 📄 Week 9: Gender and Women I: Roles and Prescriptions

Week 10: Gender and Women II: Property and Autonomy

- Women's rights to inheritance and property
- Status of widows and female autonomy
- Readings:
 - Manusmriti
 - CH 8 (verses: 27-29, 203-205, 352-378)
 - CH 9 (verses: 1-25, 71-136, 143-148, 192-200)
- **Lecture Slides:** 📄 Week 10: Gender and Women II: Property and Autonomy

Week 11: Kingship and Governance

- Role of the king and the duties of rulers
- Power, justice, and taxation
- **Readings:**
 - Manusmriti
 - CH 7
- **Lecture Slides:** 📄 Week 11: Kingship and Governance

Week 12: Law and Justice

- Judicial procedures in the *Manusmṛiti*
- Evidence, oaths, and punishments
- **Readings:**
 - Manusmriti
 - CH 8
- **Lecture Slides:** 📄 Week 12: Law and Justice

Week 13: Modern Reception and Critique

- Ambedkar and anti-caste readings
- Feminist responses and social reform movements
- Readings:
 - Annihilation of Caste: <https://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/mmt/ambedkar/>

- Uma Chakravarti – *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens*
- **Lecture Slides:** 📄 Week 13: Modern Reception and Critique

Week 14: Catch-up And Final Review

- Extra day built in to review any topics of interest for students
- Final review and student presentations/discussions
- Readings:
 - Students choice
- **Lecture Slides:** 📄 Week 14: Catch-up And Final Review

Primary Texts (in Translation)

- Manu. *The Law Code of Manu*. Edited by Patrick Olivelle, translated by Patrick Olivelle, OUP Oxford, 2009.
- Olivelle, Patrick. *Manu's code of law : a critical edition and translation of the Mānava-Dharmaśāstra*. Edited by Patrick Olivelle and Suman Olivelle, translated by Patrick Olivelle, Oxford University Press, USA, 2005.
- Wendy Doniger – *The Laws of Manu: A New Translation with Commentary*
- Selected Sanskrit verses (optional for advanced students)

Supplementary Readings

- B.R. Ambedkar – *Annihilation of Caste*: <https://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/mmt/ambedkar/>
- Uma Chakravarti – *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens*
- Olivelle – *Dharma: Studies in Its Semantic, Cultural and Religious History*
- Patrick Olivelle and Donald R. Davis, Jr – *Hindu Law: A New History of Dharmashastra*

Assignments

- Weekly reflection papers or discussion posts
- Midterm essay (textual analysis or thematic comparison)
- Final project (research essay or presentation)

Trimester System Adaptation (10 Weeks)

- Weeks 1 & 2 → Week 1
- Weeks 3 & 4 → Week 2
- Weeks 5 & 6 → Week 3
- Weeks 7 & 8 → Week 4
- Weeks 9 & 10 → Week 5
- Weeks 11 & 12 → Week 6
- Week 13 → Week 7
- Week 14 → Week 8
- Weeks 9–10