Polity in Ancient India: With special reference to Manusmriti

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Abstract

The study of ancient Indian polity provides a fascinating insight into the governance systems, societal structures, and ethical principles that shaped the subcontinent's history. This research paper examines the evolution of polity in ancient India, with a particular focus on the *Manusmriti*, one of the most significant texts in the corpus of Dharmasastra literature. The *Manusmriti* serves as a cornerstone for understanding the socio-political and legal frameworks of its time, offering detailed prescriptions on kingship, justice, administration, and the interplay of religion and statecraft.

By analyzing the text's principles of governance, including the role of *danda* (punishment), *rajadharma* (duties of the king), and its emphasis on social order through the *varna* system, this paper explores how the *Manusmriti* influenced the political organization and legal practices of ancient India. Furthermore, it evaluates the relevance of these ideas in the broader context of ancient Indian polity, including monarchical and republican systems, and their ethical underpinnings. The study highlights the enduring legacy of the *Manusmriti* in shaping the foundational principles of governance and justice in Indian civilization, while also critiquing its limitations and socio-political implications.

Keywords : Manusmriti, Ancient Indian Polity, Rajadharma, Danda, Ethical Governnance.

In the Krita Yuga (Golden Age), all people were pious, wise, virtuous, and mutually supportive and protective. No one oppressed another, and everyone lived in harmony under the guidance of *Dharma*, complementing each other. "We had no state, no royal punishment, and no one to punish. All people were protected by equality through dharma[1]. Chanakya stated that all happiness originates from *Dharma*, *Dharma* originates from wealth (*Artha*), wealth comes from governance (*Rajya*), governance relies on self-control (*Indriyajaya*), self-control stems from humility (*Vinaya*), and humility originates from serving the wise[2].

The ultimate goal of Indian statecraft (*Rajadharma*), politics, or the warrior's code (*Kshatra Dharma*) is to ensure holistic development of individuals, society, nations, and the world by removing obstacles and facilitating material and spiritual progress. This is why the Supreme Being first established *Rajadharma*, from which other branches of *Dharma* emerged.

Polity in Ancient India

Polity in ancient India evolved over centuries, influenced by its cultural, spiritual, and philosophical traditions. It encompassed a unique blend of governance systems, ranging from tribal assemblies and monarchies to republics (*ganarajya*). These systems were underpinned by principles of *dharma* (righteousness), the concept of justice, and the welfare of the people. Ancient Indian polity was characterized by a deep interconnection between religion, ethics, and statecraft, as seen in foundational texts such as the *Vedas*, *Manusmriti*, *Arthashastra*, and *Mahabharata*.

The understanding of ancient Indian polity is derived from a variety of sources, including:

- **Vedas**: The earliest texts, which mention tribal organization and assemblies (*sabha* and *samiti*).
- **Dharmashastras**: Texts like the *Manusmriti* that codify laws, governance principles, and social norms.
- **Arthashastra**: Kautilya's treatise on statecraft, economics, and military strategy.
- **Epics**: The *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, which depict ideal kingship, governance, and justice.
- **Inscriptions and Records**: Ashokan edicts and other in-

scriptions that provide insights into administrative practices and policies.

Forms of Government:

a) Tribal Assemblies

In the Vedic period, society was organized into tribes (*janas*), governed by assemblies such as the *sabha* and *samiti*. These were participatory bodies where elders and members discussed matters of importance, showcasing early forms of democratic governance.

b) Monarchy

Monarchy became the dominant form of governance during the later Vedic and post-Vedic periods. The king (*raja*) was the central authority, seen as a protector of *dharma* and a divine representative. His duties included maintaining law and order, ensuring prosperity, and safeguarding the kingdom from external threats.

c) Republics (*Ganarajya*)

Republican states, such as the *Vajjian* confederacy, coexisted with monarchies. These states were governed by councils of elders or elected representatives, reflecting collective decision-making. The *Mallas* and *Lichchhavis* were prominent republics mentioned in Buddhist texts.

Principles of Governance

The foundation of governance in ancient India was rooted in *dharma*. This ensured that rulers adhered to ethical conduct and prioritized the welfare of their subjects. Key principles included:

- **Justice and Law**: Administering fair justice through a well-defined legal framework, as outlined in texts like the *Manusmriti*.
- **Social Order**: Maintaining the hierarchical structure of society based on *varna* and *ashrama*.
- **Welfare of the People**: Ensuring prosperity through economic policies, taxation, and infrastructure development.

Role of the King

The king held supreme authority and was expected to

embody the principles of *dharma*. His responsibilities included:

- Protecting the kingdom from internal and external threats.
- Administering justice impartially.
- Ensuring economic stability and the welfare of his people.
- Acting as a moral guide and upholder of religious practices.

The king was assisted by a council of ministers (*mantriparishad*), who provided advice on governance and administration.

Administrative Systems

a) Central Administration

The king was the central authority, supported by ministers, priests, military commanders, and other officials. The administration was hierarchical, ensuring efficiency in governance.

b) Provincial and Local Administration

The kingdom was divided into provinces, districts, and villages, with local officials managing day-to-day affairs. Villages were the basic administrative units, governed by a headman (*gramini*) and councils (*panchayats*).

c) Taxation and Revenue

Taxes were collected from agriculture, trade, and other economic activities to fund public works, defense, and administration. The *Arthashastra* provides detailed guidelines on taxation and revenue policies.

Military Organization

Defense was a crucial aspect of ancient Indian polity. Kingdoms maintained well-organized armies, consisting of infantry, cavalry, chariots, and elephants. The king was the supreme commander, with a dedicated military council for strategic planning.

Role of Religion and Ethics

Religion played a significant role in shaping ancient Indian polity. Governance was deeply intertwined with spiritual principles, emphasizing ethical leadership and justice. The concept of *Rajadharma* outlined the moral duties of the king, ensuring that political power was exercised responsibly.

Examples of Ancient Indian Polities

- **Mauryan Empire**: Known for its centralized administration, ethical governance under Ashoka, and emphasis on public welfare.
- **Gupta Empire**: Celebrated for its efficient administration, cultural advancements, and relative decentralization.
- **Vedic Polities**: Tribal structures and assemblies, reflecting early forms of collective governance.

Ancient Indian polity was a rich and multifaceted system that blended governance with ethical, religious, and cultural ideals. Whether through monarchies, tribal assemblies, or republics, the emphasis was always on upholding *dharma*, ensuring justice, and promoting the welfare of the people. This holistic approach not only sustained the political systems of the time but also left a lasting legacy that continues to inspire modern governance principles.

Manusmriti: The Treatise on Human Dharma

The *Manusmriti*, authored by Manu, is a foundational text on human *Dharma*, imparting comprehensive knowledge on the subject. At the beginning of creation, the universe was formless, unmanifest, indescribable, and shrouded in ignorance. The Supreme Being dispelled this ignorance, manifesting the unmanifest universe. Through action (*Karma*), beings earned results, leading to a cycle of births and rebirths across various forms of life. To establish social order, Manu introduced the system of *Varna* (social classes) and *Ashrama* (stages of life). According to Manu, during times of chaos, people fled in fear. To protect them, Brahma created a king by incorporating the essence of gods like Indra, Vayu, Yama, Surya, Agni, Varuna, Chandra, and Kubera[3].

This divine king, endowed with the qualities of various deities, wields the power to control all beings. Even a child king must not be disrespected, as divine strength resides within him. Disrespecting a king can have dire consequences; while ordinary fire burns those who touch it carelessly, the wrath of a king can consume entire families, including their wealth and possessions.

The Role of Punishment (*Danda*)

The Supreme Being created the rod of punishment (*Danda*)

to protect all beings and uphold *Dharma*. Fear of *Danda* ensures that all creatures, stationary or mobile, use resources appropriately and fulfill their duties. *Danda* acts as a witness to all classes and stages of life, maintaining order in society. Without *Danda*, the natural tendency of humans to stray would make social order impossible. The *Manusmriti*, one of the most influential ancient Hindu texts, outlines a comprehensive framework for societal order and governance. Central to this framework is the concept of *Danda* (punishment), which plays a pivotal role in maintaining social harmony, enforcing laws, and deterring wrongdoing. The philosophy of *Danda* in the *Manusmriti* is not merely punitive but deeply rooted in the principles of justice, morality, and the greater good of society.

The Concept of Danda

In the *Manusmriti*, *Danda* is viewed as the king's essential tool for governance. It is described as a divine force that ensures justice and discipline in society. According to the text, without *Danda*, there would be anarchy, leading to the collapse of social order. The role of *Danda* extends beyond physical punishment to encompass all measures taken by the ruler or authority to correct wrongs, enforce dharma (righteousness), and maintain peace.

The text emphasizes that *Danda* should be proportionate to the offense and aligned with the principles of dharma. It is not merely a means of retaliation but a method to educate and reform individuals, thereby contributing to the collective well-being of society.

Danda as a Deterrent

One of the key functions of *Danda*[4] is to act as a deterrent against wrongdoing. The *Manusmriti* posits that the fear of punishment discourages individuals from committing crimes and violating social norms. This preventive aspect of *Danda* underscores its role in fostering a disciplined and law-abiding society. The text metaphorically compares *Danda* to a rod of discipline, which ensures that individuals adhere to their duties and responsibilities. By instilling fear of consequences, *Danda* protects the weak from exploitation and ensures that the powerful do not misuse their authority.

The Administration of Danda

The *Manusmriti* assigns the responsibility of administering *Danda* to the king, who acts as the protector and upholder of dharma[5]. The king is expected to be impartial, wise, and just in his decisions. The text warns against excessive or unjust punishment, as it can lead to resentment and rebellion. The *Manusmriti* categorizes crimes based on their severity and prescribes corresponding punishments. These range from fines and public censure to corporal punishment and banishment. The gradation of penalties reflects the text's nuanced approach to justice, taking into account factors such as intent, social status, and the impact of the crime.

Ethical Dimensions of Danda

While *Danda* is a tool for maintaining order, the *Manusmriti* also emphasizes its ethical dimensions[6]. Punishment should aim at reformation rather than mere retribution. The ultimate goal is to guide individuals back to the path of dharma and prevent future transgressions. Moreover, the text advocates fairness and equity in the application of *Danda*. It cautions rulers against favoritism or bias and stresses the importance of consistency in enforcing laws. This ethical perspective highlights the *Manusmriti's* vision of a just society where punishment serves as a means to uphold moral and social order.

Relevance in Contemporary Times

The principles of *Danda* outlined in the *Manusmriti* continue to hold relevance in modern legal and governance systems. The emphasis on proportionality, deterrence, and ethical administration of punishment resonates with contemporary theories of justice. While some aspects of the *Manusmriti* may seem archaic, its underlying philosophy of justice and order offers valuable insights into the role of punishment in society[7].

The concept of *Danda* in the *Manusmriti* represents a holistic approach to governance and justice. It underscores the importance of punishment not only as a deterrent but also as a tool for reformation and the promotion of dharma. By advocating a balanced and ethical application of *Danda*[8], the *Manusmriti* provides timeless guidance for maintaining social harmony and ensuring justice in human affairs.

Responsibilities of a King

Although the king holds immense power, his duties are intrinsically tied to constructive work for the welfare of his people and state. Just as rain nourishes all beings and trees provide shelter to birds, the king must serve as a protector and provider for his kingdom[9].

The king must be truthful, wise, knowledgeable in *Dharma* and economics (*Arthashastra*), and fair in administering punishment. A king who uses punishment justly prospers in *Dharma*, *Artha* (wealth), and *Kama* (desires), while one driven by greed, anger, or pettiness faces ruin. The notion of divine kingship implies that a king must embody divine qualities and ideals to govern justly.

The King's Advisors and Administration

Manu emphasized the importance of appointing 7-8 capable ministers, well-versed in scriptures, military strategies, and governance[10]. These ministers were responsible for advising the king on treaties, warfare, alliances, and security measures. Spies were appointed to monitor internal and external threats[11]. They were required to be ethical, discreet, and loyal to ensure the king's safety and uphold the state's integrity.

Taxation and Revenue

To sustain governance and public welfare, taxes were collected. Merchants paid up to 20% of their profits, while Brahmins and poor artisans were often exempt. The king was advised to tax judiciously, ensuring no undue burden on the populace while maintaining sufficient state revenue.

Fortifications and Defence

Manu described six types of forts: desert, water, forest, mountain, human, and mixed. Mountain forts were considered the strongest. These forts were equipped with weapons, provisions, artisans, and water to ensure the kingdom's defense.

Foreign Policy and Governance

Manu's *Mandala* theory outlined strategies for expanding and maintaining state boundaries through alliances and diplomacy. The *Shadgunya* theory emphasized six principles: peace, war, neutrality, preparation, alliances, and dual policy. Manu discouraged war unless absolutely necessary, favoring diplomacy

to preserve resources and lives.

Relevance of Manusmriti

The *Manusmriti*, often referred to as the *Manava Dharmashastra*, is one of the earliest and most influential texts on Hindu law and ethics. It provides a comprehensive framework for social organization, governance, and the maintenance of order in ancient Indian society. The relevance of the *Manusmriti* to ancient Indian polity lies in its detailed guidance on the principles of governance, justice, and the roles of rulers and subjects. It served as a foundational text that influenced the political and administrative structures of its time.

The *Manusmriti* places the king at the centre of governance, viewing him as the protector and enforcer of *dharma* (righteousness). The king is not merely a political authority but also a moral and spiritual guide for his subjects. The text outlines the king's duties[12], which include:

- Protecting his subjects from internal and external threats.
- Upholding justice by ensuring fair and impartial administration of laws.
- Maintaining social order by enforcing *varna* (class) and *ashrama* (life stage) duties.

By emphasizing the king's divine responsibility, the *Manusmriti* provided legitimacy to monarchical rule and underscored the sacred nature of political power.

A cornerstone of the *Manusmriti* is its emphasis on *dharma* as the guiding principle for governance. The text provides detailed prescriptions for both rulers and subjects to follow, ensuring harmony within the societal structure. For rulers, *dharma* dictated fairness, compassion, and adherence to the law. This ethical foundation of governance was intended to ensure that political authority was exercised for the welfare of the people and not for personal gain.

Legal and Judicial Systems

The *Manusmriti* is also significant for its codification of laws and their application within society. It delineates punishments for various crimes, ensuring proportionality and fairness. The legal principles outlined in the text emphasize the following:

- **Justice for All:** Laws applied to individuals based on their roles and responsibilities within society, taking into account factors like intent and social standing.
- **Dispute Resolution:** The king was expected to act as the highest authority in resolving disputes, supported by learned advisors and judges.
- **Prevention of Anarchy:** The fear of punishment (*Danda*) was seen as a deterrent to maintain order and prevent lawlessness.

These provisions highlight the *Manusmriti's* role as an early attempt to standardize legal practices across ancient India.

Social Order and Governance

The *Manusmriti* emphasized a hierarchical social order based on the *varna* system, which categorized society into four groups: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. While the *varna* system is often criticized for its rigidity, it was designed in the context of ancient Indian polity to ensure functional specialization and societal stability.

- **Brahmins** were advisors to the king, responsible for spiritual and legal guidance.
- **Kshatriyas** were the ruling and warrior class, tasked with governance and protection.
- **Vaishyas** managed economic activities, such as trade and agriculture.
- **Shudras** provided labor and support to the other classes.

This division allowed for a clear delineation of roles, which was essential for efficient governance in a complex society.

Economic and Administrative Guidance

The *Manusmriti* also offered insights into economic policies and administration. It discussed taxation principles, emphasizing fairness and the importance of collecting taxes in a manner that did not burden the populace. The text advised kings to use the revenue for public welfare, including infrastructure, defense, and supporting the underprivileged.

Relevance in Political Theory

The *Manusmriti* contributed to the development of ancient Indian political theory by integrating ethical and spiritual

dimensions with governance. Its emphasis on the moral duties of rulers, the role of law in society, and the importance of justice made it a foundational text for understanding statecraft in ancient India.

Conclusion

The *Manusmriti* was highly relevant to ancient Indian polity as it provided a structured framework for governance rooted in the principles of *dharma*. Its influence extended to the legal, social, and administrative domains, shaping the functioning of states and the roles of rulers and citizens. While some of its ideas may not align with modern values, its emphasis on justice, duty, and ethical governance offers timeless insights into the complexities of managing a society. (*Manusmriti's* principles of governance, justice and foreign policy.)[13]

In conclusion, *Manusmriti* highlights the divine origins of kingship, emphasizing the king's role as a servant of *Dharma*. By fostering justice, welfare, and development, the king ensures harmony and prosperity in the kingdom. These ideals continue to resonate as guiding principles for governance and ethics in modern society.

Endnotes

1. **Mahabharata, Shantiparva, 58/1**
   navairājyaṁnarājāsīnnadaṇḍona ca dāṇḍikaḥ।
   dharmeṇaivaprajāḥsarvārakṣantismaparasparam।।
2. **Mārksavāda aura Rāmarājya, ŚrīSvāmīKarapātrījīMahārāja, pṛ. saṁ.- 843**
3. **Manusmṛti, 7/4-5**
   indrānilayamarkāṇāmagneścavaruṇasya ca।
   candravitteśayoścaivamātrānirhṛtyaśāśvatīḥ॥
   yasmādeṣāṁsurendrāṇāṁmātrābhyonirmitonṛpaḥ।
   tasmādabhibhavatyeṣasarvabhūtānitejasā॥
4. **Manusmṛti, 7/15**
   tasyasarvāṇibhūtānisthāvarāṇicarāṇi ca।
   bhayādbhogāyakalpantesvadharmātnacalanti ca॥
5. **Manusmṛti, 7/17**
   sarājāpuruṣodaṇḍaḥsanetāśāsitā ca saḥ।
   caturṇāmāśramāṇāṁ ca dharmasyapratibhūḥsmṛtaḥ॥

6. **Manusmṛti, 7/19**
samīkṣyasadhṛtaḥsamyaksarvārañjayatiprajāḥ।
asamīkṣyapraṇītastuvināśayatisarvataḥ॥

7. **Manusmṛti, 7/22**
sarvodaṇḍajitolokodurlabho hi śucirnaraḥ।
daṇḍasya hi bhayātsarvaṁjagadbhogāyakalpate॥

8. **Manusmṛti, 7/25**
yatra śyāmolohitākṣodaṇḍaścaratipāpahā।
prajāstatranamuhyantinetācetsādhupaśyati॥

9. **Manusmṛti, 7/43**
traividyebhyastrayīṁvidyāṁdaṇḍanītiṁ ca śāśvatīm।
ānvīkṣikīṁcātmavidyāṁvārtārambhāṁścalokataḥ॥

10. **Manusmṛti, 7/37-38**
brāhmaṇānparyupāsītaprātarutthāyapārthivaḥ।
traividyavṛddhānviduṣastiṣṭhetteṣāṁ ca śāsane॥
vṛddhāṁścanityaṁsevetaviprānvedavidaḥśucīn।
vṛddhasevī hi satataṁrakṣobhirapipūjyate॥

11. **Manusmṛti, 7/56**
taiḥsārdhaṁcintayennityaṁsāmānyaṁsandhivigraham।
sthānaṁsamudayaṁguptiṁlabdhapraśamanāni ca॥

12. **Manusmṛti, 7/1**
rājadharmānpravakṣyāmiyathāvṛttobhavennṛpaḥ।
saṁbhavaścayathātasyasiddhiścaparamāyathā॥

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