

The Social Order of the *Manusmṛti* and Its Contemporary Relevance

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Abstract

The *Manusmṛti* occupies an important position in the history of ancient Indian social thought. The present study, entitled “The Social Order of the *Manusmṛti* and Its Contemporary Relevance,” examines Manu’s conception of social organisation and evaluates its significance from the perspective of contemporary society. The study focuses primarily on the Varna system, the Āśrama system, the position of women, and the ethical values reflected in Manu’s social thought. The Varna system constituted a major foundation of Manu’s social organisation. The Brāhmaṇa, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya, and Śūdra were assigned distinct duties and responsibilities in social life. Alongside this, the four Āśramas Brahmacharya, Gārhasthya, Vānaprastha, and Sannyāsa provided a structured framework for the different stages of individual life, emphasising education, family responsibilities, social duties, self-restraint, and spiritual development. Manu’s views on women reveal both an emphasis on their dignity, welfare, and importance within the family and certain restrictions on their independence, reflecting the social conditions of his time. The study further considers the contemporary relevance of Manu’s social thought. The provisions relating to Varna, gender, and social hierarchy cannot be directly applied to modern society, which is based on equality, individual liberty, social justice, and constitutional rights. However, ethical values such as duty, self-restraint, truthfulness, forgiveness, purity, non-violence, and responsibility continue to possess significance in contemporary life. Therefore, Manu’s social system should neither be accepted uncritically nor rejected entirely. A balanced and critical approach is necessary to understand its historical significance, social implications, and continuing relevance. The study concludes that the *Manusmṛti* remains an important source for understanding the development of ancient Indian social thought, while its provisions must be evaluated in the light of modern humanistic and constitutional values.

Keywords: *Manusmṛti*; Social Order; Varna System; Āśrama System; Women; Contemporary Relevance

Introduction

In the history of ancient Indian social thought, the *Manusmṛti* is an important and widely discussed Smṛti text. As a Dharmaśāstra, its principal objective was to provide instructions

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regarding duties, conduct, and principles in various spheres of individual and social life. Consequently, along with religious prescriptions, the text also provides an understanding of various aspects of the familial, social, moral, and cultural life of ancient Indian society. One of the principal characteristics of Manu's social order is the systematic arrangement of the Varṇa and Āśrama systems. Along with defining the duties of the Brāhmaṇa, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya, and Śūdra, human life has been divided into different stages through the four Āśramas—Brahmacarya, Gṛhastha, Vānaprastha, and Sannyāsa. The *Manusmṛti* also contains extensive discussions on marriage, the selection of bride and bridegroom, family, the duties of men and women, strīdhana, and social morality. In particular, Manu's views on the Gṛhastha Āśrama, familial responsibilities, the status of women, social duties, and the moral character of the individual reveal important aspects of his social thought. At the same time, Manu's various prescriptions concerning the varṇa-based social structure, marriage, and the freedom of women reflect the prevailing customs and values of ancient society. Therefore, Manu's social order is not merely a description of a social structure belonging to the past; rather, it reflects a systematic conception aimed at regulating the individual, family, and society. In the context of the changing values and perspectives of modern society, there is a need to re-evaluate various aspects of this conception from a contemporary perspective.

Varṇa System

One of the principal foundations of Manu's conception of social organisation was the Varṇa and Āśrama system. Although the Varṇāśrama system had already been prevalent in Indian society from the period preceding Manu, it assumed the form of a well-organised social structure in the *Manusmṛti*. Of the four Varṇas mentioned in the social order, the first three were designated as 'Dvija' (twice-born), while the Śūdra was referred to as 'Ekajāti' (once-born). Manu did not recognise any fifth Varṇa beyond these four.¹

The term 'Varṇa' literally means 'colour'. According to ancient conceptions, a symbolic association was established between the four Varṇas—Brāhmaṇa, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya and Śūdra—and the colours white, red, yellow and black respectively. However, whether Varṇa was determined solely by birth or by an individual's qualities (guṇa) and actions (karma) has been an important subject of discussion in ancient Indian literature. The *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā* refers to the four Varṇas in accordance with the division of guṇa and karma.² The *Mahābhārata* also attaches greater importance to occupation, character, qualities and actions than to birth. It is even stated that if a Śūdra possesses good conduct and noble qualities, he may attain the status of a Brāhmaṇa; conversely, if a Brāhmaṇa deviates from righteous conduct and prescribed religious duties, he may be regarded as inferior even to a Śūdra.³

Brāhmaṇa

In the *Manusmṛti*, among the four Varṇas, the Brāhmaṇa was accorded the highest social status. According to Manu, although a Brāhmaṇa was socially entitled to a superior status by virtue of birth, true superiority depended upon learning, knowledge, character, and proper conduct

¹ *Manusmṛti*, 10.4

² *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā*, 4.13

³ *Mahābhārata*, 3.151.25-27

and practice. Therefore, not all Brāhmaṇas were equally superior; it was the learned and well-versed Brāhmaṇa in the scriptures who was truly worthy of respect.⁴ The principal duties of a Brāhmaṇa were study, teaching, performing sacrifices, officiating at sacrifices for others, giving gifts, and accepting gifts. Through these functions, he guided the religious and moral life of society. A Brāhmaṇa was not merely a priest responsible for religious rituals; he was also a teacher, preceptor, and moral guide of society. The preservation of knowledge of the Vedas and scriptures and its transmission to subsequent generations constituted one of his most important responsibilities. In ancient times, the household of a Brāhmaṇa often served as a centre of education or as a Gurukula. Disciples lived in the preceptor's household, received education, and observed the discipline of Brahmacarya. According to Manu, a single Brāhmaṇa well-versed in the Vedas was more worthy of respect than numerous ignorant Brāhmaṇas.⁵ This indicates that the social status of a Brāhmaṇa was deeply connected with knowledge and education.

Brāhmaṇas also played an important role in the administration of society and the state. Advising the king on various matters, providing guidance on issues relating to Dharma and justice, and assisting in judicial proceedings were among their important responsibilities. The *Manusmṛti* also mentions the association of learned Brāhmaṇas with judicial proceedings in the royal court.⁶ As a result, while the Brāhmaṇa provided leadership in the religious and educational spheres, he also played an influential role in the administration of justice and policy-making of the state. However, alongside the high status accorded to Brāhmaṇas, the *Manusmṛti* also prescribed strict moral regulations for them. Although a Brāhmaṇa was permitted to adopt certain alternative occupations when necessary for his livelihood, earning a livelihood through servitude or unethical means was discouraged. Manu also permitted the adoption of certain exceptional measures for the preservation of livelihood during times of distress. This demonstrates that the social status of a Brāhmaṇa was intrinsically connected with the expectation of proper conduct and self-restraint.

It is noteworthy that although Manu accorded special status to Brāhmaṇas, he did not support all Brāhmaṇas unconditionally. He condemned those Brāhmaṇas who had deviated from their prescribed duties, lacked proper conduct, engaged in sinful behaviour, remained unversed in Vedic study, or were accustomed to unethical means of livelihood, and instructed that they should be excluded from religious ceremonies. In other words, Manu did not completely disregard the relationship between Brāhmaṇahood and scriptural knowledge, good conduct, and morality.⁷

Kṣatriya

In the social system of the *Manusmṛti*, the principal responsibilities of the Kṣatriya were the protection of the subjects, defence of the state, and administration of governance. Manu prescribed for the Kṣatriya the duties of protecting the subjects, giving gifts, performing

⁴ *Manusmṛti*, 1.96

⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.121

⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.10-11

⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.150-166

sacrifices, studying, and abstaining from sensual indulgence.⁸ Among these duties, however, ensuring the safety and welfare of the subjects was regarded as the foremost duty of the Kṣatriya.⁹ For the protection of the subjects and the maintenance of the security of the country, engaging in warfare was also an essential duty of the Kṣatriya. Repelling enemy attacks and striving for victory in battle formed part of his svadharma. Therefore, the ideal that a king engaged in the protection of his subjects should never retreat out of fear from the battlefield is particularly expressed in the *Manusmṛti*.¹⁰ The same sense of duty of the Kṣatriya is also reflected in the Bhagavadgītā. In Manu's social thought, the mutual cooperation between the Brāhmaṇa and the Kṣatriya is of particular significance. The Brāhmaṇa guided society through knowledge, Dharma, and morality, while the Kṣatriya, through power and authority, ensured the security of that social order and the protection of the subjects. Thus, the *Manusmṛti* expresses the idea that the establishment of a healthy and well-organised society is not possible without the harmonious combination of knowledge and power.¹¹

Since the Kṣatriya belonged to the category of the Dvijātis (twice-born), the rites of Upanayana, study, sacrifice, and giving gifts were prescribed for him. At the same time, bearing arms and acquiring proficiency in the art of warfare for the protection of the subjects constituted an important part of his duties. Thus, the life of a Kṣatriya was not dependent solely upon military power; religious education and moral responsibilities were also integral to his life. With regard to livelihood, Manu also took into consideration situations of distress. Although each Varṇa had its own prescribed occupation under normal circumstances, when serious difficulties arose in earning a livelihood, Brāhmaṇas and Kṣatriyas were permitted to adopt certain occupations of the Vaiśya. Moreover, there was also provision for lending money at a limited rate of interest to persons in need for religious purposes.¹² This indicates that, in Manu's social system, alongside Varṇa-based duties, certain practical provisions were also made for exceptional circumstances.

Vaiśya

In the *Manusmṛti*, agriculture, animal husbandry, trade, lending money, giving gifts, performing sacrifices, and study are mentioned as the principal occupations and social responsibilities of the Vaiśyas.¹³ The *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā* also refers to agriculture, cow protection, and trade as the natural duties of the Vaiśya (18.44).

The Vaiśyas also belonged to the category of the Dvijātis (twice-born). After undergoing the Upanayana ceremony and receiving education, they engaged in agriculture, trade, and animal husbandry. The protection and care of animals was not merely a means of livelihood for them; it was also regarded as a religious duty. Therefore, the Vaiśya was instructed not to neglect the responsibility of animal husbandry.¹⁴ In the field of trade, the *Manusmṛti* states that Vaiśyas

⁸ Ibid., 1.89

⁹ Ibid., 7.144

¹⁰ Ibid., 10.119

¹¹ Ibid., 9.322

¹² Ibid., 10.117

¹³ Ibid., 1.190

¹⁴ Ibid., 9.328

should acquire knowledge of the quality of commodities, their prices, weights and measures, profit and loss, market practices, and the commercial customs of different countries. In other words, they were not merely traders; rather, they were expected to acquire proficiency in various aspects of economic activity. The *Manusmṛti* also contains references to their undertaking sea voyages for commercial purposes.¹⁵

In Manu's view, the purpose of the economic activities of the Vaiśya was not merely the accumulation of personal wealth; it also involved earning wealth through righteous means and fulfilling the needs of society. Therefore, the wealth and commercial expertise of the Vaiśya were expected to be utilised for the broader welfare of society. In this way, the *Manusmṛti* presents the Vaiśya primarily as the Varṇa responsible for strengthening the economic foundation of society through agriculture, animal husbandry, and trade.

Śūdra

Although the social status of the Śūdra in the *Manusmṛti* was regarded as lower in comparison with the other Varṇas, their necessity in social life was not denied. According to Manu,¹⁶ the principal duty of the Śūdra was to render service to the Brāhmaṇa, Kṣatriya, and Vaiśya. However, the role of the Śūdra was not confined merely to service. Numerous productive occupations, such as handicrafts, artistic activities, agriculture, animal husbandry, fishing, bamboo and leather work, metalwork, laundry, and various other professions, were also included among their means of livelihood. Particularly, when difficulties arose in earning a livelihood, Manu permitted the Śūdra to sustain himself through arts, crafts, and various forms of skilled work.

The right of the Śūdra to Vedic study and the Upanayana rite was not recognised in the *Manusmṛti*; their rights in matters of religious practices were also limited. Nevertheless, a certain degree of flexibility can also be observed in Manu's statements. If a Śūdra was virtuous and devoted to Dharma, his conduct was regarded as praiseworthy, and it is stated that he could be imparted the necessary religious instruction concerning occupation and livelihood. Likewise, the *Manusmṛti* also speaks of showing respect to an elderly Śūdra in society. Thus, the Śūdras were not completely excluded from social life; rather, their labour and skills were deeply connected with the everyday life of society.

In understanding the position of the Śūdra, the contradictory provisions of the *Manusmṛti* are particularly noteworthy. On the one hand, their duty of service and social rights were restricted; on the other hand, they were entrusted with responsibilities relating to agriculture, industry, handicrafts, and various other essential occupations. Indeed, the economic and practical life of society was to a considerable extent dependent upon their labour. Therefore, although the *Manusmṛti* assigned the Śūdra a lower social status, their economic and social indispensability is evident. From a modern perspective, such Varṇa-based discrimination calls for critical examination; however, when viewed historically, the diverse occupations and labour of the Śūdras played an important role in sustaining the foundations of ancient society.

¹⁵ Ibid., 3.158

¹⁶ Ibid., 1.91

Āśrama System

Alongside the Varṇa system, the *Manusmṛti* refers to the four-Āśrama system for regulating individual life and making it disciplined and duty-oriented. These four Āśramas are Brahmacharya, Gārhasthya, Vānaprastha, and Sannyāsa. While Varṇa-dharma determined an individual's responsibilities in society, Āśrama-dharma organised the duties and ideals associated with the different stages of individual life. According to Manu, these Āśramas were to be followed successively in the lives of the Dvijātis, and the Gārhasthya Āśrama was regarded as the principal foundation of the other Āśramas.

Brahmacharya Āśrama

Brahmacharya Āśrama was the initial stage of education and character formation. After undergoing the Upanayana rite, boys belonging to the Brāhmaṇa, Kṣatriya, and Vaiśya Varṇas went to the preceptor's household to study the Vedas, Vedāṅgas, and other necessary branches of learning. Along with receiving education while residing in the preceptor's household, service to the preceptor, control of the senses, cleanliness, humility, and discipline were the principal ideals of a Brahmachārī. Manu did not confine the life of a Brahmachārī merely to the acquisition of knowledge; he also regarded conduct and moral character as indispensable components of education.¹⁷ The Brahmachārī had to lead a highly disciplined life in the preceptor's household. Daily performance of the fire ritual, evening prayers, seeking alms, assisting the preceptor in necessary tasks, and study were his daily duties. He had to refrain from desire, anger, greed, excessive eating, dancing and singing, luxury, and sensual pleasures. The preceptor was regarded as father-like, while the preceptor's wife was regarded as mother-like. Reverence towards the preceptor, obedience to his commands, and showing due respect to elders were important characteristics of the Brahmachārī's conduct.

At the end of his period of education, the Brahmachārī, with the permission of his preceptor, completed the Samāvartana ceremony and returned home. However, if he so desired, he could remain in the service of his preceptor throughout his life and live as a Naiṣṭhika Brahmachārī. Overall, the *Manusmṛti* presents the life of a Brahmachārī as an integrated discipline combining learning, self-restraint, discipline, humility, and morality. Thus, the first stage of the Āśrama system was particularly important in laying the foundation for an individual's future family and social life.

Gārhasthya Āśrama

After completing education and the Samāvartana ceremony in the Brahmacharya Āśrama, an individual entered the Gārhasthya Āśrama.¹⁸ Among the four Āśramas, the Gārhasthya Āśrama was regarded as particularly important in the *Manusmṛti*, because the householder supported the people belonging to the other Āśramas by providing them with financial resources and necessary material provisions.¹⁹ This Āśrama commenced with marriage, and the wife, as her husband's sahadharminī (partner in the observance of Dharma), was expected to participate in

¹⁷ Ibid., 2.112-163

¹⁸ Ibid., 3.2

¹⁹ Ibid., 6.89

the religious duties of household life, family care, and social responsibilities.

In matters of marriage, Manu primarily instructed that a suitable bride should be chosen outside the same gotra and close blood relations. Although marriage with a girl belonging to the same Varṇa was regarded as more preferable, the practice of a man belonging to a higher Varṇa marrying a woman belonging to a lower Varṇa, known as Anuloma marriage, was also prevalent in contemporary society.²⁰ On the other hand, the marriage of a man belonging to a lower Varṇa with a woman belonging to a higher Varṇa, known as Pratiloma marriage, was condemned. In the selection of a bride, importance was also attached to her family environment, lineage, physical well-being, and temperament.

The principal purpose of the Gārhaṣṭhya Āśrama was not merely to lead a family life; the observance of Dharma, the upbringing of children, hospitality, the performance of sacrifices, giving gifts, and responsibilities towards society constituted its important aspects. However, Manu's regulations concerning marriage and Varṇa distinctions clearly reflect the social inequalities of the period. In particular, his strict prohibitions concerning the marriage of a Dvija with a Śūdra woman reveal the Varṇa-based social outlook prevalent in contemporary society.

Women in Manu's Social System

Manu's view of women in the *Manusmṛti* is, on the one hand, respectful and dignified, while on the other, it is governed by strict rules and discipline. Manu holds that where women are honoured, the gods are pleased, and the welfare and prosperity of the family increase. He regards the wife as the principal foundation of the dignity, beauty, and continuity of the household and lineage.²¹ He also refers to the important role of women in bearing and raising children, extending hospitality to guests, and performing the duties of household life.

For the protection and security of women, Manu assigns the responsibility of protecting a daughter, wife, and mother respectively to the father, husband, and son. According to him, women should not be neglected but should be treated with affection, respect, and proper care.²² At the same time, he places particular emphasis on women's purity, fidelity to their husbands, self-restraint, and fulfilment of domestic duties. He regards adultery and relationships with persons outside marriage as reprehensible for both women and men.

Manu regards marriage as the principal sacrament of a woman and as the foundation of domestic life. He advises that a daughter should be married to a suitable and virtuous man and prohibits giving a daughter in marriage to an unworthy man. He also lays down a provision concerning a daughter's right to choose a husband according to her own preference if her parents fail to arrange her marriage at the appropriate time. In addition, by referring to various forms of Strīdhana, he also recognises the concept of a woman's own property.

However, Manu's position regarding women's independence is considerably conservative. He states that a woman should remain under the protection of her father, husband, and son at

²⁰ Ibid., 3.12

²¹ Ibid., 3.55-57

²² Ibid., 9.3

different stages of her life and does not support widow remarriage. At the same time, the *Manusmṛiti* contains certain strict and derogatory statements concerning the character of women. Thus, Manu's overall perspective on women represents a combination of respect, family dignity, purity, and a sense of duty with the social controls prevalent in the contemporary society.

Vānaprastha Āśrama

The third stage of life after the Gārhasthya Āśrama is the Vānaprastha Āśrama. According to Manu, one should not remain attached to worldly life and sensual pleasures until the end of life; rather, in the later part of life, one should gradually move towards renunciation of worldly affairs.²³ When signs of old age appear in the body and a grandson is born, the householder should retire to the forest (6.1–2). If his wife is willing, he may take her with him, or he may entrust the responsibilities of the household to his son and depart for the forest alone. The life of a Vānaprastha was based on self-restraint, austerity, purity, and spiritual practice. He was instructed to abandon village food and articles of luxury, subsist on fruits, roots, and vegetables, and wear garments made of deerskin or bark. He was instructed to perform the daily Pañcamahāyajñas, offer oblations, study the Vedas, serve guests, and give gifts. He was also advised to abstain from alcohol and meat and to follow the ideals of compassion, friendliness, and benevolence towards all living beings.²⁴

The principal aim of the Vānaprastha was the control of the senses and purification of the mind. He practised Brahmacharya, slept on the ground, renounced comfort and attachment to the household, and sought to attain self-knowledge through the study of the Upaniṣads and other texts. Manu also prescribes the observance of various rigorous austerities during summer, the rainy season, and winter. Thus, after spending the third stage of life in the forest practising austerities, one was prescribed to renounce all worldly bonds and enter the fourth stage, the Sannyāsa Āśrama (6.33).

Sannyāsa

In the *Manusmṛiti*, Sannyāsa Āśrama is described as the fourth and final stage of life. After fulfilling the responsibilities of Brahmacharya, Gārhasthya, and Vānaprastha, an individual is expected to renounce worldly life, possessions, desires, and all forms of attachment and embrace Sannyāsa. The principal aim of a Sannyāsin is the attainment of self-knowledge and liberation (mokṣa). A Sannyāsin should be self-controlled, detached, non-violent, and even-minded. Rather than residing permanently in a particular household, he should sustain himself through alms and wander alone or without attachment. For him, all living beings are equal; therefore, he should harbour neither violence, anger, nor hostility towards anyone. Truthfulness, control of the senses, purity, meditation, and contemplation of Brahman should constitute his principal spiritual practices.

According to Manu, non-violence, control of the senses, renunciation of attachment and aversion, and self-realisation are the principal means by which a Sannyāsin attains liberation.

²³ Ibid., 5.169

²⁴ Ibid., 6.5-16

Through the attainment of self-knowledge, the Sannyāsin becomes free from worldly bondage and realises Brahman. Thus, the ultimate purpose of Sannyāsa Āśrama is the realisation of Brahman and the attainment of mokṣa through self-knowledge. Finally, Manu has prescribed ten common virtues for individuals belonging to all four Āśramas—steadfastness (dhṛti), forgiveness (kṣamā), self-control (dama), non-stealing (asteya), purity (śauca), control of the senses, right knowledge, self-knowledge, truthfulness (satya), and freedom from anger (akrodha). These constitute the fundamental foundations of a healthy and ideal way of life.²⁵

Relevance of the Social System in the Contemporary Context

Contemporary society is founded upon a social, political, and constitutional framework that is entirely different from that of ancient Indian society. Therefore, the provisions of the *Manusmṛti* cannot be directly applied to present-day life. However, the significance of Manu's social system cannot be denied in understanding how the underlying values and ideas of an ancient social philosophy influenced subsequent social thought. In modern society, a sense of duty and responsibility is particularly important. The concept present in Manu's thought of fulfilling one's responsibilities towards the family, society, and humanity at large, alongside individual freedom, may be discussed in relation to the idea of responsible citizenship. Similarly, ethical qualities such as truthfulness, forgiveness, self-restraint, purity, and freedom from anger continue to be valuable in the formation of an individual's character.

In the present time, amid problems such as changes in family relationships, generational distance, and social isolation, the importance of mutual respect and a sense of responsibility is being increasingly felt. In Manu's²⁶ discussion of household life, the emphasis placed on the mutual duties and harmony among family members may, in this respect, provide an important basis for ethical discussion.

Manu's views concerning the position of women need to be examined with particular caution in the contemporary age. While his recognition of respect for women, their welfare, and their importance within the family may be viewed positively, the provisions that restrict women's freedom are not compatible with modern principles of gender equality, individual liberty, and constitutional rights. Therefore, in evaluating Manu's views on women, both the values that may be considered acceptable and their historical limitations must be taken into account. Similarly, social divisions based on Varṇa and notions of status determined by birth are not acceptable in a contemporary democratic society. The foundation of the modern state is equal rights, social justice, and equality before the law. Therefore, it is reasonable to evaluate Manu's provisions concerning Varṇa not as an ideal for contemporary society, but as a historical element for understanding the social structure of ancient times.

In the case of the Āśrama system also, although its external prescriptions may not be applicable to life today, the ideas of education, responsibility, self-restraint, and self-development at

²⁵ Ibid., 6.41-92

²⁶ Ibid., 3.2-118

different stages of life may still be subjects of reflection. In particular, the idea of limiting material indulgence, practising self-restraint, and turning inward during the later stages of life offers an alternative ethical perspective in contrast to the consumerist lifestyle of the modern age.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the social system of the *Manusmṛiti* may be viewed, on the one hand, as an attempt to organise ancient Indian society within a definite framework of religious, moral, and social order, and, on the other, as a reflection of the social realities and values of its time. The social structure of the age is clearly reflected in Manu's prescriptions concerning Varna, Āśrama, family, marriage, and women. However, the entire content of an ancient text cannot be evaluated from a single perspective. Manu's social thought contains certain provisions that are historically conditioned and unacceptable from the perspective of the present day; at the same time, it also upholds values such as a sense of duty, self-restraint, truthfulness, forgiveness, purity, non-violence, and ethical living, whose significance has not entirely disappeared with the passage of time. Therefore, a proper evaluation of Manu's social system requires a critical and impartial perspective—one that acknowledges its historical significance while also subjecting it to necessary re-evaluation in the light of modern humanistic values. From this perspective, the *Manusmṛiti* may be regarded as an important source for understanding ancient Indian social thought.

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