

Women's role in the Household: A look into the Text *Manusmriti*

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Abstract: As much as the importance of men is depicted in the normative texts, the role played by women who took part in the society cannot be ignored. As the text was mainly written by the priestly class they tried to portray how men and women had to behave in the society but more significantly the text can also be seen as an indicator of how gender relations during the post-Mauryan period are stressed. As this period witnessed a number of developments, the issue of gender cannot be ignored. One such area is the household where one can witness that patriarchal institutions were kept in high regard which attempted to create patriarchal status in order to keep women within the private sphere especially in the household. After a person attains the status of a householder the text clearly points out the role for both the sexes and also allows the householder to have control over the family and the only role of the woman after becoming a wife was to assist her husband while all other functions are being performed by her husband. Thus the husband is often seen as the supporter of patriarchal ideals and has to look into that the patriarchal rules as portrayed in the texts are collectively practice in the household. Though the householder played an important part in the functioning of the household, but the significance of women in the household cannot be ignored. As marriage was held important for the continuation of the lineage, the text clearly points out that the wife was considered to be held in high importance. Therefore, focusing on how women are treated in the household, this paper attempts to unfold as to how women were represented in the early Indian textual traditions.

Keywords: gender, household, *Manusmriti*, marriage, patriarchy, women

I. Introduction

In Indian history the period from 200 BCE to 300CE a period of about approximately five hundred years has witnessed a number of developments be it in terms of political, social or economic process as well as in the fields of art and architecture. While this period has witnessed diverse expansion in various areas which mark this phase as one of the important phases in Indian history, it has been noticed that while looking at the society during this period it reflects a lack of engagement with gender relations. Patriarchy also continued to control the society during this period and the marginalization of women from the public sphere is clear from the fact that historical sources of the period are silent about the participation of women in a number of activities. Normative texts that were composed during this period, it is observed that the compilers of the texts have clearly defined the roles for the members of each of the *varna* as well as for both men and women as to how they had to perform in the society. Therefore the attitude of women as seen in these texts is contradictory because the role played by women in the society cannot be ignored but there were clear attempts on the part of the compilers to prevent them to take any part in the society.¹ Women apparently function as pawns in the hands of the male kinsmen; however they participated in continuing the institutions because of the pressure on them to perform.² Thus as the early Indian texts were mostly male centric this further adds difficulty to interpret them. The texts completely ignore the contributions of women and constantly project a gloomy image of women as recorded in the texts. Therefore to understand the portrayal of women in the society especially in ancient societies is hard because it opens up a number of themes as to whether women actually recognized themselves in the same way as pointed out by the male compilers or they perceive themselves differently in the society is very difficult to understand because we do not have any evidence to support our arguments.

Therefore in this paper an attempt will be made to inquire into the text *Manusmriti* which attempted to uphold the patriarchal institution in order to keep women within the domestic sphere and were subordinated by their male members in the household. As a person enters a householder stage, his position completely changes which makes him acquire greater position in the society and a greater emphasis in the household. The birth of the daughters was often seen as a burden for the family and the birth of the son was often welcome.³ It may be pointed out here that the birth of the son meant that he could continue the family offspring as well as was able to offer offerings to the ancestors (*pitrs*). The control over women's sexuality and her reproductive ability of continuing the lineage of the patriarchal household was also considered as important and therefore the main emphasis was put on the sexuality of the women.

II. The Text

The *Manusmriti* (henceforth *MS*) is one of the most important and controversial literary work of ancient India which contains 2,685 verses arranged in twelve books.⁴ The text lays down social and moral guidelines relating to social responsibilities and duties with an emphasis on the representation of life as “how it is and how it should be lived”.⁵ It is a text of different authorship and the acceptable date for its composition is between c. 200 BCE – CE 200.⁶ On the whole the *Manusmriti* demonstrates the process of reconsolidation of a continuing ancient tradition with emphasis of reorientation of that heritage around ‘new principles of life’.⁷ It should be kept in mind that it is a normative text and how far the laws were actually practiced in reality further adds difficulty to the whole debate of whether it is possible to seek a social reconstruction of a society on the basis of such a text. A text can also be called a cultural artefact on the basis of the cultural tradition it carries and the information it withholds. Tyagi in her recent work has pointed out that when a text or an epigraph is created it leads into the imagination that goes behind its creation. She further goes on to say that when one reads a text it makes one understand why a particular subject is selected over others, the mode of representation and the genre that is chosen for the representation of a particular socio-cultural experiences also reveal information.⁸ It can be seen that the text discusses on a number of themes and aims to cover a wide range of human behavior in which gender relations form a very significant part. An attempt to create patriarchal hierarchy is evident in the text where by women were confined to the domestic realm and were subordinated in the household and were left from a number of roles like economic, social and decision making role. What can be pointed out in the text is that most of the instructions laid down are mostly for women who belong to the upper stratum of the society.

The Importance of the Household in Early India

A study of the importance of the household in ancient society has been a developing theme in recent times. There are a number of scholars who have tried to study the household in ancient societies.⁹ In the Indian context, scholars and historians have been taking a keen interest in the study of the household in early India and have tried to depict how gender relations have been structured and challenged in the household. Historians like Kumkum Roy¹⁰ and Jaya Tyagi¹¹ have open up certain issues in the study of the household in ancient India. But before one study the Brahmanical society one cannot ignore the household or the *grha* which was considered a very important part in the society.¹² It should be noted that one important aspect that affected social stratification that preceded the advent of the Christian era was focused on the changing role of *grihapati* (the householder). The Sanskrit word *grihapati* appears from the *Rgveda* onwards and is used for the householder meaning the master of the house and the mistress of the house was called the *grihapatni*. Later the word features in Panini's *Astadhyayi* meaning the master of the house.¹³ Svira Jaiswal has pointed out that the early Vedic *grihapati* was not an ordinary householder and in addition, stressed that the shift from nomadic pastoralism to sedentary agriculture led to the *grihapati's* transformation as the head of a complex household structured on patriarchal principles.¹⁴ Ideally the *grihapati* or the male head of the household presided over the *grha* which was defined in terms of the presence of the wife and sons in particular and offspring in general. The *grha* was also seen as a unit that both controlled and used productive resources including land and cattle, ensured the transmission of such resources from one generation to the next through patrilineage and organized consumption and distribution.¹⁵ Similarly a study of the household in early Indian societies cannot be left out without mentioning the family which played an important role. Accordingly the family is seen as an area to organize reproduction and production, and to pass down the bloodline the control of property to successive generations.¹⁶ As patriarchy was very dominant during this phase, the supremacy of the male head in the household was clear whereby the relation between both the sexes becomes biased which thus lead to the subjugation of women. Hence as the family organization was patriarchal there is a very significant relationship between womanhood and family life. Thus the study of gender relations within the family is thus undeniable from the understanding of women within the society.¹⁷

The role of the Householder and women's role in the household

The *Dharmashastras* which were dominated by the householder's code of the reproduction of the specie at its core were given to glorifying the status of the *grhastha* and pushing into the background the *asramas* of *vanaprastha* and *sannyasa*.¹⁸ The text clearly points out that a man after finishing his training with the guru he should enter the householder stage¹⁹ and thus begin to collect resources to help in the livelihood of the family and perform the daily routines in the household. Since people in the three other stages of life are supported everyday by knowledge and the food of the householder, therefore the householder stage of life is the best.²⁰ Entry into the household was mainly by birth or through marriage. After a man enters the householder stage one has to look what qualities he should be seeing in a woman who will become his wife. The choice that a man makes to choose a bride for himself was very important and the text clearly deals in detail regarding as to what type of girl should be chosen for marriage. The text also mentions what type of a bride should be avoided by a man before he marries. A woman who is neither a co feeding relative on her mother's side nor belongs to

the same lineage on her father's side and who is a virgin is recommended for marriage only to twice born men.²¹ The text also points out that what type of woman a twice born man should avoid before he marries. Like a girl who is a red headed or has an extra limb or who is sick or has no body hair or has too much body hair or who talks too much, who does not lack any part of her body and he will not marry any woman if she does not have any brother or her father is unknown.²² The text also states that a man should marry one to a woman who does not belong to the same *gotra* as he is. The text even mentions that a twice born man (*dvija*) should only marry a wife who is of the same caste and has the right marks.²³ Thus getting married and having children was a central responsibility of the householder, so women were important only as wives and as bearers of children.

From the early phases even before the composition of the *Manusmriti*, emphasis has been laid on early marriage for girls. The text points out that a thirty year old man should marry a twelve year old girl who charms his heart and a man of twenty four should marry an eight year old girl.²⁴ One of the reasons why early marriages were undertaken for women is because this phase witnessed a number of foreign elements in the society. In order to avoid women to come into contact with the foreign races who were slowly absorbing in the society, the compilers of the normative texts pointed out that woman had to be married off at an early age. Marriage was considered very essential and important in the Brahmanical society. The marriage ritual was considered very important. The texts mentions that the transformative ritual of taking the bride by the hand is prescribed for women of the same class; know that this (following) procedure is for the marriage ritual with women of a different class. Similarly it goes on to say that when a woman marries a man of a superior class, a woman of the ruler class must take hold of an arrow, for a commoner girl a whip and a servant must grasp the fringe of his garment.²⁵ As seen in the earlier normative texts like the *Dharmasutras* as well as in the *Dharmashastras* a major emphasis was laid on the need for an ideal wife who could help her husband in the functioning of the household and to beget sons. Therefore the main role of women was limited to her sexuality whereby through the institution of marriage it marked a major shift in their roles from daughters to wives. The importance of clearly choosing a wife is carefully mentioned in the text as it determines the progeny. The wife brings forth a son who is like the man she makes love with; that is why the husband should guard his wife in order to keep his progeny clean. Similarly in another verse in the text it also state that women were created to bear children, and men to carry on the line.²⁶ The importance of the wife is also clearly mentioned in the other verses of the text. The wife is called the *jaya*.²⁷ As the wife is the most important focal point of attention among the different categories of women as seen in the normative texts; symbols, rituals and norms are all concentrated in the person of the wife. A further emphasis on the importance of the wife in the household is clearly mentioned. The text states that in the family the husband is always satisfied by the wife and the wife by the husband.²⁸ The following verses goes on to state that the importance of the wife in the household in which if the wife is radiant then the whole family is radiant but if the wife is not radiant then the whole family is not radiant. Therefore a woman is recognized in the society as the wife, when she enters into a marriage with her husband only then she becomes a social identity. As a result it is only through marriage the only ritual that is prescribed for a woman. Since together with her husband she performs the rituals and to beget son, therefore it is only through these two important acts that define her as a social being in the society.²⁹

Women were also regarded as lamps of the houses, worthy of reverence and greatly blessed of their progeny. The wife is the visible form of what holds together the begetting of children, the caring of them when they are born and the ordinary business of life.³⁰ Similarly if both the sexes undergoes through a bad marriage, the neglect of rites and failure to study the Vedas then the families ceased to exist.³¹ Therefore the role played by the wife in the household tends to be ignored by the text which clearly depicts a gender bias. The notion of purity was considered of deep importance in the Brahmanical texts. The portrayal of menstruating women in the Brahmanical texts reveals hatred towards these women. The menstruating women were considered to be impure. There are a number of verses in the text which clearly indicates this aspect.³² This thus shows a sharp distinction between both the sexes where the males was considered to be pure and the menstruation of women was considered as a symbol of impurity. Keeping women under guard was regarded of prime importance as depicted in the *Dharmashastras*. There as a constant fear among the Brahmanical writers regarding the boundaries that was kept for women since keeping women under control was considered the foremost duties. In the text it clearly states that even the weak husbands must guard their wives by considering it their highest duty. It goes on to say that a woman must be guarded by her father during her childhood, by her husband in married life and by her son in old age.³³ The fact that women were not independent³⁴ as pointed out in the text shows that women were kept in the household and the role they played in the household was very limited as compared to their male counterparts. It can be found in the text that efforts were made to win the support of women who were subordinated. This was ensured through the prescription of gifts of ornaments, clothes, and food on festive occasions and through the assurance that serving the husband was their only duty would result in the attainment of heaven or of the world attained by the husband.³⁵

Gendered inequality in the society can be noticed from the time when both the male and the female who had not even completed the marriage and is soon to be married; their main aim was to give birth to a child.

When a husband enters a wife, becomes an embryo, and is born on earth.³⁶ While the procreative role of women was clearly important, that within the household also evidently acquired a new significance. This is reflected both in the insistence on confining women within the household, and in assigning them a specific role within.³⁷ The preference for the birth of the son is depicted in one of the verses in the text where by a faithful wife who is married in accordance with law and is dedicated to revering to the ancestors may eat the middle ball from the ritual if she wishes to become pregnant with a son. Then she will bring forth a son who will live a long time who will have fame, wealth and progeny a man of lucidity and religion.³⁸ Therefore the birth of sons were regarded in high regard where the text points that the birth of the son that was born through different types of marriages³⁹ especially the first four marriages are well educated in the Vedas and are regarded in high esteemed by educated men. But for sons that were born from the remaining marriages were born as cruel sons and who hate the Vedas and religion.⁴⁰

The birth of daughters seems to be ignored or neglected can be seen from the manner in which different phases as to the upbringing of the male child were celebrated. It must be noted that the birth of daughters was not looked down completely. In the text, Manu consider one's daughter as the highest object of tenderness.⁴¹ But one has to be careful while considering this acceptance because the birth of the son was more favoured as compared to daughters. The initiation rite, *upanayana* was undertaken by the males while the rites were not meant for their female counterpart. Before the umbilical cord of the male child is cut, the birth rite is performed and he eats honey, gold and butter with the Vedic verses.⁴² This verse clearly points out a gender bias where this was neglected in regard to their female counterparts. It is only in one verse in the text where in regards to the naming of the female child is mention that the while naming a women, the names given should be easy to pronounce, not harsh of patent meaning, and auspicious; they should captivate the mind-and-heart, end in a long vowel, and contain a word for blessings.⁴³

After entering the householder stage, the householder should also perform the domestic sacrifices and the great five sacrifices (*panchamahayajna*) in accordance to the rules and do his everyday cooking.⁴⁴ The stress laid on the performance of the domestic sacrifices in the household indicates the household to be a sacred institute where rituals had a deep emphasis. While the householder was mainly limited to the household, women were clearly marginalized in the performance of sacrifices. Suvira Jaiswal have pointed out that the displacement of women from *Srauta* rituals and misuse of their role by male priests can be seen the later Vedic texts onwards which according to her has been pointed out by a number of scholars.⁴⁵ Though it is noticed that women had no right to make any sacrifices on their own, the text makes some exception that in the evening the wife may make the propitiatory offerings from the sanctified food, although without reciting any of the Vedic verses, for what is called the ritual of all gods is prescribed for both the morning and evening.⁴⁶ After performing the ritual of propitiatory offering, the householder should feed first a guest and in accordance with the rules, give alms to a beggar and to a chaste student of the Vedas. By giving alms, the twice born householder wins a reward for merit which is the same as the reward for merit won by giving a cow to a guru in accordance with the rule.⁴⁷ The activities assigned to women were devalued and this was evident in the conceptualization of the five slaughter houses within the *grha*. According to Manu the householder (*grhastha*) has five 'slaughter houses', the fire-place, the grinding-stone, the broom, the pestle and mortar and the water-pot.⁴⁸ In other words, the equipment required for routine household activities was conceived as of polluting and it is likely that this association would have been extended to those who use them.⁴⁹ Using these he is bound with the fetters of sin, so he should make up by performing the five great sacrifices daily. But these are the 'sinful' sites around which revolve the life of a common housewife.⁵⁰

The system of initiation and submission to the guru for learning the Vedic scriptures allowed for its continuation as well as its exclusive control by the Brahmanical male order while marginalizing women by denying them the right to learn the Vedas. As initiation was meant for males of the three higher varna and it can be seen that the text of this period also was obsessed by the birth of the male child. Offering to the ancestors are to be diligently dispatched to those grounded in knowledge.⁵¹ This verse clearly points that only males of the household can perform this rite since their female counterparts could not perform this rite as they were not given access to Vedic learning. Should there be a son who has crossed to the far shore of the Veda while his father does not know the Veda by heart or the father who has crossed to the far shore of the Veda while his son does not know the Veda by heart, it should be understood that of them the one with the father that knows the Veda by heart is superior, but the one who deserves respect too because of the reverence due to the verses of the Veda.⁵²

The role of the *upanayana* in Brahmanical tradition that was implanted and took root in the social strata cannot be underestimated. In the early Vedic period *upanayana* marked the beginning of studentship for both girls and boys, but in the later phases it was denied to the females and along with that the scriptures were made inaccessible to them. This resulted in the restriction of their religious rights. Thus the wife in the household had no right in the sacrifices performed with the husband and she had neither the expertise nor the right to utter the Vedic verses.⁵³ Therefore from a young age males were given a charge to perform a distinctive role in the society. It is seen that as the young males were educated in the Vedic learning, for women, this cycle should be

performed without Vedic verses. The ritual of marriage is traditionally known as the Vedic transformative ritual for women, serving her husband is (the equivalent of) living with a guru and household chores are the rites of the fire.⁵⁴ Women were put to the background from learning the Vedas there by indicating a gender bias towards women in the society. As this distinction was made from an early age it was thus prevalent throughout life thereby showing that women were not having any role to perform be it in terms of social, ritual and in political spheres. The text also clearly points out that women had no role to play as they were totally excluded from all kinds of formal training or learning that would made them capable to perform the same role as males in the society. Thus the control of the upper caste males over Vedic learning and other rites that were being undertaken by them made it impossible to be undertaken by their female counterpart. Even as women were excluded from Vedic learning, yet they may had some idea on the non- formal learning of passing on ideas to their children which they may have received and that was passed down from one generation to another. While the role of the householder was enhanced within the household, women were confined within the four doors of the household clearly points out their subordinated position to the men.

III. Conclusion

In conclusion, life in the household as shown in the text offered not much choice for women. The only way for her to opt out from the household was only through death. Though there are some cases where one finds that women opted from the household only if they join the heretical sects. It can also be found that women who join the heretical sect received very little attention from the compliers. It can be said the development of Brahmanical ideas and philosophy as depicted in the text marks an important stage which attempted to lay down the models for the ideal *grha* to be followed by the households mainly for those who belonged to upper strata of the society. Thus it guaranteed that the patriarchal rules in the household were strictly kept in the hands of the male head since they had only the right to perform the various sacrifices and to take part in the various activities in the society. Though it is noticed that women did not have any major roles to play in the household as pointed out in the text, but there are some verses in the text which state that women were respected in the household.⁵⁵ It should be noted here that while women had limited roles to perform in the household as seen in the text, one has to adopt a more objective approach of looking at women beyond the roles they perform in the household. Therefore from the text one can clearly point out that a standard model was put forward in which both male and female had to perform in the society.

References

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- ³ This statement is very evident in the normative texts that were composed in the earlier periods before the composition of the *Manusmriti* where the main emphasis is put on the birth of the sons as compared to the birth of daughters.
- ⁴ All references regarding the *Manusmriti* are from Wendy Doniger and Brian .K. Smith, *The Laws of Manu*, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 2000.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xvii.
- ⁶ Regarding the time period of the *MS* there has been a debate among scholars regarding the composition of the *MS*. A group of scholars believed that the *Manusmriti* did not begin all of a sudden and at a fixed date, but the origin of the text lay in the older *sutras*. One of the earliest proponents of this hypothesis was Max Muller and his hypothesis gained currency among the other scholars like Buhler and Jolly. It is also argued that the original work underwent a number of additions, alterations before it reached the present form which is now. However regarding the extant of the *MS* there is sufficient evidence to believe that the text succeeded the *Dharma sutras* and preceded the other *Dharmastra*.
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- ⁸ Here Jaya Tyagi has made a reference to the Puranic texts (with reference to the *Matsyamahapurana*) while studying these texts, she makes a point by first looking into the content and context of the text while looking into the participation of women in ritual traditions. For details see, Jaya Tyagi, *Contestation and Compliance Retrieving Women's Agency From Puranic Traditions*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2014,p.4.
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- ¹⁹ MS. 3.2, 4.1.
- ²⁰ MS. 3.78.
- ²¹ MS. 3.5-6.
- ²² MS. 3.8-11.
- ²³ MS. 3.4.
- ²⁴ MS. 9.94.
- ²⁵ MS. 3.43-44.
- ²⁶ MS.9.96.
- ²⁷ MS.9.8.
- ²⁸ MS. 3.66.
- ²⁹ Uma Chakravarti, *Everyday Lives, Everyday Histories: Beyond Kings and Brahmanas of 'Ancient India'*, op.cit., 158.
- ³⁰ MS. 9.26-27.
- ³¹ MS. 3. 60- 63.
- ³² MS. 4.57, MS. 5.66, MS. 5.85.
- ³³ MS. 9.3, MS 9.6.
- ³⁴ MS. 5.147-148.
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- ³⁶ MS. 9.8-9.
- ³⁷ Kumkum Roy, *The Power of Gender and the Gender of Power*, op.cit., p.59.
- ³⁸ MS. 3. 262-263.
- ³⁹ The different types of marriage were the *Brahma, Arsa, Prajapatya, Daiva, Gandharva, Asura, Rakshasa and Paisaca*.
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- ⁴² MS. 2.29.
- ⁴³ MS. 2.33.
- ⁴⁴ MS. 3.67.
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- ⁴⁸ MS. 3. 68-70.
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