

Gendering Rituals in the *Dharmasūtras* and the *Manusmṛti*

This paper aims to illuminate the gendered nature of rituals described in the *Dharmasūtras* and the *Manusmṛti*. The *Dharmasūtras* are those of Gautama, Baudhāyana, Āpastamba and Vasiṣṭha. The *Dharmasūtras* belong to the time period c.600 B.C.-c.100 B.C. while the *Manusmṛti* is assigned the period c. 200B.C. – 200A.D..

The methodology that would be adopted for studying these texts would take into account their basic nature and characteristics. These textual works were the expressions of upper caste men and they targeted an audience comprising the same. They give a top-down view of society and are highly prescriptive in nature. Based on this narrow perspective, without a realization of it, if one was to build a description of society, (s)he would be erroneous. The texts also suffer from the dilemma of concentrating on the woman of the upper caste, thus marginalising the existence of lower caste women. The texts promote ‘Brahmanical Patriarchy’ which entails essentially two aspects- one, the suppression of the lower castes and two, the suppression and subordination of women. Inevitably, the presence of a dominant section in society necessitates the presence of a subordinate section and moreover, very often, the claim to superiority is not an uncontested one. The importance of legitimation for the firm establishment of a social hierarchy in such a case can hardly be overstated. That the Brahmanical authority was a contested one is indicated by the dire and persistent anxiety and the endeavour by the *Brāhmaṇa* authors to assert their superiority over the other castes. It is in this context and from this perspective, that the paper aims to study the category of rituals outlined in the texts.

Rituals are the means whereby social groups deal with biological or natural processes and convert them into events of social celebration. Rituals, then, not only function as important rites of passage but also and perhaps more importantly serve as symbols of both upper caste dominance as well as male dominance in a patriarchal and caste-stratified society. In the Brahmanical caste-stratified society, ritual knowledge was considered as the most significant form of knowledge and consequently, access to it was carefully regulated.

With a brief discussion of the forty rituals or sacraments enlisted in the texts, this paper would concentrate on the significant rituals of initiation (considered as the second birth of upper-caste men), marriage (including a discussion on the eight marriage rites and their appropriability for different *varṇas*, notion of *Kanyādāna*, bride-price and marriage being the equivalent of the ritual of initiation for women thus leading to their second birth, the

implications of the desire for a male child) and those associated with menstruation and childbirth (which aimed to ritually demote the procreative powers of women so as to overcome the male inferiority complex regarding sexuality). This paper would endeavour to illustrate how instead of celebrating female power, rituals condemned it and how, women were treated as second-class citizens devoid of souls, not capable of gaining final liberation. It would further demonstrate how sex in general and sexual association with the female in particular was regarded as ritually impure. The paper would conclude that women were treated as ritually impure by chiefly three means i) by not being allowed to chant Vedic mantras ii) by not allowing mantras to be chanted by the priests for women's rituals and iii) by not granting an independent status to women as regards the performance of rituals. Thus, in essence the paper would engage with how rituals were used to legitimise male control over both production and reproduction. Throughout the paper, the distinctiveness of the texts as regards the rituals would be recognised and pointed out.