

Nithin Sridhar, *Chatuh Shloki Manusmriti: An English Commentary*. New Delhi: Vitasta Publishing Pvt Ltd., 2025.

‘*Chatuh Shloki Manusmriti: An English commentary*’ by Nithin Sridhar is a book written in traditional *śāstric* (Indian classical text) style to explore the content and the context of the text *Manusmṛti* through a contemporary lens, deploying indigenous and traditional methodology.

The book is divided into two sections, in which the first section lays down an introduction to the text with articles exploring the epistemic nature of the text, its origination, transmission, authorship, and an attempt to understand an indigenous way to decode *Manusmṛti*. The second section has an extensive commentary on the first four verses of the *Manusmṛti*, which itself reflects the traditional approach of elaborating upon the classical Indian texts, as has been justified by the author in the preface of the book by presenting examples of texts where the opening four verses are focused upon, like *Brahmasūtra-Catuḥsūtrī* and *Catuḥśloki Bhāgavatam*. This is followed by three appendices, of which the first two examine a Hindu understanding of *varṇa-dharma*, and the last one is a *stutiḥ* composed by Kushagra Aniket for Svāmbhuva-Manu.

The first part of the book presents three chapters forming an introduction to the text. The first chapter contends that while the original author of *Manusmṛti* is the Svāyambhuva-Manu, its present form is the abridgment from the Bṛgu recension. The second chapter argues that *Manusmṛti* is a *śabda pramāṇa*, verbal testimony, for expounding dharma. The third chapter presents the deployment of native frameworks to revive the study of dharmaśāstras (traditional texts on the study of dharma) and contextualize their teaching to address contemporary issues.

In the second section, Sridhar follows a traditional commentary style for the first four verses of *Manusmṛti*. He explains the meaning of important Sanskrit terms, gives grammatical and philosophical analysis, and compares earlier commentarial traditions. The first verse is interpreted as establishing the authority of the master and the subject. Sridhar explains that the verse presents Manu as a teacher of dharma who speaks, having realized the knowledge rooted in the Vedas through his *ekāgratā*, one-pointed concentration. He gives the interpretation that the first verse serves as the *maṅgalācaraṇa* (the invocatory verse traditionally written at the beginning of a Hindu text for the successful completion of the work), and the first and the second verse also expound the *anubandha catuṣṭaya* (which is a classical Indian style of specifying the purpose of the text through four components, that is, *adhikārī*, appropriate audience, *viśaya*, subject, *sambandha*, relation between the text and the subject, and *prayojana*, aim of reading the text). The second verse mentions the

inquiry of the sages who approach Manu for guidance upon the subject matter of dharma and discusses the diversity acknowledged by the text and the path of equanimity or *samatva*n being adapted to seek the welfare and emancipation of the entire humanity. The third verse establishes the authority of the master and is discussed to posit that Svāyambhuva-Manu is an *āpta* or trustworthy person to give valid knowledge. Two interpretations of the meaning of the verse have been described. Commentary on the last verse explored the *guru-śiṣya paramparā*, the tradition of teacher-disciple relation in imparting knowledge, and discussed the significance of the term '*śrūyatām*', 'listen'.

Finally, the appendices function as responses to common criticisms and praise to the Svāyambhuva-Manu. The endnote mostly consists of the verses from the primary text cited to support the core contentions, along with a few arguments from the secondary sources.

The author has combined recent interpretations with a traditional framework, which challenges and presents an alternative to the examination of Indigenous concepts with a Western paradigm. He has utilized the *śāstric* methods of expounding the commentary by various means, for instance, explaining *anubandha catuṣṭaya*, amalgamating the expositions of prominent commentaries, elaborating on every word, and comparative analysis of the position of different schools of *darśana* (philosophy). In the second and third chapters of the first section, he has mentioned in detail the epistemic nature of the text as *śabda pramāṇa* propounding on the subject of dharma, and has deployed the *pramāṇa śāstra* (epistemological framework) of the traditional Indian philosophical schools. He has traced down the definitions of the terms through the *dhātu*, or the roots, from which the words have been derived, along with the definitions provided by scriptures, such as *Mīmāṃsā Śloka Vartikā*, and, renowned professors such as Dr. Bharat Gupta, which explores the etymological aspects of the terms for a proper understanding without any misinterpretations, another method deployed traditionally to grasp the meaning of the words and sentences as intended.

He began with the chapter on tracing the origination, transmission, and authorship of the text, for which he made citations from within the text of Manusmṛti as well as other texts such as *Mahābhārata*, *Bhaviṣya Purāṇa*, and *Skanda Purāṇa*, providing substantial evidence to support his central argument of the chapter that Manusmṛti is a text having unitary authorship with a long history of knowledge transmission of the subject matter of the text through successive abridgment in its current form, which is from the *Bhṛgu* recension. Along with making citations in agreement with this contention, he also made citations to reject the possibility of other recensions as the current available text to further support the argument. This shows his robust approach

to making a strong foundation for the arguments. The author has also highlighted that while the central principles of dharmaśāstras are inherently valid, their practical application may differ depending upon the socio-political context.

In the second chapter, the author attempts to establish *smṛtis* in general and Manusmṛti in particular as the *śabda pramāṇa*. For the same, he has taken recourse to first expanding upon the *pramāṇa śāstra*, specifically *śabda pramāṇa* as propounded by different theistic schools of philosophy, following which he moves ahead to establish that Manusmṛti is a *śabda pramāṇa* on the basis of arguments made within the text and arguments made in *Nyāya* and *Mīmāṃsā Darśana*. This again adopts the approach of substantiating the arguments from within the text as well as outside to make a strong contention. However, in this case, it may be observed that to conclude the validity of the Manusmṛti as *śabda pramāṇa*, while references from *Nyāyamañjarī* have been drawn to establish the validity of *smṛtis*, there is a major dependence on the verses from within the text itself to prove its own validity. Further, the conflict between *śruti* and *smṛti* is explicated, where ample references are made, which show that *śrutis* are to be kept at a higher authority because they are inherently valid, while *smṛtis* are inferentially valid based on Vedās. This justifies the conclusion that the conflicts do not outrightly challenge the authoritativeness of the *smṛti*, yet the other part of the conclusion that the conflict that arises is merely a 'choice of preference' between the two courses of action, probably requires more elaboration to be presented as a strong contention. The last section of the chapter described the purpose of *smṛtis* as *pramāṇa śāstra* to reveal the knowledge about dharma and to provide the knowledge about the causal relation of action and results, i.e., *karma* and *karmaphala*. This appears to be a valid contention on the basis of the context of *pramāṇa śāstra* established throughout the chapter, and also challenges the modern misinterpretation of understanding these texts as any commandment, lawbook, or constitution. The questions highlighted at the beginning of the chapter and the final words seem to be colloquial.

In the third chapter, the author has made an attempt to present an appropriate way to be able to understand the Manusmṛti as intended. The first two sections about defining dharma and acquiring its authentic knowledge, and the section dealing with the subject matter of *dharmaśāstra*, mostly expand upon the arguments laid down in the previous chapter. The third section of the chapter presents the way of *śraddhā* or trust to understand the text, instead of suspicion, as in the latter approach, to fill the void of the non-empirical nature of *śabda pramāṇa*, unnecessary speculations are made. This is a critique of the approach of analyzing a text on dharma through an ideological

or political lens. Additionally, different accounts of locating dharma (cosmologically, temporally, teleologically, functionally, and relationally) have been explored in the chapter to interpret the appropriate meaning from the text. For instance, the elaboration of cosmology in the first chapter is made to establish that exposition on cosmogony, which leads to *ātmajñāna* or self-knowledge, is also exposition on dharma, which is the highest dharma, and is a case of *nivṛtti* dharma. It is also concluded that worldly human duties are the limb of this dharma, forming *pravṛtti* dharma. This argument is well-founded on the basis of commentaries from Medhātithi and Kullūka Bhaṭṭa. Towards the end of the chapter, the author has also dealt with the contemporary debates concerning women in Manusmṛti. The author has argued that the verses are wrongly interpreted as confining a woman's pursuit of *artha* (wealth) and *kāma* (desires) because the subject matter pertains only to dharma. It is also important to note that the author has presented this teleologically as a *pravṛtti* dharma, which means that it relates to the worldly matters and not to the highest dharma of cosmogony and *ātmajñāna*. It is argued that in the worldly context, since biologically women are endowed with nurturing, their dharma is expatiated through a relational account. Nevertheless, it is acknowledged by the author in the commentary of the first verse that examples of women such as Meera Bai show that for women with intense *vairāgya*, detachment, the path of renunciation was always open. A few verses from Manusmṛti are also cited to highlight that men's obligations also involve service and relational duties. The meaning of dependence has been interpreted in terms of a characteristic trait of any group, which is applied to all the members of the group. This touches upon the traditional method of presenting objections and responding to them. However, the interpretation of the verses for which the case is made by the author may still deliver controversial meanings in the context of *pravṛtti* dharma itself, which needs more substantiation.

The commentaries have followed a traditional style of describing each and every word, followed by a discussion which includes a comparative analysis of different sūtras, bhāṣyas, smṛtis, and also encapsulates contemporary analysis. The commentaries have dealt in detail with the what aspect of the verses, to interpret the meanings conveyed appropriately through an Indic perspective. However, the why aspect of the meanings intended could also have been explored in more detail, which also is an approach followed in classical Indian texts through the *pūrvapakṣa* (which represents the position of rival or opponent, which also includes questions about the why aspect of the contention being made arguing for its futility) and *siddhānta* (through which the objection is critically analysed, responded and refuted, re-establishing the argument much more meticulously).

The text '*Chatuh Shloki Manusmriti: An English Commentary*' is an attempt made by Nithin Sridhar to reapproach the classical Indian text of the *dharmaśāstra*, *Manusmṛiti*, through the indigenous perspective to understand the text from the frameworks in which it has been elucidated. Sridhar has made a notable effort to follow the traditional approach of commentary, along with addressing contemporary challenges presented against the text, bridging the traditional and the modern methods of analysis. The arguments made are lucid and accessible, briefly touching upon illustrations of the most common objections, without entering into the nuances of the cycle of objections and responses often adapted in traditional commentarial style, which makes the text based on a traditional approach, along with being easy to understand by people unfamiliar with the classical style.

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