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Dharma, Nature, And Sustainability: An Ethical Study Of The Manusamhitā

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Abstract

The Manusamhitā long regarded as a foundational text in Indian legal and social thought, also contains a rich, though often overlooked, reservoir of ecological wisdom. At a time when environmental degradation threatens planetary health, this paper revisits the Manusamhitā through the lens of environmental ethics, revealing its relevance to contemporary ecological challenges. Far from being a relic of a bygone era, the text offers a sophisticated vision of human–nature relationships rooted in restraint, responsibility, and reverence for all forms of life.

Modern environmental ethics—shaped by thinkers such as Aldo Leopold, Peter Singer, Holmes Rolston, Tom Regan, and Paul Taylor—seeks to address the moral obligations of humans toward non-human entities and ecosystems. The Manusamhitā anticipates many of these concerns through its integrated cosmology and dharmic directives. It presents nature not as a passive resource but a living, sacred entity with intrinsic value and moral standing.

The paper examines Manu’s approach to plants, animals, and natural elements such as water, soil etc. Plants are recognized as sentient beings enveloped in tamas, and their destruction is subject to ethical scrutiny and penance. Animal welfare is approached with a nuanced balance between ritual practice and non-violence, advocating compassion and justice for all creatures. Environmental components like rivers, forests, and arable land are protected through detailed rules that prohibit pollution, waste, and overexploitation—offering a proto-legal framework for ecological preservation.

Through its analysis, the study demonstrates how the Manusamhitā advances a holistic ethical paradigm—one in which ecological sustainability is inseparable from spiritual and social duties. By reinterpreting ancient dharma in dialogue with contemporary ecological thought, the paper reveals the enduring significance of indigenous wisdom for shaping a sustainable and ethically grounded future.

Keywords: Ecological Wisdom, Sustainability, Animal Welfare, Sacred Nature.

Introduction :

At the dawn of creation, nestled in the pure lap of nature, life emerged and evolved through numerous favorable transformations, ultimately acquiring the ability to sustain itself. However, with the advancement of civilization, the unrestrained greed and irresponsible human actions have brought the natural world to the brink of catastrophe. Rising pollution has thrown the ecosystem in a state of severe imbalance.

Development is undoubtedly essential for human happiness and prosperity, but it must never come at the cost of ecological stability. True development should ensure that neither future generations nor any form of life suffers harm. Unfortunately, today's pursuit of development has been distorted by consumerism and unchecked desire. As a result, Mother Earth is facing relentless degradation. Unplanned urbanization and industrialization, reckless deforestation, overuse of pesticides, and uncontrolled spread of synthetic chemicals have severely disrupted ecological balance, leading to alarming changes in landforms and climate.

In the name of progress, humanity has abandoned its ethical compass and is chasing an illusion of artificial prosperity. Modern consumerism often rests on the dangerous assumption that only humans have the right to consume nature's resources, but this belief is fundamentally flawed. Nature is now pushing back. Scientific research demonstrates that excessive carbon emissions are rendering the planet increasingly inhospitable. Pollution-related diseases and deaths are on the rise. A global water crisis is emerging. Humanity, once blind in its pursuit of luxury, is now compelled to acknowledge its dependence on biodiversity and clean air.

In recent decades, environmental studies have gained worldwide importance. Researchers across science and the humanities are actively re-evaluating our relationship with nature. Economics has evolved into Environmental Economics, and biotechnology into Environmental Biotechnology. Fields like eco-conscious architecture, environmental journalism, and sustainable urban planning are flourishing. Importantly, a new philosophical domain—Environmental Ethics—has emerged to explore our moral obligations toward the natural world.

The Moral Basis of the Human-Nature Relationship :

The relationship between humans and nature is reciprocal and interdependent. When forests are destroyed for urban expansion, oxygen levels drop. When fossil fuels are overused, global warming intensifies. The widespread use of air conditioners and refrigerators leads to ozone depletion. When rivers are polluted by industrial waste clean water become scarce. When animals are hunted to extinction, ecosystem lose balance. These are not isolated events - they are deeply connected symptoms of our ethical neglect toward the environment.

Environmental Ethics aims to understand these interactions and provides a normative framework to guide human conduct toward nature. It is a relatively new academic field, introduced at the World Congress of Philosophy in 1973. Thinkers like Peter Singer and Tom Regan argue that morality should extend beyond humans to include all sentient beings. Earlier, in 1949, Aldo Leopold declared that any act preserving the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community is right; what harms it is wrong.

Today, Environmental Ethics includes not just animals, but also rivers, mountains, seas, forests—all elements of the ecosystem. Around the globe, the relevance and urgency of Environmental Ethics are being increasingly recognized. Numerous conferences and research initiatives are enthusiastically exploring the intersection of development, ethics, religion, and the environment.

Indian Ethical and Philosophical Approaches to nature :

However, the ethical awareness of environmental responsibility is not new to India. Centuries ago, Indian sages articulated deep compassion and moral concern toward nature. In the Vedic tradition, nature is revered as a goddess, as a mother—as both nurturing and powerful. Even when the Earth was used to meet human needs, ancient seers offered prayers to heal her wounds.

Not only the Vedas, but also the Upaniṣads, Rāmāyaṇa, Mahābhārata, Purāṇas, and Dharmasāstras have consistently emphasized our moral duties and responsibilities toward the natural world. Within this tradition, the Manusmṛiti offers profound and overlooked guidance on humanity's duty to environment.

Creation, Ecology, and Ethical Awareness in the Manusmṛiti :

Though primarily regarded as a text of religious, political, social, and judicial codes, the Manusmṛiti also conveys a deep ecological vision. In the first section, which depicts the Creation of the Universe, the sage Manu, in response to the sages' questions about Dharma, narrates the origin of the world—beginning with Brahmā and extending to the entire animate and inanimate cosmos. He states that in the beginning, the world was engulfed in darkness and lay dormant. At the end of the cosmic dissolution (pralaya), the all-powerful, unmanifest, inconceivable, subtle, and self-born Lord appeared in a great form to dispel the darkness. He first created water as the basis of life and cast into it the seed of his own energy. That seed, when placed in the water, transformed into a golden cosmic egg from which Brahmā himself was born (Manusmṛiti 1.6-1.9). He then gradually creates all living beings (Manusmṛiti 1.16).

Along with the creation of living beings, Brahmā also created various life-supporting elements—planets, stars, rivers, seas, mountains, plains, and uneven lands (Manusmṛiti 1.25). In this way, from the very outset, the Manusmṛiti emphasizes the simultaneous creation of life and environment. In describing the origin of life, Manu mentions not only plants and humans, but also animals, birds, fish, and even the tiniest creatures such as insects, mosquitoes, and flies (Manusmṛiti 1.39-1.40). Through this detailed enumeration, he alerts humankind to its ethical responsibilities and moral obligations toward the environment and all living beings.

There is considerable debate regarding the scope of environmental ethics. Some, like Peter Singer, argue that only sentient beings who are capable of feeling pain deserve moral consideration. According to Singer, non-sentient nature does not possess moral standing. Others, such as Holmes Rolston, reject this anthropocentric or sentience-based framework. They argue that all elements of nature, sentient or not, deserve moral consideration. Paul Taylor and Tom Regan propose that even if a being does not serve human interests, it still has intrinsic value. In contrast to these views, Manu presents an early example of deep ecology—valuing the entire natural system, from microbes to celestial bodies.

Āchārya Manu's Perspective on Plants :

Āchārya Manu, classifies plants such as oshadhi (medicinal herbs), vanaspati (trees bearing fruit without flowers), guccha (bushes), gulma (shrubs), and ballī (creepers). He identifies plants as sentient beings, capable of experiencing pleasure and pain, though the consciousness is veiled by tamas (Manusmṛiti 1.49). Through this realization, Manu seems to remind us that harming plants is not just unscientific—it is unethical.

Manu describes the cutting of medicinal plants or immature trees as a sinful act (pāpakṛtya) (Manusmṛiti 11.64, 11.65). He clearly mentions that one must undergo penance (prāyaścitta) if they cut down fruit-bearing trees, shrubs, creepers, vines, or cultivated plants without necessity (Manusmṛiti 11.142 -

11.144). This suggests that, in Manu's view, destroying plant life was considered a form of moral transgression.

Additionally, he advises the planting of long-living and environmentally significant trees—such as banyan (vaṭa), peepal (aśvattha), kinsuka, śālmālī, śāla, palm (tāla), and kṣīrī—along the boundaries of villages.

From these directives, it is evident that Āchārya Manu not only recognized the ecological importance of plants but also emphasized human gratitude, moral responsibility, and the necessity of their preservation. This view mirrors contemporary ideas of restoration ecology and environmental justice.

Principles of Animal Protection in the Manusmṛhitā :

Ācārya Manu believed that animal slaughter and cruelty toward animals are condemnable and harmful. According to him, all living beings are creations of God, and therefore, showing compassion and ensuring their protection is a moral duty of humans. Though, Manu permitted animal sacrifice for ritual purposes, but strictly forbade unnecessary killing and condemned meat consumption. He clearly stated that cruelty towards animals can never be a means to attain heaven (Manusmṛhitā 5.48). He emphasized that harming animals for personal pleasure prevents one from attaining happiness in this life or after death (Manusmṛhitā 5.45). In contrast, a person who refrains from harming and killing animals attains profound peace (Manusmṛhitā 5.46). The text further asserts that all participants in the process of animal slaughter—whether through action, permission, or consumption—are equally responsible (Manusmṛhitā 5.51).

He permitted limited dependence on animals during livelihood needs or times of crisis. Given the essential role of animals such as cows, buffaloes, and horses in agriculture and transportation, Manu instructed that their use must involve the least possible suffering (Manusmṛhitā 4.2).

Manu warns against neglect or mistreatment of domestic and agricultural creatures. For instance, if a cow went missing due to the herdsman's carelessness and was injured or killed by snakes, dogs, or other wild animals, or fell into a pit and met with an accident, the caretaker would be duly punished (Manusmṛhitā 8.232). Even if predators like wolves or jackals breached an animal enclosure and killed livestock, the responsibility—and thus the punishment—fell upon the herdsman (Manusmṛhitā 8.235).

Manu also mandated designated grazing lands for animals in both rural and urban settings (Manusmṛhitā 8.237). If animals consumed crops from open pastures, no penalty was imposed on the owner, but if it happened in enclosed fields, the caretaker or owner was punishable—yet under no condition were the animals themselves to be driven away or harmed (Manusmṛhitā 8.240– 8.241). Consumption of crops by cows or animals offered to deities within ten days of giving birth was not punishable. His call for grazing lands and protection of postpartum animals shows a sensitivity to animal welfare comparable to modern animal rights discourse.

He stated that anyone who kill asses, horses, camels, elephants etc. would incur the same sin as one born of a 'mixed caste' (Manusmṛhitā 11.68). Not only domestic animals - even wild and non-domesticated animals such as frogs, jackals, birds, and reptiles are included in his moral framework. For killing of insects, birds, cats, mongooses, frogs, dogs, monitor lizards, owls, crows, and similar creatures, specific penances were prescribed (Manusmṛhitā 11.131)

Most notably, as penance for cow slaughter, Manu ordered the guilty person to live wrapped in a cow's hide in the pasture and to bathe in cow urine (Manusmṛhitā 11.108–11.109). Through this, he did not merely emphasize ritual observance but attempted to build a moral and social structure for the protection of livestock and nature.

Through these injunctions, it becomes evident that Āchārya Manu upheld a unique perspective on animal compassion and environmental protection, which aligns remarkably well with modern environmental ethics. He can arguably be regarded as one of ancient India's foremost environmental moral philosophers, who clearly articulated humanity's responsibility to preserve the animal kingdom and the natural world.

Environmental Protection Regarding Inanimate Natural Resources :

Not only for living beings, Manu also demonstrated a highly conscious and farsighted attitude in his text toward the protection of inanimate elements of the environment. To prevent environmental harm from human waste, he strictly prohibited defecation and urination on roads, over ashes, in grazing lands, or on cultivated fields. Furthermore, such acts were also forbidden near rivers, water bodies, riverbanks, termite mounds, snake holes, mountains, and mountain peaks (Manusāṃhitā 4.45-4.47).

In ancient India, wells, ponds, rivers, and springs were primary sources of drinking and daily-use water. To prevent pollution of these water sources, Manu prohibited actions such as defecating, urinating, spitting, washing dirty clothes, or mixing poison in the water (Manusāṃhitā 4.56). According to Manu, defecating in water leads to a decline in one's intellect (Manusāṃhitā 4.52).

Taking a step further toward environmental protection, he advised the construction of wells, ponds, and reservoirs at the boundaries of villages (Manusāṃhitā 8.248). He considered it a punishable offense to waste water from public water sources or to steal water from someone else's pond. If someone broke a dam and caused water wastage, he was to be punished by drowning or sentenced to death through other means. However, if the guilty person rebuilt the dam, he could be freed by paying a monetary fine (Manusāṃhitā 9.279). Breaking dams was a crime, and even a bystander who failed to prevent such an act despite having the capacity to do so was also subject to punishment (Manusāṃhitā 9.274).

Although Manu valued agriculture, he advised Brāhmaṇas and Kṣatriyas to refrain from farming, since plowing the land could lead to the destruction of countless small creatures (Manusāṃhitā 10.83–10.84). Acknowledging the potential for land degradation due to farming, he emphasized that farmers must be knowledgeable about appropriate seeds and soil. He instructed that high-quality seeds should not be sown in infertile land (Manusāṃhitā 2.112). If a seller falsely claimed that non-viable seeds could germinate, or mixed inferior seeds with superior ones for sale, Manu prescribed strict penalties for such deceit.

Through these codes and prohibitions, Manu not only sought to prevent the unnecessary degradation of the water or land but also endeavored to cultivate a sense of ethical responsibility in humans toward environmental conservation.

Conclusion : A Timeless Ethical Foundation :

In today's era of climate crisis and ecological collapse, environmental ethics reminds us that nature is not merely a resource but a moral subject. Every component of nature has intrinsic value, and humanity bears a moral responsibility to treat them with care and respect. This ethical perspective is not a product of modern philosophy; rather, it is deeply reflected in the insights of ancient Indian thought.

Through the Manusāṃhitā, Āchārya Manu envisioned a world governed by environmental harmony, where humans do not dominate nature, but live in respectful coexistence with it. His principles of non-violence, conservation, and ecological justice align remarkably with today's most urgent environmental values. In a world grappling with climate change and biodiversity loss, Manu's vision offers not dogma, but a timeless ethical foundation for building a sustainable future.

In the Manusm̐hitā, we find not just a code of conduct, but a vision of ecological dharma—a world where all beings, animate and inanimate, are bound by moral interdependence. In rediscovering Manu’s wisdom, we reclaim an ancient path toward a sustainable and ethically grounded future.

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