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The Law Code Of Manu (Oxford World's Classics)



The Law Code of Manu

A new translation by Patrick Olivelle

OXFORD WORLD'S CLASSICS



Synopsis

The Law Code of Manu is the most authoritative and the best-known legal text of ancient India. Famous for fifteen centuries it still generates controversy, with Manu's verses being cited in support of the oppression of women and members of the lower castes. A seminal Hindu text, the Law Code is important for its classic description of so many social institutions that have come to be identified with Indian society. It deals with the relationships between social and ethnic groups, between men and women, the organization of the state and the judicial system, reincarnation, the workings of karma, and all aspects of the law. Patrick Olivelle's lucid translation is the first to be based on his critically edited text, and it incorporates the most recent scholarship on ancient Indian history, law, society, and religion.

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Book Information

Series: Oxford World's Classics

Paperback: 368 pages

Publisher: Oxford University Press; Reissue edition (August 3, 2009)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0199555338

ISBN-13: 978-0199555338

Product Dimensions: 7.6 x 1 x 5.1 inches

Shipping Weight: 9.1 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars See all reviews (5 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

I approached Manu's Dharmashastra with historical curiosity, braced for a tough read, but I was delightfully surprised to learn what an engaging, beautiful, and fascinating text this is. In twelve chapters the mythical author Manu describes the nature of the well-ordered society and focuses on

the role of the Brahmin within it. The Indologist Richard Gombrich describes "Dharma", awkwardly rendered by Olivelle as "Law", as corresponding to the medieval European concept of "Nature". Both terms undermine the normative/descriptive distinction; in this text's primary usage "Dharma" refers both to the essential nature of things and the way things ought to be. Manu is an archetypal figure in Indian religious thought going back to the Rig Veda. His function is the founder of the civilization and bestower of its organizing patterns of behavior. In this work he describes prototypical forms of life that the Brahmin should follow, nominally based on the Vedas, which are themselves considered to be architectonic of the coherent structure of the cosmos. The male Brahmin's life is presented in four life-stages, each with its attendant duties and obligations. The first stage is the student, in which the Brahmin learns the rites of recitation and sacrifice under the tutelage of the guru. The second is the householder, in which the Brahmin raises and safeguards the family. When the Brahmin becomes gray and sees his grandchildren, he enters the third stage and is to retire to the forest to undertake austerities, yoga, and meditation.

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