

## Cast(e)aways? Women in Classical India

(200 CE, 6th c. CE)

**1886. *The Law of Manu: The Sacred Books of the East*. Edited by F. Max Müller. Oxford: Clarendon Press.**

### Poems:

**1991. "Women Writing in India." 600 B.C. to the Present. Edited by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita. New York: The Feminist Press.**

*Gender relations and the societal conditions experienced by women became a topic of intense study and debate in the second half of the twentieth century. Central to that study are the place of religion and its impact on the experience of women throughout history. Hindu beliefs, as expressed in the Vedic literature, placed the Indian woman in a thoroughly subservient position within the caste system. Her entire life was circumscribed by rigid laws, and even in death she could not guarantee escape from domination by men.*

*The Law of Manu offers one of the clearest statements of dharma as it relates to Hindu women. Jainism and Buddhism offered little in the way of improving the lot of Indian women, though the Buddha reluctantly agreed to accept female nuns among his followers. In striking contrast to the strictures related by the scribe Manu are the second and third selection included below: poems by two Buddhist nuns, Mutta and Sumangalamata. Though still treated as second-class citizens, the two women revel in the freedom of their unique social position.*

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### **The Law of Manu**

By a girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house.

In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent.

She must not seek to separate herself from her father, husband, or sons; by leaving them she would make both (her own and her husband's) families contemptible.

She must always be cheerful, clever in (the management of her) household affairs, careful in cleaning her utensils, and economical in expenditure.

Him to whom her father may give her, or her brother with the father's permission, she shall obey as long as he lives, and when he is dead, she must not insult (his memory).

For the sake of procuring good fortune to (brides), the recitation of benedictory texts and the sacrifice to the Lord of creatures are used at weddings; (but) the betrothal (by the father or guardian) is the cause of (the husband's) dominion (over his wife).

The husband who wedded her with sacred texts, always gives happiness to his wife, both in season and out of season, in this world and in the next.

Though destitute of virtue, or seeking pleasure (elsewhere), or devoid of good qualities (yet) a husband must be constantly worshipped as a god by a faithful wife.

No sacrifice, no vow, no fast must be performed by women apart (from their husbands); if a wife obeys her husband, she will for that (reason alone) be exalted in heaven.

A faithful wife, who desires to dwell (after death) with her husband, must never do anything that might displease him who took her hand, whether he be alive or dead.

At her pleasure let her emaciate her body by (living on) pure flowers, roots, and fruit; but she must never even mention the name of another man after her husband has died.

Until death let her be patient (of hardships), self-controlled, and chaste, and strive (to fulfil) that most excellent duty which (is prescribed) for wives who have one husband only.

Many thousands of Brâhmanas who were chaste from their youth, have gone to heaven without continuing their race.

A virtuous wife who after the death of her husband constantly remains chaste, reaches heaven, though she have no son, just like those chaste men.

But a woman who from a desire to have offspring violates her duty towards her (deceased) husband, brings on herself disgrace in this world, and loses her place with her husband (in heaven).

Offspring begotten by another man is here not (considered lawful), nor (does offspring begotten) on another man's wife (belong to the begetter), nor is a second husband anywhere prescribed for virtuous women.

She who cohabits with a man of higher caste, forsaking her own husband who belongs to a lower one, will become contemptible in this world, and is called a remarried woman.

By violating her duty towards her husband, a wife is disgraced in this world, (after death) she enters the womb of a jackal, and is tormented by diseases (the punishment of) her sin.

She who, controlling her thoughts, words, and deeds, never slights her lord, resides (after death) with her husband (in heaven), and is called a virtuous (wife).

In reward of such conduct, a female who controls her thoughts, speech, and actions, gains in this (life) highest renown, and in the next (world) a place near her husband.

### **Poems from Two Buddhist Nuns**

#### **MUTTA**

So free am I, so gloriously free,  
Free from three petty things --  
From mortar, from pestle and from my twisted lord,  
Freed from rebirth and death I am,  
And all that has held me down  
Is hurled away.

#### **SUMANGALAMATA**

A woman well set free! How free I am,  
How wonderfully free, from kitchen drudgery.  
Free from the harsh grip of hunger,  
And from empty cooking pots,  
Free too of that unscrupulous man,  
The weaver of sunshades.  
Calm now, and serene I am,  
All lust and hatred purged.  
To the shade of the spreading trees I go  
And contemplate my happiness.



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