

Laws of Manu

- Date** ■ Unknown, probably around 100 B.C. based on earlier practices
- Place** ■ Unknown, probably northern India
- Type of Source** ■ Religious text/law code (original in Sanskrit)
- Author** ■ Unknown, attributed to Manu, the father of humanity
- Historical Context** ■ Hinduism is believed to have developed out of the Aryan migrations into India (see *Atlas of World History*, page 25). After about 500 B.C., Hinduism faced challenges from new ideas including Buddhism, Jainism, and Greek philosophy. After the fall of the Mauryan Empire, scholars believe the higher castes, the Brahmins and Ksatriya, were concerned about the breakdown in social order. As a result, they compiled various customs and traditions into a single source, the *Manusmriti* (Laws or Traditions of Manu).
- Internal Context** ■ After explaining the different duties of each caste and appropriate consequences for obedience and disobedience, Manu goes on to describe *karma* (action), the universal law controlling a soul's ultimate fate.

Chapter XII

1. **O sinless One**, the whole sacred law, [applicable] to the four **castes**, has been declared by thee; communicate to us [now], according to the truth, the ultimate retribution for [their] deeds.'
2. To the **great sages** [who addressed him thus] righteous **Bhrigu**, sprung from Manu, answered, 'Hear the decision concerning this whole connection with actions.'
3. **Action**, which springs from the mind, from speech, and from the body, produces either good or evil results; by action are caused the [various] conditions of men, the highest, the middling, and the lowest.
4. Know that the mind is the instigator here below, even to that [action] which is connected with the body, [and] which is of three kinds, has three locations, and falls under ten heads.
5. Coveting the property of others, thinking in one's heart of what is undesirable, and adherence to false [doctrines], are the three kinds of [sinful] mental action.
6. Abusing [others, speaking] untruth, detracting from the merits of all men, and talking idly, shall be the four kinds of [evil] verbal action.
7. Taking what has not been given, injuring [creatures] without the sanction of the law, and holding criminal intercourse with another man's wife, are declared to be the three kinds of [wicked] bodily action.
8. [A man] obtains [the result of] a good or evil mental [act] in his mind, [that of] a verbal [act] in his speech, [that of] a bodily [act] in his body.
9. In consequence of [many] sinful acts committed with his body, a man becomes [in the next birth] something **inanimate**, in consequence [of sins] committed by speech, a bird, or a beast, and in consequence of mental [sins he is re-born in] a low caste.

O Sinless One *Manu*

castes

Social groups rigidly defined from birth. In this case, they refer to varnas, the broadest groups, rather than the much smaller jati, which are also translated as caste. (See the Caste System chart on the website.)

great sages

Sanskrit: maharishi. Ten maharishi were taught the laws by Manu. They spread the laws to their students.

Bhrigu

Bhrigu is one of the maharishis. He is also credited with developing astrology.

Action

karma, the consequence of good and evil

inanimate

not living. According to Hindu tradition, all things including non-living objects and abstract ideas have souls. How these souls function is complex and very different from souls in humans, animals, or plants.

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10. That man is called a [true] **tridandin** in whose mind these three, the control over his speech, the control over his thoughts, and the control over his body, are firmly fixed.
11. That man who keeps this threefold control [over himself] with respect to all created beings and wholly subdues desire and wrath, thereby assuredly gains complete success...
26. Goodness is declared [to have the form of] knowledge, Darkness [of] ignorance, Activity [of] love and hatred; such is the nature of these [three] which is [all-] pervading and clings to everything created.
27. When [man] experiences in his soul a [feeling] full of bliss, a deep calm, as it were, and a pure light, then let him know [that it is] among those three [the quality called] Goodness.
28. What is mixed with pain and does not give satisfaction to the soul one may know [to be the quality of] Activity, which is difficult to conquer, and which ever draws embodied [souls towards sensual objects].
29. What is coupled with delusion, what has the character of an undiscernible mass, what cannot be fathomed by reasoning, what cannot be fully known, one must consider [as the quality of] Darkness.
30. I will, moreover, fully describe the results which arise from these three qualities, the excellent ones, the middling ones, and the lowest.
31. The study of the **Vedas**, austerity, [the pursuit of] knowledge, purity, control over the organs, the performance of meritorious acts and meditation on the Soul, [are] the marks of the quality of Goodness.
32. Delighting in undertakings, **want** of firmness, commission of sinful acts, and continual indulgence in sensual pleasures, [are] the marks of the quality of Activity.
33. Covetousness, sleepiness, **pusillanimity**, cruelty, atheism, leading an evil life, a habit of soliciting favours, and inattentiveness, are the marks of the quality of Darkness.
34. Know, moreover, the following to be a brief description of the three qualities, each in its order, as they appear in the three [times, the present, past, and future].
35. When a [man], having done, doing, or being about to do any act, feels ashamed, the learned may know that all [such acts bear] the mark of the quality of Darkness.
36. But, when [a man] desires [to gain] by an act much fame in this world and feels no sorrow on failing, know that it [bears the mark of the quality of] Activity.
37. But that [bears] the mark of the quality of Goodness which with his whole [heart] he desires to know, which he is not ashamed to perform, and at which his soul rejoices.

tridandin

literally: keeper of three vows. A tridandin controls his/her thought, speech, and action.

Vedas

The Vedas were the original poem-prayers of Hinduism. The term also means all the wisdom of the ancient Hindus and gods.

want

in this case, lack

pusillanimity

cowardice

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38. The craving after sensual pleasures is declared to be the mark of Darkness, [the pursuit of] wealth [the mark] of Activity, [the desire to gain] spiritual merit the mark of Goodness; each [later] named quality [is] better than the preceding one.
39. I will briefly declare in due order what **transmigrations** in this whole [world a man] obtains through each of these qualities.
40. Those endowed with Goodness reach the state of gods, those endowed with Activity the state of men, and those endowed with Darkness ever sink to the condition of beasts; that is the threefold course of transmigrations.
41. But know this threefold course of transmigrations that depends on the [three] qualities [to be again] threefold, low, middling, and high, according to the particular nature of the acts and of the knowledge [of each man].
42. Immovable [beings], insects, both small and great, fishes, snakes, and tortoises, cattle and wild animals, are the lowest conditions to which [the quality of] Darkness leads.
43. Elephants, horses, **Sudras**, and despicable barbarians, lions, tigers, and boars [are] the middling states, caused by [the quality of] Darkness.
44. **Karanas**, **Suparnas** and hypocrites, **Rakshasas** and **Pisakas** [belong to] the highest [rank of] conditions among those produced by Darkness.
45. **Ghallas**, **Mallas**, **Natas**, men who subsist by despicable occupations and those addicted to gambling and drinking [form] the lowest [order of] conditions caused by Activity.
46. Kings and **Kshatriyas**, the domestic priests of kings, and those who delight in the warfare of disputations [constitute] the middling [rank of the] states caused by Activity.
47. The **Gandharvas**, the **Guhyakas**, and the servants of the gods, likewise the **Apsarases**, [belong all to] the highest [rank of] conditions produced by Activity.
48. Hermits, **ascetics**, **Brahmanas**, the crowds of the **Vaimanika** deities, the **lunar mansions**, and the **Daityas** [form] the first [and lowest rank of the] existences caused by Goodness.
49. Sacrificers, the sages, the gods, the Vedas, the **heavenly lights**, the years, the **manes**, and the **Sadhyas** [constitute] the second order of existences, caused by Goodness.
50. The sages declare **Brahma**, the creators of the universe, the law, the Great One, and the Undiscernible One [to constitute] the highest order of beings produced by Goodness.

transmigrations

the translator's word for samsara. Today they are more commonly called reincarnations.

Sudras

the caste of peasants and laborers

Karanas

people with parents from two different castes

Suparnas

a race of bird-people

Rakshasas

man-eating monsters who live in solitary places

Pisakas

a type of flesh-eating demon

Ghallas, Mallas

low Dalit (untouchable) castes

Natas

low-caste dancers and entertainers

Kshatriyas

the caste of warriors and aristocrats, also spelled Ksatriya

Gandharvas

male nature spirits that serve as messengers between the gods and humans.

Guhyakas

guardian spirits of Kubera, the god of wealth

Apsarases

female spirits similar to Greek nymphs or muses, also the wives of the Gandharvas

ascetics

people who deny themselves all comfort

Brahmanas

usually spelled Brahmins, the caste of priests

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51. Thus [the result] of the threefold action, the whole system of transmigrations which [consists] of three classes, [each] with three subdivisions, and which includes all created beings, has been fully pointed out.
52. In consequence of attachment to [the objects of] the senses, and in consequence of the non-performance of their duties, fools, the lowest of men, reach the vilest births.
53. What wombs this individual soul enters in this world and in consequence of what actions, learn the particulars of that at large and in due order.
54. Those who committed **mortal sins** [mahapataka], having passed during large numbers of years through dreadful hells, obtain, after the expiration of [that term of punishment], the following births...

Manu then goes on to list what offenses result in which types of births.

Vaimanika
lesser gods

lunar mansions
the creatures that make up the "lunar zodiac" in astrology, also called the wives of the moon

Daityas
a race of giants

heavenly lights
stars

manes
ancestral spirits

Sadhyas
a type of god

Brahma
The most enlightened souls unite with Brahma the Creator. This union is called moksha and is the ultimate goal of all Hindus.

mortal sins
the worst possible offenses

Source: "Laws of Manu, Chapter 12," *Internet Sacred Texts*, n.d., <<http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/manu/manu12.htm> > (May 19, 2011).