

THE STATUS OF WOMAN
IN ANCIENT INDIA:
COMPULSIVES OF THE
PATRIARCHAL ORDER

The status a society assigns to woman largely depends upon the basic structure of that society itself. While considering the emergence of the traditional social structure in India, it is interesting to see how diverse struggling racial groups became parts of an integrated hierarchical society in which the invading immigrants formed the elite stratum. We also see how the values of the elite stratum were forcefully imposed on the integrated culture that emerged as a result of this interaction, how the immigrants suffering from a deep-seated feeling of insecurity performed various rites and rituals to ward off the fear of extermination; how the womenfolk belonging to a stock which was not only racially and culturally different but inimical too, were given a low position; and how due to extraneous origin of womenfolk a feeling of suspicion against them was deeply ingrained in the society.

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It is also remarkable how the elites resisted social change. Whenever conditions of change occurred, it was the elite who fought them with the revival of older norms. This revival had to be selective, so that it might be acceptable to the society. It often happened that some popular values and norms found their way into the established structure, while some old customs were rejected in order to win the confidence of the people. This happened probably because the elites wanted to maintain their privileged position, which they might have lost as a result of a basic change. The works of the revivalist era evolved a whole logical and consistent scheme, which even the exploited classes eventually internalized.

The evolution of the status of woman in India has been a continuous process through several millenia. Many socio-cultural factors internal and external are responsible for its molding. Ancient texts from Vedas onwards bear testimony to the vicissitudes through which the life of women passed in the course of the long social and cultural history of India. Vedas preserved the earliest records of the great struggle which took place around 1500 B.C. This struggle between the invading Aryans and the earlier settlers not only changed entirely the status of woman but demolished the earlier socio-cultural structure. The matrilineal order was replaced by the patriarchal one. It was natural for the victorious Aryans to be suspicious of their wives who were enslaved forcefully by them. Thus the low assessment of woman was embedded in the very roots of Indian social structure.

Around the second century B.C. the older social structure had been slackened by many social, political and religious forces. These forces were Buddhism, Jainism and the non-Aryan invaders. To retaliate against these forces and to revitalize the society, the revival of old norms was essential. *Manu Smṛti*, the Veda of Brahmanical revival, pre-eminently deserves the credit for consolidation of old norms. To provide a sound foundation to the patriarchal social structure, *Manu* vigorously asserted the Vedic norms and values. The natural consequence was a strong setback to the status of woman. The later *Smṛtis*, epics and systems of metaphysics supplemented *Manu Smṛti*. The status assigned to woman in Vedas is definitely subordinate to that of man.

Vedic Aryans had a strong patriarchal order. But many of them had to take wives from people among whom matriliney was perhaps prevalent. This was an immediate threat to their own cultural heritage. This made them all the more strict towards woman. In Brahmanas, there is ample evidence that people were suspicious of their wives. We come across many passages which are very uncomplimentary to woman. In the Grhya Sutras many marital and post-marital rites are prescribed in order to divert the evil substance in the bride towards her presumed lover.

The process of degrading the position of woman was further accelerated in the era of the first Brahmanical revival during which the Manu Smṛti was composed, that is, around the second century B.C. This was an era of crisis. The old vedic norms were breaking up due to threats which came from many sides. The most vigorous challenge was from Buddhism. Another threat was posed by non-Aryan popular heterodox religious sects. Still another came in the shape of foreign invaders—the Greeks, the Parthians, the Sakas and the Kusanas who were settling in India. These invaders were very close in their physical features to the recognized attributes of the Brahmana Varna. They fitted in very well with the criteria of fair complexion and blonde hair as characteristics of a Brahmana propounded by Patañjali.¹

Systems of philosophy and legal codes seem to have developed in such a way so as to support these social norms. Certain systems of metaphysics personified the material cause of world or Prakṛti or Maya as the wife of the Puruṣa or ultimate Reality. This provides a metaphysical justification to the role which woman actually enjoys in the traditional social order. Similarly the theory of Karma explains her low position as a consequence of sins incurred in previous births. The law gives also maintained conformity to these norms. Woman was not considered a full legal person. Religion too played its part. Plentiful heavenly rewards were promised to boost the morale of the woman who abided by these norms despite hardships.

WOMAN IN THE VEDIC TIMES

It appears that among pre-Aryan settlers woman occupied a position which was somewhat equal to that of man. Women

¹ *Mahabhasya of Patanjali*, II. 2.6.

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fought in the battlefield together with menfolk. In RgVeda, Indra refers to Dasa Sambara with contempt, because his army consisted of woman soldiers: "The Dasa Sambara made woman his instrument, what can his Abala or vigorless army do to mine?"² The word Abala became a synonym for woman, and this use of the word is current even now.

During the period of their expansion, the Aryans abducted women on a large scale from the subjugated enemy as war booty, and turned them into wives. It is remarkable that the word 'Vadhu' is used both for bride and female slave in RgVeda.³ The following general principle enunciated in AtharvaVeda supports this hypothesis: "When a Brahmana grasps the hand of a woman, though she be married, she becomes his wife."⁴

In RgVeda we find certain disparaging remarks about woman. The poet asserts that "Indra ordained that women have non-controllable minds, therefore they must see downwards not upwards."⁵ Urvashi consoles Pururava with the words that the friendship of woman does not last; they have the hearts of hyenas.⁶

Many hymns of RgVeda expressly mention the existence of polygamy. Aryans aspired for many wives. Their gods and kings or tribal leader aided them in their wish fulfilment. Many hymns praised the two Asvins for providing good consorts. "They made Cyavana the husband of many maidens."⁷ Similarly King Trasdasyu gave fifty brides to Sorabhi at the bank of Suvastu river.⁸ Vasistha also got many brides seated on two chariots from King Sudasa.⁹ However the unenviable plight of a man with many wives also finds vivid portrayal. A man who had fallen in a well is compared to the husband of many wives; for he was obstructed and made miserable from many sides.¹⁰

The feeling of rivalry among co-wives is well reflected in

² *RgVeda*, V. 30.9.

³ *RgVeda*, VIII. 19. 36-37.

⁴ *AtharvaVeda*, V. 17. 8-9.

⁵ *RgVeda*, VIII. 33. 17-19.

⁶ *RgVeda*, X. 95.15.

⁷ *RgVeda*, X. 116.10.

⁸ *RgVeda*, VIII. 19. 36-37.

⁹ *RgVeda*, VII. 18-22.

¹⁰ *RgVeda*, I. 105.8.

Vedic hymns. These hymns are very near to folksongs in their content and tenor. Feminine jealousy finds forceful expression. We find mention of certain herbs which are supposed to have the power of keeping away the other co-wife from the husband's favor. Indrani, the archetypical woman, gives vent to her feelings thus:

I dig out this most potent drug
Through which a co-wife is obstructed and the husband is won.
O, the beloved of gods! strong! beautiful! and one whose leaves are up!
May you keep away my co-wife, the husband may belong only to me.
O the best (Uttara) one! May I be the best (Uttara!)!
May I be the best among the best.
While my co-wife be the lowest (Adhara) among the low.
I do not speak her name, I do not like that person;
I send the co-wife even farther than far away.
O herb! I am strong and so art thou,
May both of us being strong crush my co-wife.¹¹

In ArthavaVeda a wife who has taken over all the possessions of the co-wife wishes that the co-wife may not come back from her parent's house:

I am taking all the property of that wretch [co-wife],
All the riches, as if I am making a garland of flowers from the tree,
Just as a big mountain with its large base stands there forever,
May she too for ages get stuck in her parents' house.

Her envious sentiments find no limit. She seeks the help even of the god of death in her mission:

"O Yama may that woman be capable of becoming your wife,
Till then may she remain fortunate with her mother, with her father, with her brother."¹²

¹¹ *RgVeda*, X. 145.

¹² *AtharvaVeda*, I. 14.

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Certain hymns of RgVeda portray the woman as proud, dominant and full of vigor:

“The sun arose (as if) my luck arose,
Knowing that I the victorious one, control my husband.
I am ardent and I speak beautifully,
May my husband follow me.
My sons are killers of enemy, my daughter is brilliant.
I am the best winner, my husband has best hymns for me.”¹³

The later Vedic literature inherited the norms of RgVeda. Taittiriya Samhita justified polygamy in a very simple way on the basis of ritual: “He ties two ropes to the sacrificial post, therefore a man marries two wives; he does not tie one rope on two sacrificial posts, therefore a wife does not marry two husbands.”¹⁴ Aitareya Brahmana says similarly: “Therefore a person marries many wives but a wife cannot have many husbands.”¹⁵ For a king besides the Mahisi or consecrated queen, Satapatha Brahmana mentions three other categories of wives: Vavata or the favorite wife, Parivrakta or the discarded wife and Palagali or the low caste wife.¹⁶

The position of woman shows a perceptible decline with the passage of time. Taittiriya Samhita says: “Therefore woman is without senses, not capable of inheriting, and lower even to a sinful man.”¹⁷ The feeling of suspicion towards the fidelity of the wife also finds expression. Maitrayani Samhita says that: “Woman is falsehood because though bought by her husband she lives with others.” The same Samhita provides that Sabha should not be attended by woman.¹⁸

In Satapatha Brahmana during the performance of the Varunapraghasa¹⁹ offerings the sacrificer’s wife has to confess her extraconjugal relationships before the Pratiprasthata priest.

¹³ *RgVeda*, X. 159. It is interesting that just like contemporary Indian folk-songs this hymn mentions a number of sons but only one daughter.

¹⁴ *Taittiriya Samhita*, VI. 6.4.3.

¹⁵ *Aitareya Brahmana*, XII. 11.

¹⁶ *Satapatha Brahmana*, XIII. 4.1.9.

¹⁷ *Taittiriya Samhita*, VI 5.8.2.

¹⁸ *Maitrayani Samhita*, I. 10.11; IV. 7.4.

¹⁹ These offerings are given to Varuna in order to deliver one’s progeny from Varuna’s noose.

The priest leads the sacrificer's wife aside. "He asks her 'With whom holdest thou intercourse? Now when a woman who belongs to one (man) carries on intercourse with another, she undoubtedly commits (a sin) against Varuna. He therefore asks her thus, lest she should sacrifice with a secret pang in her mind; for when confessed the sin becomes less, since it becomes truth, this is why he thus asks her. And whatever (connection) she confesses not, that indeed will turn out injurious to her relatives.'"²⁰ The underlying principle is that confession before the priest destroys the sin.

Chastising womanfolk seems to be a normal practice. In Satapatha Brahmana it is asserted that even the gods used to do this occasionally, therefore men should also do likewise. The Satapatha Brahmana states: "*Ghee* or clarified butter is a thunderbolt, and by that thunderbolt, the *ghee*, the gods smote their wives and unmanned them, and thus smitten and unmanned they neither owned any self nor did they own any heritage. And in like manner does he now, by that thunderbolt, the *ghee*, smite the wives and unman them, and thus smitten and unmanned, they neither own any self nor do they own any heritage."²¹

The feeling of suspicion towards the wife finds an even stronger expression in the marital and post marital rituals prescribed in Grhya Sutras. The wife is supposed to bring some evil elements with her, which can harm her husband, his forthcoming progeny, cattle, house and fame. Sensing these dangers, the husband performs prayer to direct these elements towards his wife's earlier lover or spouse. On the fourth day after the marriage ceremony, before the consummation of the marriage, a fire sacrifice is made in which after offering each oblation the husband pour the remainder of the oblation into the water pot, and out of that pot he sprinkles it on her head with words: "The evil substance which dwells in thee that brings death to thy husband, death to thy children, death to cattle, destruction to the house, destruction to fame, that I change into one that brings death to thy paramour. Thus live with me to old age."²²

²⁰ *Satapatha Brahmana*, II. 5.2.20.

²¹ *Satapatha Brahmana*, IV. 4.2.13.

²² *Shankhayana Grhya Sutra*, I. 18.3.

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We can witness the gradually lowering position of woman through the successive texts. In Vedas men used to acquire wives without any guilt just by grasping their hands though they be married. They did not mind the existence of their former husbands. In Brahmanas, during ritual, the wives had to confess their extra-marital relations, if any. In Ghrya Sutras it is presumed that every woman had a lover who wanted to harm the husband and his property. To forestall this threat the husband had to seek the help of various gods. In Smrtis, despite the fact that girls were married away at a very tender age, we find a great deal of suspicion about the character of woman.

The essential attitude towards a daughter which still prevails in Indian society seems to have taken shape long ago. The birth of the daughter was considered undesirable in the later Vedic times just as it is regarded even now. In many later Vedic texts we find derogatory remarks regarding the daughter. Taittiriya Samhita says: "The daughter is left aside after she takes birth while the son is gladly accepted."²³ Aitareya Brahmana calls a daughter "an insult" while the son is described as the "light of the highest heaven."²⁴ Sutras prescribe a number of prenatal rituals to ensure the birth of a male child. In Smrtis the "mother of female children is equated to a barren woman."²⁵

SUPPORT OF MYTH, METAPHYSICS, AND LAW TO THE LOW STATUS OF WOMAN

The generally low estimate of woman in the patriarchal social structure induced the law-givers to prescribe an early marriage for girls in order to combat the influence of matriarchy prevalent among the earlier settlers. Gautama Dharma Sutra prescribes that girls should be given in marriage before they attain puberty.²⁶ The difference of age between the bride and bridegroom does not seem to be much in the Sutras because a boy of seventeen, who has completed his studies, is described as an eligible suitor. But in Smrtis the difference between the respective ages of bride

²³ *Taittiriya Samhita*, V. 10.3.

²⁴ *Aitareya Brahmana*, XXXII. 1.

²⁵ *Narada Smrti*, XII. 94.

²⁶ *Gautama Dharma Sutra*, XVIII. 20.30.

and bridegroom became excessively pronounced. Manu prescribes that a man of thirty should marry a maiden of twelve or a man of twentyfour, a girl of eight. This difference of age ensured the full dependence of woman on man and male superiority over her.

The Vedic literature explains the conjugal relationship through the analogy of Dyu and Prthvi or heaven and earth. This myth of divine parents of the universe probably originated in the remote past among the Indo-Aryans, long before they entered the Indian sub-continent. Heaven and earth are complements of a single whole. Father heaven makes the earth pregnant through rains, and "beings of manifold forms grow."²⁷ On the other hand the imputed parenthood of heaven and earth is transferred to the human couple. A *mantra* of Arthava Veda recited by the bridegroom at the time of the wedding says: "I am Dyau, you are Prthvi."²⁸ This *mantra* was adopted by many Grhya Sutras. The implicit idea seems to be that though the earth is the mother of all beings yet the beings manifest the divine father. Like the parents of the universe the husband and wife too form a single whole. In Satapatha Brahmana it is said, "The wife is indeed the half of one's self. Therefore, as long as a man does not secure a wife, as long as he does not beget a son until then he is not complete or whole. But when he secures a wife and begets progeny, he becomes complete."²⁹ The son is the manifestation of the father. In RgVeda, a father prays, "O Fire may I enjoy immortality through the children."³⁰ Nirukta also says: "The son is my own self. May he live a hundred autumns."³¹ This idea found even more vivid expression in Kausitaki Upanisad: "One's own self takes birth as the son."³²

The generally low estimate of woman influenced her role as mother too. Since motherhood is dependent on the seed that the father bestows, she is considered lower. Auddalika, as referred to by Vatsyayana in the Kama Sutra asserts: "The woman

²⁷ *RgVeda*, VI. 70.

²⁸ *Atharva Veda*, XIV. 11.71.

²⁹ *Satapatha Brahmana*, V. 2.I. 10.

³⁰ *RgVeda*, V. 8. 10.

³¹ *Nirukta*, III. 4.

³² *Kausitaki Upanisad*, II. 11.

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cannot enjoy the act of creation, for she does not contain the seeds. Her joy is only the reflection of the Man's joy."³³

The myth of divine parents of the universe survived in *Manu Smṛti* also. It equates the woman to the field or *Ksetra* and man to the seed; and after some discussion as to which of the two is more important it is concluded that seed is more important because the "offsprings of all created beings are marked by the characteristics of the seed." To further emphasize the idea the *Smṛti* writer says that though earth is called the primeval womb of created beings, the properties reflected in the created beings are not of earth but of the seed."³⁴

The role of woman in procreation is minimized to such an extent that the seed of man is considered efficacious enough to produce a child even without the aid of woman. In *Mahabharata* we find that the great teacher, *Drona*, was born because of semen falling into a *Drona*, a vessel of wood. Certain metaphysical systems which grew up in ancient Indian society provide an elaborate cosmic justification for the dependent and low status of woman.

In the *Sankhya* and *Advaita* philosophical systems, the relationship of woman and man is imputed to the supreme being and *Prakṛti* or *Maya*. Through this analogy many attributes of nature were transferred to woman also.

Thus a similarity between the macrocosm and the microcosm was established. The role of the ultimate reality was conceived as that of a powerful patriarch who manifests himself through *Maya* or Nature in the form of creation. Though *Prakṛti* or *Maya* has been recognized as the mother of the universe, the fatherhood of the Lord overshadows her because it is the Lord who has been manifested. Similarly it is the patriarch who creates his family; woman is only his instrument or medium.

The theory of *Karma* too played an important part in justifying the social system and in inducing woman to reconcile herself to her lot as the natural consequence of her own deeds in past lives.

The legal ideas provide further support to patriarchy. *Satapatha Brahmana* and other texts call woman "*Adaya*" or one who does not inherit. The law-givers following it provided no share in

³³ *Vatsyayana*, *Kamasutra* Madhavacarya ed. (Bombay, Laxmi Venkateshwar Steam Press, 1934), Vol. II. 1.10.

³⁴ *Manu Smṛti*, IX. 32-37.

property to woman. The process of depriving woman of the ownership of property through use of physical force is reflected well in the passage of Satapatha Brahmana cited above. It says that the women were smitten so hard that they became unable even to think of inheriting property. This strongly suggests that among the earlier settlers who belonged to a matriachal order, woman owned property; and later on she was deprived of its ownership because of the strong patriarchal structure of the Aryans. Dharma Sutras carried on the ancient Vedic tradition and did not recognize woman as a legal person. She can neither inherit nor can give evidence or be surety. However Gautama Dharma Sutra provides a share to a sonless widow.³⁵ The later Dharma Sutras denied that too. Manu Smrti, being the earliest work of the revivalist era, adhered to the ancient tradition. The later law-givers, Yajnavalkya and Brahaspati, took a liberal attitude and recognized a widow and daughter of a sonless person as full heirs.³⁶ But this too was denied by the commentators. None of the law-givers allowed woman to enter into any transaction or give evidence.

Manu had to provide a solid foundation to a patriarchal society which was in crisis. To have a smoothly and harmoniously functioning mechanism based on old norms, it was essential for Manu to lay down codes which imply perpetual subjugation of woman and Sudra. Manu prohibited the customs of Niyoga, or the appointment of the younger brother-in-law to raise a son on the widowed sister-in-law for his elder brother, the taking-of-bride price, and marriage of a twice-born man to a Sudra woman. By the time of Manu the first two customs had lost their currency and the changed norms of society did not permit him to revive them. This austere Smrti writer called Niyoga "a beastly act."³⁷ Similarly about the practice of the bride-price Manu remarks, "it is selling one's child" and is therefore sinful.³⁸ The marriage with a Sudra female was also vehemently condemned by Manu³⁹ because he wanted to preserve the caste hierarchy. Rejecting the first two customs certainly had the

³⁵ *Gautama Dharma Sutra*, XXVIII. 21.

³⁶ *Yajnavalkya Smrti*, II. 135; *Brhaspati Smrti*, XXVI. 87,90.

³⁷ *Manu Smrti*, IX. 64-68.

³⁸ *Manu Smrti*, III. 51-52.

³⁹ *Manu Smrti*, III. 17-18.

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impact of lowering the position of woman. The sonless widow who was not allowed levirate had to live on the mercy of her relatives. Prohibition of bride-price also made the daughter totally undesired.

The statements made in Smrtis and in the epics show a high degree of consistency. The fundamental values of Indian society are well enunciated in them. Long inculcations about the glory of chastity, obedience and devotion to the husband, marred the natural affectionate conjugal relations. It was expected that the wife should submerge her personality into that of her husband. The position of the wife was reduced to a pupil or a mute follower rather than a companion or a friend. Manu compares a woman to a student. He says, "The nuptial ceremony is similar to the initiation, serving the husband is equal to living in the teacher's house and the household duties are equal to the worship of the sacred fire."⁴⁰ He further prescribes that like a teacher or father the husband can chastise his wife with a rope or cane on her back.⁴¹

All the works of the revivalist era adhered to the norms established by Manu. The ideal established for the wife is to serve her husband with mind, speech and body though he be poor, sickly or foolish.⁴² A number of supernatural rewards have been promised to women who steadfastly adhere to these norms; while the deviators have only sufferings in their lot. Manu says that a woman who through her thought, speech and actions remains dutiful to her husband gets the highest heaven with her husband besides worldly renown; whereas the violator of duties becomes a she jackal and remains afflicted with diseases.⁴³ Parasara says that the wife who insults a poor, sickly or foolish husband, takes birth as a bitch and after that again and again she becomes a she-pig.⁴⁴

Mahabharata contains several stories of devoted wives who acquire divine power by serving their husbands. Through her

⁴⁰ *Manu Smrti*, II. 67.

⁴¹ *Manu Smrti*, VIII. 299-300.

⁴² *Manu Smrti*, V. 154; *Yajnavalkya Smrti*, I. 77; *Parasara Smrti*, IV. 17-18; *Ramayana, Ayodhya Kanda*. XXIV. 26-27. *Mahabharata Anusasanaparva*. 146-55; *Narada Smrti*, XVIII. 22.

⁴³ *Manu Smrti*, V. 164-166.

⁴⁴ *Parasara Smrti*, IV. 17-18.

tremendous supernatural power Savitrir retrieved her husband from the clutches of Yama, the god of death. A young hunter, who being stricken by lust tried to approach Damyanti, fell dead by her curse. Sandili attained celestial regions by virtue of obedience and devotion to her husband. Gandhari had power to burn the universe and stop the movements of sun and moon. All these stories gave a psychological incentive to bear the disproportionate load of a number of odd jobs, that were deliberately prescribed to preoccupy a wife.

Manu, Yajnavalkya and Brhaspati provide that woman should be kept busy in cleaning utensils, performing rituals, cooking and doing other domestic works besides keeping accounts of income and expenditure, so that she may remain pure.⁴⁵

Smrtis and epics decry woman vigorously. Many wholesale abusive statements have been issued. Mahabharata outnumbers other texts in such declarations: "Nobody is as wicked as woman; they are the edges of knife, poison, snake and fire at the same time."⁴⁶ The same text asserts that "Woman are uncontrollable, they live under their husband's control only because nobody approaches them and they are afraid of servants."⁴⁷ The Valmiki Ramayana says: "By nature women are indifferent to religion, fickle, fierce and a cause of conflict."⁴⁸ It has been said in the Mahabharata that it is impossible to enumerate all the bad qualities of woman even for one who is endowed with a thousand tongues and a hundred years of life, even if he devotes himself to nothing else but to this task alone.⁴⁹ Manu Smrti is no milder in its disdain for woman: "Through their passion for man, through their natural cruelty become disloyal towards their husbands, however carefully they may be guarded."⁵⁰ Later the status of woman declined further. Sankara, the great philosopher proclaimed: "Woman is the gate for hell." The commentaries too, meticulously adhered to the norms subjugating woman. It is ordained that the wife should take food in the same plate in which the husband has taken his meals. Obviously the

⁴⁵ *Manu Smrti*, IX. 11; *Yajnavalkya Smrti*, I. 83, 87; *Brhaspati Smrti*, XXV. 6.

⁴⁶ *Mahabharata, Anusasanaparva*, XXVIII. 12.29.

⁴⁷ *Mahabharata, Anusasanaparva*, XXXVIII. 16.

⁴⁸ *Ramayana, Aranyakanda*, XXXIV, 29-30.

⁴⁹ *Mahabharata*, XII. 75.9.

⁵⁰ *Manu Smrti*, XI. 14.

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wife was expected to eat the left-overs of her husband. But the law-giver was careful enough to forbid the husband to leave in his plate delicacies like curds, honey, ghee and milk.⁵¹

Thus the patriarchal elite stratum of ancient India through its constant efforts, and the instinct of self-preservation inherent in culture itself, evolved such a strong social mechanism, the rationale for which was provided by religion, law and philosophy, that it not only successfully met the inner and outer challenges but influenced all the people who came in contact with it.

⁵¹ *Parasara Madhaviya*, I.I. 422.