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Reading Response for 10/23/2008  
“*Dharmasutras & Law Code of Manu*”

I. Summary

Patrick Olivelle’s introduction to the *Dharmasutras* provides important background and meaning to the context of the readings. This brief abstract of the *Dharmasutras* is summed up as a “unique documents give us a glimpse if not into how people actually lived their lives in ancient India, at least into how people, especially Brahmin males, were ideally expected to live their lives within an ordered and hierarchically arranged society” (Sutras xxi). One important point in the introduction lies in the understanding of the title of the text because the term gives meaning to the content of the text. Olivelle understands the meaning of a Sutra to be “a thread on which each aphorism is strung like a pearl” (Sutras xxiv). These aphorisms, a succinct statement expressing an opinion or a general truth, teach proper conduct and action in society (Encarta Dictionary). Defining dharma on the other hand was less solid as his explanation seemed to change based upon the context. Although many scholars debate the accuracy of the meaning of dharma Olivelle describes it as “the rules of correct ritual procedure,” but later accounts for its broader definition as:

the accepted norms of behaviour, ritual actions and rules of procedure, moral/religious/pious actions and attitudes (Sutras righteousness), civil and criminal law, legal procedure and punishment, and penances for infractions of *dharma*. It is *dharma* that provides the guidelines for proper and productive living and for social organization and interaction. It includes social institutions such as marriage, adoption, inheritance, social contracts, judicial procedure, and punishment of crimes, as well as private activities, such as toilet, bathing, brushing the teeth, food and eating, sexual conduct, and etiquette. (Sutras xxxviii-ix)

Through this definition dharma appears to govern and bind the individual to a sense of duty. Such a lengthy description accounts for the complexity of the term as well as its relative spiritual, intellectual, and cultural importance.

The *Dharmasutras* reads like short statements that convey applicable knowledge on how an individual (or Brahmin Male) should ideally conduct his actions throughout life. Referring to the texts as “normative,” Olivelle means that they “They contain norms of correct behavior and action” (Sutras xlii). Although the texts are primarily speaking of the actions of Brahmin males, the text offers insight into the value of a class structured society through the ideologies of the religious officiating class. Lastly Olivelle making one final point in the introduction he reminds of the importance of perspective, by advising not to erroneously impose the ideals espoused in the *Dharmasutras* upon the whole of Indian culture, life, and spiritual practices.

From the end of the fifteenth section through the sixteenth the text captures an interesting almost ritual-like observance of the use of water to purify and cleans the individual, either in “preparation of a meal” or “prescribed” to help with various ailments (Sutras 26-7). Water, although not explicit in the text, has some significant place as this section directly precedes the discussion on food. The food sections are entitled: *Unfit food, Rules of Eating, Eating Utensils, Forbidden food, and People from whom Food May be Accepted,*” and clearly portray the importance of selective eating habits. Of these sections the largest two discuss inappropriate, “unfit” and “forbidden” food choices and who food should be “accepted” from. Of the first category, “he should not...” precedes the majority of these sections on restrictions surrounding the purchase, preparation, and eating of various foods (Sutras 27-9). These regulation on the diets of the Brahmin appear sporadic, and with little explanation of the reasons behind the need restrict the diet. The text is explicit in the proper actions and conduct in relationship to

preparing, eating, and utilize of food. The text seems to address the importance of both the purity of the food as well as the individual for “while he is eating, he is touched by a Sudra, he should stop eating,” and until he regained his pure status he would only defile himself (Sutras 27). A Sudra being the lowest of the four classes and a Brahmin being the highest this interaction shows the importance of purity, and the cultural importance of a hierarchical social structure. The concept of food for mere physical sustenance is false, as food also takes on spiritual properties through ritual “burnt offering” (Sutras 59). The Ancestral Offering deeply connects the use of food through ritual and the Brahmin, and will be discussed shortly from the *Law Code of Manu*.

Just as with the *Dharmasutras*, “which predate Manu by two to three centuries,” Olivelle prefaces the *Law Code of Manu* with an introduction which consists of its history, translation, impact upon the modern world, and some contextual notes that better illuminate the cultural relevance of the text (Manu xviii). The introduction builds a framework that helps those unfamiliar with Indian culture, and provides a convenient outline to the content of the text. One important difference between the texts is the style of writing as the Law Code of Manu uses “verse” and “narrative” rather than short statements of principles (Manu xxiii). The creation myth appears as a poignant beginning by establishing order, mythology, nature, and humanities place in the world. Since “this whole world comes into being in an orderly sequence,” the individual appears as part of the created order, and not outside of it (Manu 14). This order permeates culture through dietary food laws and rituals. An example is seen through the spiritual regulation of the consumption of meat, for “the creator himself fashioned both the eaters and the living beings suitable for eating.” But this consumption must follow the specifications outlined in the *Law Code* or else one could risk living as an animal for twenty one lifetimes (Manu 87)!

The next section of the readings is filled with various ritual acts and the importance of observing various rites with the proper levels or qualifications of order, cleanliness, food, and

authority. The importance of a structured ritual is apparent throughout these sections. The Ancestral Offering depicts orderliness and is clearly outlined by the specific credentials of the guests, food, and actions to be observed during the ritual. The ritual has a prescribed order that could be divided into four major categories. First, preparation: *Number of Invitees, Quality of Invitees, Unfit Invitees, Persons who purity and Invitations*; second, purpose: *Classes of Ancestors, Times for Ancestral Rites and Preparatory rights*; third, offerings: *Principle Offerings, Rite for the Newly Deceased, and Concluding rites*; and lastly the meal: *Food at Ancestral Rites, Feeding the Brahmins, Conclusion of the meal*. Each section reflects upon the Ancestor through either external; eating food, burning offering, etc.; or internal; mental discipline, purity of soul, etc; religious manifestations through ritual.

The ideal of cleanliness was also important to the performance of the ritual as two full pages entitled, *Unclean Invitees*, was allocated to the specifics of who to eliminate from participation do to various unclean acts, professions, and social standings. (Manu 54-56) Not only was the physical cleanliness important, but “keeping himself ritually pure and with a collected mind,” essential to the conducting of the ritual. Those who claim ritual purity and cleanliness will partake of the ritual meal for all “sacrificial foods of every kind... should be regarded as what ensures success at divine rites” (62). The Brahman in attendance, who performs and eats at the ancestral offering, should be a “Vedic scholar...renowned for his knowledge” (Manu 53). These qualifications along with purification gave the Brahmin the authority to conduct these rituals. “Brahmins, who purify those alongside whom they eat,” as priests through their eating, purity, and right are not selfishly feasting but the people vicariously are blessed (Manu 57). The significance of food at the ritual offering was not underestimated and acted as a central offering that was ingested by the Brahmin to ensure benefit to the

community. Being and maintaining physical, spiritual, and mental order, authority, and cleanliness was a priority or else negative effects could alter the intent of the ritual. For example, “a tear makes the food go to ghosts; anger, to enemies; a lie, to dogs; touching with the foot, to fiends; and flipping around, to evil-doers” (Manu 60).

## II Evaluation

The complexity of the relationship between food and religious practice appears to center around purity. For example: “even though he is already pure, however, when he is preparing to take his meal, he should sip water twice, wipe his lips twice, touch his lips with water once, 10 rub the inside of his lips, and then sip water,” depicts the prescription of water as a preparatory step to the consumption of a meal (Sutras 26). The use of water to ensure the purity of the individual appears redundant yet is still required by both the *Dharmasutras* and the *Law Code*. Both texts clearly discuss the importance of not only cleanliness, but purification in the preparation and performance of ritual meals, offerings, and rites. The rituals connected food not only to the living but the dead as well since “the remnants of food and what has been scattered on the sacred grass are the share of those who have died.” (Manu 61) The text through the depiction of the integrated relationship of food and ritual portray an image of a culture enriched through the physicality of food with spiritual undertones.

The hierarchical class system seems to have relatable connections to our own culture and food production. Farming as a profession is interconnected with food production so the idea that a “farmer by profession” was considered impure in Indian culture stimulated some reflections on the values of class hierarchy (Manu 55).. Both Kingsolver and Pollan recognize the lack of

respect and appreciation the majority of our society gives to farmers, so in many ways segments of our population degrade just as the Brahmins did to those who produced food.

### III. Wider Relevance

The class themes of farming and sustainability were not really addressed, except for the label of farming as impure, as food was more tightly integrated with religious practices of offerings, feasts, and rites. The closest concept to farming and sustainability was found in the metaphor of “a man [who] plants a mango tree to get fruits, but in addition he obtains also shade and fragrance,” is a great example of the idea of sustainability because it evokes the knowledge of cause and effect upon their environment (Sutras 31). Not only does the individual gain physical fruits, but they also negate “the sin” that would reap “a larger share of the fruits” through their actions (Sutras 31). This cycle of planting, cultivating, benefiting, and harvesting offers a symbolic/symbiotic relationship where both mutually gain physically and the cultivator who gains additional spiritual relief from sin or misconduct. The text also discussed the importance of the knowledge of where food came from whether given, purchased, or grown. I was thus intrigued by the idea that a Brahmin “should not eat food obtained from the market” (Sutras 28). No Justification or qualification is given by the text any further, but it must be given in some way to protect the purity of the Brahmin class, against impure things. So what protections do we have against the market? Are we consigned to grow it ourselves or at least inspect were we receive our food, maybe we can interpret this as council to just be informed on the importance of protecting our own purity.