

## CONSERVATION OF BIODIVERSITY IN *MANU-SAMHITĀ*

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Intimate relationship with diverse biological entities and concern for their conservation have remained important components of Indian culture since ancient times. The *Manu-samhitā*, a Sanskrit text of early part of the Christian era, contains, in different chapters, some direct and indirect instructions about the conservation of plants and animals. The same have been analyzed, enumerated, and their relevance in modern times emphasized.

**Key Words :** Animals, *Manu-Samhitā*, Plants.

### INTRODUCTION

Biodiversity, in recent times, has become an important subject of study. "In simple terms, biodiversity is the vast variety of natural plant and animal life existing in any region".<sup>1</sup> Biodiversity is a natural attribute of environment. A region, with larger number of living species, is usually considered to have better environment and the range of biodiversity of a place indicates the richness of natural wealth of that place. Industrialization and urbanization are causing degradation of environment; consequently the existence of many species of plants and animals has become threatened. In view of these, scientists, all over the world, have become concerned about conserving the existing biodiversity. It may be said that, the conservation of biodiversity is considered as a thrust area of modern scientific activities. In India too, some efforts have been made during the last two decades, to comprehend the range and impact of biodiversity as also the problems related to the conservation of living forms. But, very little has been done to record and analyse the evolution of the traditional perceptions and prescriptions about the conservation of biodiversity. Sanskrit texts are an important resource of ancient Indian wisdom. The Sanskrit literature is vast in extent and varied in contents; it originated in different periods and in various regions of India. In this situation, it is better to study one Sanskrit text at a time, and after analyzing a number of texts, the collected information may be arranged sequentially. With this in view, the *Manu-Samhitā*, an ancient text having continuous and pervasive influence on a section of the Hindu society even today, was selected for study.

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*Manu-Saṃhitā*—is a *Dharmaśāstra* which provides the code of both religious and civil laws. The text has 2,694 verses in 12 chapters. It deals with many topics, including the creation of universe, living creatures, *caturvarṇa* (four principal castes) and their duties, kingship and duties of a king, laws of inheritance of properties, various socio-religious customs, eatables and non-eatables, etc. “The text is, in sum, an encompassing representation of life in the world—how it is, and how it should be lived”.<sup>2</sup> The text contains instructions for conservation of plants and animals.

The authorship of the *Manu-Saṃhitā* is attributed to the first Manu, i.e. the *Svāyambhūva Manu*, who is considered as a secondary creator. It is estimated that the extant text originated between the 2nd Century BC and the 2nd Century A.D.<sup>3</sup>

The text has been treated by scholars especially as a guide to socio-religious activities and the modes of inheritance of properties. In British India, the text became instrumental in the construction of a complex system of jurisprudence. Nine commentaries and many translations of the text in various Indian and European languages have appeared from time to time. Many authors have studied the text from different points of view, but little work has so far been done in compiling and analyzing the scientific information available in this work of encyclopedic scope. Das Gupta,<sup>4</sup> Padhy, Dash and Mohanty,<sup>5</sup> however, have put in some pioneering efforts.

### MATERIAL AND METHOD

The instructions on conservation of plants and animals are scattered in verses of different chapters. These have been collected and recorded under the following heads - (a) General observations, (b) Plants, and (c) Animals. References to the respective chapter and verse have been given in parenthesis along with each information.

### ENUMERATION OF INFORMATION

#### (a) *General observations*

(1) According to *Manu-Saṃhitā* (I. 28, 39-45), Brahmā, the god of creation has created all the plants and animals with specific characteristics and functions, and none should disturb these creatures. Through this observation, *Manu-Saṃhitā*, it appears, attributes some sort of divine origin to plants and animals. Normally, God-fearing people do not dare to cause any harm to the divine beings.

(2) The text (X. 89) mentions that the forest-dwelling animals and birds are not articles for sale. Before enunciating this general instruction, the text states (III. 162) that, one who coerces the elephant, cow, horse or camel (*hastigo' śvoṣṭradamake*) or maintains *śyena* (falcon) for sport or for sale to earn a living, should not be invited to any socio-religious festival. The text continues (III. 164, 166) that, those persons who

subsist by displaying various exercises of dog, falcon, and those who earn livelihood with the help of sheep or buffalo should be shunned meticulously from all oblatinal functions. If one cannot make profit by catching wild animals and birds, then why one should face the hazards of trapping them! Thus it may be said that, the above instructions go a long way in saving these creatures from poaching.

(3) The text (VI. 46) states that, one should carefully see the ground before setting foot there, and must drink water only after straining it with cloth (*dr̥ṣṭipūtamaṇyaset pādamaṁ vastrapūtamaṁ jalam pibet*). Whatever may be the purpose of this instruction, it helps one to avoid killing small creatures. It is true that microbes occurring on the road or in the ground cannot be seen with the naked eye, but very small creatures can be observed and trampling them can be avoided. Similarly, straining water with cloth will not remove bacteria or still smaller living objects, but definitely would help to save tiny creatures which can not be seen with the naked eye.

#### (b) *Plants*

Storage organs of plants like tuberous roots and underground stems, leafy vegetables, beautiful flowers, tasteful fruits, timber-yielding trees, crops etc. have remained objects of allurements since ancient times. For saving the plants and their parts from injury/destruction, *Manu-Samhitā* prescribes various punishments for the offenders (Table I). The fear of punishment(s) acts as a significant deterrent, and greedy people dither to cause harm to the plants.

#### (c) *Animals*

Some animals are useful, some are attractive, while others appear to be dangerous. For any of these reasons humans may feel allured to catch the animals and in certain cases to drive away the dangerous animals. In these efforts men often cause injury to the animals.

The *Manu-Samhitā* states that protecting the animals is the duty of the king. According to this text (VIII. 306), the king who protects animals and punishes the killers earns merits.

From the hunter-gatherer stage of life, humans have been consuming fish and the meat of animals and aves. This habit of man causes destruction of wild life. Perhaps with a view to saving creatures from wanton killing by greedy men, the *Manu-Samhitā* (V. 11-36) describes some specific situations when these can be eaten, but normally one should not eat them. The text (V. 37) categorically prohibits the unwanted slaughter of animals (*na tveba tu vr̥thā hantum paśumicchē kadācana*). Manu so severely condemns the unnecessary slaughter of animals that he says (V. 38) that the sin of such an act haunts the sinner in birth after birth (i.e. rebirths). Manu states (V. 41) explicitly that excepting some religious rites violence must not be caused to the animals (*madhuparke ca yajñe ca piṭṛdaivatakarmaṇi/atraiva paśavo hiṁsyā nānyatretyebravīnmanuḥ*).

To save the useful animals from destruction, *Manu-Saṃhitā* (XI. 69) states that killing of *khara* (ass), *aśva* (horse), *uṣṭra* (camel), *mṛga* (deer), *ibha* (elephant), *aja* (goat), *avika* (sheep), *mīna* (fish), *ahi* (snake) and *ahiṣa* (buffalo) is a sin. In (XI. 71) further states that killing even *kṛmi* (worm), *kīṭa* (insect) and *vayas* (bird) is a sinful act. Various punishments for different misdemeanours to the animals have been suggested in this text (Table II).

TABLE I : PROTECTION OF PLANTS

Sl. No.	Nature of offence	Punishment prescribed
1.	Felling living tree for	Offender should be condemned as
(a)	establishing mine, factory or	a degraded person (XI. 64).
	constructing big bridge/dam etc.,	
(b)	firewood.	Offender should be condemned as
		as a degraded person (XI. 65).
2.	Cutting down fruit-laden tree or	Offender should recite certain
	shrub or twiner or climber or	<i>Ṛks</i> for hundred times (XI. 143).
	flowering herb.	
3.	Destroying plants - cultivated or	To atone for the sin, the offender
	monocarpous or wild.	has to attend on a cow throughout a
		whole day, and undergo penance by
		subsisting only on milk (XI. 145).

TABLE II : PROTECTION OF ANIMALS

Sl. No.	Nature of offence	Punishment prescribed
1.	Teasing the animals.	Punishment should be
		commensurate with the gravity of
		offence (VIII. 286).
2.	Wounding, injuring leading to	Cost of the treatment should be
	blood-shed, etc.	borne by the offender (VIII. 287).
3.	If other animals are harmed	Owner of the vehicle is to pay a fine
	because of untrained driver of	of two hundred <i>paṇas</i> (VIII. 293).
	a vehicle.	
4.	Causing harm to noble animals	Offender is to pay a fine of five
	like cow, elephant, camel, horse,	hundred <i>paṇas</i> (VIII. 296).
	etc.	

Sl. No.	Nature of offence	Punishment prescribed
5.	(i) Causing violence to small animals; (ii) Harming ass, goat, cattle; (iii) Killing dog, boar.	Offender is to pay a fine of (i) 50 <i>paṇas</i> (VIII. 297); (ii) five <i>māṣās</i> of silver (VIII. 298); (iii) one <i>māṣa</i> (VIII. 298).
6.	Knowingly killing <i>mārjāra</i> (cat), <i>nakula</i> (mongoose), <i>maṇḍuka</i> (toad), <i>śvan</i> (dog), <i>godhā</i> (iguana), <i>ulūka</i> (owl), <i>kāka</i> (crow).	Offender should perform <i>cāndrāvana vrata</i> (XI. 132).
7.	Unknowingly killing <i>mārjāra</i> etc.	To subsist, the offender should drink only milk for three days (XI. 133).
8.	Killing (a) <i>sarpa</i> (snake), (b) <i>varāha</i> (boar), (c) <i>tittira</i> (francoline partridge), (d) <i>śuka</i> (parrot), (e) <i>krauñca</i> (curlew, heron), (f) any one of the following : <i>haṃsa</i> (swan), <i>baka</i> (crane, cattle egret), <i>barhiṇa</i> (peacock), <i>śyena</i> (falcon), <i>bhāsa</i> (white-backed vulture) or <i>vānara</i> (monkey), (g) <i>aśva</i> (horse), (h) <i>abhi</i> (elephant), (i) <i>aja</i> (goat) or <i>meṣa</i> (sheep), (j) <i>khara</i> (donkey), (k) <i>mṛga</i> (deer), (l) <i>hariṇa</i> (deer), (m) <i>uṣṭra</i> (camel),	Offender should give to a Brahmin (a) an iron rod (XI. 134), (b) a pitcher full of <i>ghee</i> (XI. 135), (c) four <i>āḍhakas</i> of sesame (XI. 135), (d) a two-year old calf (XI. 135), (e) a three-year old calf (XI. 135), (f) a cow (XI. 136), (g) a cloth (XI. 137), (h) five blue bulls ( <i>nīlān vṛṣān</i> ) (XI. 137), (i) one bull (XI. 137), (j) a one-year old calf (XI. 137), (k) a milking cow (XI. 138), (l) a <i>vatsatārī</i> (XI. 138), (m) one <i>rati</i> of gold (XI. 138).

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The *Manu-Samhitā* contains many instructions about the conservation of biodiversity. Most of the measures, suggested by the text, are secular in nature. In this respect, this text bears close similarities with the measures contained in the *Kauṭīliya Arthaśāstra* (a text of c. 4th century BC)<sup>6</sup> and *Agni Purāṇa* (a text of c 9th century AD).<sup>7</sup> In this connection it may be mentioned that many of the instructions regarding the

conservation of biodiversity, contained in the *Purāṇas* and *Tantras*<sup>8</sup> and also prevalent in most of the tribal communities of India<sup>9</sup> are religious in nature. To comprehend the history of thoughts and measures for conservation of plants and animals, the reasons and impact of the shift of attitude from secular to religious have to be analyzed dispassionately.

Before concluding it should be stated that, the measures for conservation of biodiversity, suggested by the *Manu-Saṃhitā*, are relevant even now. The same is the case with the instructions contained in the *Kauṭīliya Arthaśāstra* and *Agni Purāṇa*.

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