

Gendered Vigilantism in India: A Study of Manusmriti, Arthashastra, And Mechanisms of Gendered Control

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ABSTRACT

This research paper explores two timeless ancient texts, Manusmriti and Arthashastra, to find out the historical roots of gendered vigilantism in India and how behavioral frameworks mentioned in these texts continue to influence contemporary attitudes towards women's identity and autonomy. Through close examination of these texts as well as interpretations, this research paper explores the parts of women's autonomy including mobility, marriage choices, public conduct, and moral duties. The two texts discussed in this paper differ in intent and ideology, but both suggest a similar control over women. Manusmriti, being a normative text, enforces a moral universe for women based on purity, obedience and patriarchal guardianship whereas Arthashastra, a pragmatic and political treatise, suggests state led methods of regulation, punishment and strategic control. This shared framework for discipline and regulation, normalized surveillance as an essential social practice. These ancient norms can be traced into contemporary practices such as control of women's movement, dress codes, violence based on honor, and restrictions in public and private places, including homes, colleges, offices, etc. Therefore, this paper argues that modern-day cultural policing is not the latest phenomenon but an extension of long-lived cultural traditions. This research paper establishes a relationship between historical legacies and contemporary treatment of women, highlighting the need to reexamine these norms to create a more equal and harmonious society.

Keywords: Manusmriti, Arthashastra, Moral Policing, Women's Autonomy, Patriarchal Traditions.

Introduction

Gendered vigilantism has become one of the most persistent and celebrated features of contemporary Indian society. Women's choices, varying from choice of clothing to intimate relationships and public participation, are often judged, controlled and punished by families, communities and even state institutions like police. These practices of restriction and surveillance which lead to honor-based violence, public harassment and digital shaming, are justified as necessary means to protect culture, morality and social order and are conveniently masked as reaction to modernity and western influence. These justifications fail to account for the deeper historical foundations that have long legitimized the regulation of women's lives in the Indian subcontinent.

Ancient texts have played a fundamental role in designing social norms, legal frameworks, moral authority, and the overall governance of women's autonomy. In this research we'll investigate two of these texts, Manusmriti and Arthashastra, for their influence on women's freedom, moral subordination and other societal order concerning women. Manusmriti, a dharmashastric text, defines social and moral duties of a woman based on caste and other factors, whereas Arthashastra by Kautilya, presents a

practical approach on statecraft and surveillance and suggests discipline and regulation as foundation to political stability. However, these texts have different objectives; both construct women's behavior as a matter requiring constant supervision and regulation.

This research paper argues that contemporary moral policing in India cannot be fully understood without tracing its historical roots in these ancient normative frameworks. By examining the concepts of women's identity, control, and autonomy mentioned in *Manusmriti* and *Arthashastra* this research exhibits modern day vigilantism is not a current practice but an extension of a well-established socio cultural and legal traditions. This relationship between present day treatment of women with historical continuum allows for a deeper understanding of how power structure designed centuries ago sustained over time.

Review of Literature

The scholarships on *Manusmriti* do not show a linear approach and have evolved dramatically. Indological approach, pioneered by Sir William Jones, studied *Manusmriti* as a historical record which presented an ideal, not a real picture of society. This approach was later challenged and from mid 20th century onwards, feminist and socio historical studies presented the text as normative and ideological in nature. Patrick Olivelle suggests that *Manusmriti* should be considered as a prescriptive document aimed at defining ideal social behavior instead of presenting it as actual practices, yet its normative nature has allowed it to shape moral consciousness across centuries (Olivelle 41).

Feminist scholars argued that *Manusmriti* envisioned a perfect woman through the ideals of purity, dependence and compliance. Uma Chakravarti's work shows that the control of women's sexuality is crucial to maintain caste hierarchy and positioned women as symbolic bearers of lineage and purity (Chakravarti 55–61). This idea presents control of women's bodies as a tool essential to preserve social order. Wendy Doniger similarly observes that *Manusmriti* constructs a moral universe in which female autonomy is perceived as inherently destabilizing (Doniger xlv).

When looking at the laws of Manusmriti, we're met with a system of male guardianship that has been interpreted to be social surveillance, normalizing moral policing within the home, and it's impossible to ignore that these ideas still have a grip on present-day family dynamics and institutionalised beliefs. Well-known Arthashastra, on the other hand, has been mainly studied as a political and administrative text, thanks to the classical scholarship of R. P. Kangle and L. N. Rangarajan that laid out its meticulous approach to governance, laws and penalty systems.

But feminist scholars pointed out that it also employed an enormous number of women as spies, snitches and sex workers. Coming from a different perspective, these women's roles in the system could be seen as a participation in the public sphere, yet scholars are of the opinion that this ultimately serves the state's control rather than the woman's autonomy.

Nowadays, studies of moral policing in India are looking at phenomena such as honour killings, vigilantism, institutional monitoring and online shaming, and Prem Chowdhry has discovered that these acts of violence are inextricably entwined with caste endogamy and the concept of family pride. Legal academics like Flavia Agnes and Pratiksha Baxi show how government institutions can be used to enforce moral codes, by applying double standards and moral judgments (Agnes 63-72; Baxi 44).

Feminist theorists, including Nivedita Menon and Ratna Kapur, argue that moral policing is basically a way that patriarchy adjusts to changing social situations, but still holds on to its control, Menon 76-92; Kapur 102-118. Although lots of work has been done in this area, there are very few studies that explicitly connect today's moral control to the ancient texts of Manusmriti and Arthashastra, which is the main objective of this paper.

Methodology

When analyzing the ancient Indian texts Manusmriti and Arthashastra, a qualitative research study that used close textual analysis and feminist hermeneutics, turned to the English translations of Patrick Olivelle and R. P. Kangle and L. N. Rangarajan as its basis. Coming dashing off the heels of this translation, the study zeroed in about women's freedom of movement, their sexuality, marriage, and how they behave in public.

With the help of feminist principles, the study dug into the way power and control are wielded in these texts and is not of the opinion that these texts are set in stone. They firmly place them in the historical period in which they were written and see how these ideas have gradually been passed down the years to affect our modern thought. The study didn't attempt to directly compare the customs of the past and the present but explored the theoretical foundations of today's attitudes toward women's autonomy.

Objectives of the Study

In the history of gendered moral policing in India, two ancient texts, *Manusmriti* and *Arthashastra*, offer a critical understanding of how women were conceptualized, treated and held to be morally responsible in the Indian subcontinent. Coming running over back to the same era, this study is also concerned with the prescriptions related to women's mobility, sexuality, marriage and public conduct to see how they were used as methods of control in both the moral-religious and political-administrative systems of the time.

One of the main objectives of this research is to delve into how the power of the state was merged with moral authority to regulate women's lives. *Manusmriti* relies on the ideas of purity, obedience and patriarchal protection to discipline women, and *Arthashastra*, with its legal codes and system of punishment, was used to govern. This study, which will show that these two kinds of control may go together, will demonstrate that these methods and mechanisms would justify the constant supervision of women's bodies and lives.

When studying the origins of moral policing in India a good look at the past's moral codes shows us just how much is being done to control women's lives, and it's clear that things like dress codes, honor-based violence, institutional surveillance and cyber moral policing aren't brand-new ideas. Coming from the past, it's striking that these measures are a knee-jerk reaction to social changes that we can't turn back. Well-known feminist scholarship can be enriched by this study that's now giving a comprehensive and disturbing look to the stifling effect that ancient norms have had on our thinking and treatment of women, raising the question, are these norms really in line with how we want to treat women in the 21st century.

Research Questions

As investigating the ancient Indian texts *Manusmriti* and *Arthashastra* this study uses a network of interconnected questions to look at both the written rules and their impact on the present day. At the heart of this research is the way these texts portray a woman's sense of autonomy, morality and social standing, which is defined and measured by the language and ideas they contain, often framing a woman's behavior as a collective concern that requires monitoring and supervision.

The research also delves into the sorts of moral surveillance, legal regulation, and disciplinary powers that are legitimate within these texts. It takes a close look at the use of mechanisms such as guardianship, chastity laws, punishment for sex crimes and limiting one's freedom to travel, that were designed to control the way women move and think. In investigating how the religious ideas of *Manusmriti* and the state-led governance of *Arthashastra* intersect, the research uncovers a complete system for the management of women.

Finally, the study investigates how these ancient principles continue to influence present-day trends in moral policing in India. It examines if the vigilantism we see in the country today, varying from familial controls, community surveillance, to institutionalized and digital monitoring, can be seen as a logical progression of the socially ingrained, socio-legal norms of the past.

Manusmriti and Moral Surveillance

Manusmriti, establishes that the lives of women should be under the watchful eye of society in the name of protecting order, purity and harmony in the family. One of the most cited prescriptions of the text asserts that a woman must be protected by her father in childhood, her husband in youth, and her son in old age, effectively denying the possibility of female independence (Manu 9.3; Olivelle 185). The system of control that this idea sets up is not just a simple description of social roles, it's actually institutionalizes dependency, and makes it seem like watching over someone is a moral obligation. Autonomy is framed as a potential threat, while control is presented as protection.

Manusmriti's system of moral surveillance is primarily seen in the control over a woman's sexuality, freedom of movement, and behavior. According to the text, female sexuality is basically viewed as a threat to the stability of the social order if not properly contained, necessitating strict oversight to preserve lineage and caste purity. Uma Chakravarti argues that by linking women's sexual behaviour to caste hierarchy, the text transforms women's bodies into sites of collective anxiety rather than individual agency (Chakravarti 55–61). As a result, women's actions are no longer personal choices but matters of social consequence.

Looking at the *Manusmriti*, we'll see that marriage is essentially a way to monitor and control individuals, especially women, within the system. It is structured to make women obey their husbands and doesn't even ask much of them in the way of consent. Women's assent and desire are subordinated to social expectations, reinforcing discipline through marital norms. Coming into widowhood makes this surveillance even tighter, because widows are forced to lead lives of extreme self-control, giving up any sort of pleasure and withdrawing from the rest of society. Wendy Doniger notes that such prescriptions enforce lifelong moral discipline over women's bodies, even in the absence of male guardianship (Doniger xlv).

Manusmriti presents moral policing as a benevolent guardian of social order, using surveillance as a means to protect women, and rationalizing its power as necessary for societal stability. Surveillance is justified as necessary for women's safety and societal stability, obscuring its oppressive function. As Olivelle observes, the authority of *Manusmriti* lies not in its legal enforcement but in its moral influence, which has allowed its ideas to persist within cultural consciousness (Olivelle 41). This moralization of control forms a foundational template for later and more institutionalized forms of gender regulation.

Arthashastra and State Surveillance

The two ancient Indian texts *Manusmriti* and *Arthashastra*, demonstrates two very different approaches to governing women. While *Manusmriti* focuses on moral-religious restrictions, the *Arthashastra* attributed to Kautilya suggests a legal and administrative dominance. Arthashastra presents a very practical vision of how a state should be run, prioritizing social order, economic productivity and stability, and doesn't see women's love lives, or the way they behave, as anything to worry about morally, they're basically matters of state interest. Laws governing marriage, adultery, prostitution, and sexual transgressions explicitly position women's bodies within the jurisdiction of state authority (Kangle 217).

In the governance model of Arthashastra, the use of surveillance is evident. Closer analysis reveals that Kautilya, the author, places utmost importance on spies, secret informants and sneaky looks from the sidelines is basically the key to running a successful state. This shows an early expression of the government's control over how people behave. L. N. Rangarajan notes that surveillance in Arthashastra is not incidental but central to statecraft, reflecting an early articulation of administrative control over social behaviour (Rangarajan 133). Women in this system are often employed as spies, courtesans and informants.

While this involvement may suggest a degree of participation in public life, the feminist scholars argue that it's not exactly a sign of equality. Women are being used by the system, rather than being seen as independent individuals. Pratiksha Baxi points out that such legalistic frameworks normalise intrusion into intimate life, legitimising surveillance and punishment as rational governance (Baxi 44). Thus, *Arthashastra* takes the power to control people's behaviour, through the state, rather than using moral arguments.

Arthashastra stands out as the foundational text that not only governed personal and social lives, but also reveals different, yet complementary ways of control. Manusmriti's embedded surveillance network was largely based in family and community, and formalization of control was taken care of in the more sophisticated framework provided by Arthashastra. The dualities of cultural and political levels and how they can be controlled by patriarchal forces can be seen in these two texts.

Contemporary Moral Policing

Contemporary gender based moral policing in India can be seen as precursors to the practices found in the ancient Hindu texts: *Manusmriti* and *Arthashastra*. The Indian Constitution, which enshrines equality and liberty, does not fully protect the autonomy of Indian women, and informal and formal means are found to further restrict their space, most of which is rationalized with security and discipline, basically mirroring the logic of the watchful guardian found in *Manusmriti*. Hostel curfews, restrictions on women's movement, and dress codes in educational institutions are frequently justified in the name of safety and discipline, echoing *Manusmriti's* logic of guardianship (Agnes 72).

Honour-based violence and caste endogamy further suggests that the concept of moral surveillance has its roots in purity and lineage. Prem Chowdhry demonstrates how women who transgress norms related to marriage and sexuality are subjected to social ostracism, violence, and even death, revealing the enduring power of honour ideology (Chowdhry 17–29). These practices, and the ways that they subjugate women's sexual agency and identity, mirror the moral universe presented in *Manusmriti*.

State institutions often participate in moral policing, reflecting *Arthashastra's* logic that surveillance and punishment are co-related. Publicly shaming couples in parks, the silent endorsement of moral vigilantes by local authorities, and the haphazard enforcement of laws that dictate who can be with whom, show how the power of the state is used to control people's personal lives, particularly in a gendered way. Ratna Kapur argues that such practices are often framed as protection or cultural preservation, masking their coercive nature (Kapur 118).

In the digital world, a lot of scrutiny falls on the online lives of women. Social media sites have become the latest weapon where women's online presence is controlled and regulated, reinforcing the belief that female visibility must be controlled. As Nivedita Menon observes, moral policing adapts to new social contexts while retaining its core patriarchal logic (Menon 92). Well-known moral policing today doesn't represent a clean break from the past; it's a rearrangement of the same ideas.

Discussion

When analyzing the texts *Manusmriti* and *Arthashastra*, an intricate system of gendered moral control in India is revealed. This system has evolved over time and operates on multiple levels, from moral to social and institutional. Though the two books are fundamentally different in genre, purpose, and outlook, they do agree that a woman's freedom poses a threat to social fabric. This belief became the philosophical underpinning for the justification of systems of monitoring, restraint, and regulation that women have been subjected to.

In *Manusmriti*, the idea of moral surveillance is deeply planted in familial structure and the community. In India it is also seen as a way for men to control the behavior of women, especially when it comes to their sexuality, marriage and movement. The moral authority of the text enables surveillance to function without legal enforcement, relying instead on internalized norms and collective policing by family members and community elders (Olivelle 41; Chakravarti 61). Well-known is how the internalization of moral codes, and this male control can be passed down through generations and doesn't require regular outside interference.

When looking at *Arthashastra*, the same concerns about women's behaviour are turned into a comprehensive system of governance, with a focus on surveillance. But this time, the tone is bureaucratic, and women's bodies and their sexuality are given strict laws and rules to live by, coming from the state. As Kangle and Rangarajan observe, *Arthashastra's* emphasis on espionage and administrative discipline reflects an early articulation of state power extending into private life (Kangle 217; Rangarajan 133). This shift from moral obligation to legal authority does not reduce control but rather strengthens it by granting the state legitimacy to intervene.

When read together, these texts illustrate two fundamental structures that have become apparent. One is moral authority, and the other is political power. But each of them works in a dual manner, and these dualities intersect when shaping the moral beliefs that guide the society. This amalgamation helps explain why moral policing still exists in contemporary India despite legal reforms and constitutional guarantees of equality. Even when laws change, deeply embedded moral frameworks continue to shape social behavior and institutional practices.

Contemporary practices confirm that moral policing is still a major issue. Coming in many forms, such as hostel restrictions, honor-based violence, street harassment of couples, and online surveillance, these actions show that we're still grappling with a dual legacy of *Manusmriti* and *Arthashastra*. Practices justified as protective or disciplinary echo *Manusmriti's* guardianship logic, while state involvement in regulating sexuality and public behavior mirrors *Arthashastra's* governance model (Agnes 72; Kapur 118). The fact that these practices continue makes clear that moral policing is not a reactive response to social change, but a mechanism through which patriarchy manages control even in the face of changing times.

Feminist scholars have argued that moral policing intensifies, when women challenge the traditional boundaries of society and assert their visibility and autonomy. Menon notes that moral regulation often emerges as a backlash against women's increased participation in education, employment, and public life (Menon 92). This observation aligns with the historical pattern identified in this study that moral surveillance escalates when a woman goes past what is considered the norm for her, and which shows that basically, autonomy must be restricted.

It's impossible to ignore that individuals and cultural beliefs play a huge part, but reducing the issue to just those elements, and therefore depoliticizing it, doesn't do justice to the bigger picture, when

analyzing the motivations behind moral policing. Tracing the roots of these attitudes can help us put modern vigilantism into a much wider historical and social landscape. This is evident when you look at the ancient normative frameworks that this study delves into, which helps us see that control is what drives moral policing and that it's usually a continuation of earlier patterns, not a total break from them.

In relation to understanding the history of *Manusmriti* and *Arthashastra*, cultural symbols and quotes are often invoked, but in a selective and decontextualized manner. As Doniger and Chakravarti caution, this is how the gender-based hierarchy gets reinforced, while alternative interpretations are overlooked. (Doniger xlv; Chakravarti 58). It's important to know that these manuscripts are still heavily influential in modern discussions, and it is high time that we look beyond the symbolic meaning that they get reduced to.

Ultimately, gendered moral policing cannot be fully understood independent of its historical roots. Analyzing through this historical lens enables a more refined, feminist analysis that goes beyond the obvious acts of control and to the very ideologies that make them possible. Unless these deep-rooted frameworks are addressed, gender equality can't be effectively pursued, and therefore, reform may be shallow and non-productive.

Conclusion

While examining the history of gendered moral policing in India, two of the country's most influential ancient texts, *Manusmriti* and *Arthashastra*, provides a useful lens to understand the cultural, social and institutional trends affecting the development of gender roles and policing, as laid out here in the paper. Our textual analysis and comparative scrutiny have shown that moral policing isn't a relatively new phenomenon in the Indian subcontinent and nor is it a casual component of the country's society. In fact, it's a historically rooted mechanism of control that has grown and changed over time.

Analyzing *Manusmriti*, we can see that the concept of morality is built on ideas of purity, obedience and male control. Coming from a place of self-protection, it basically normalizes the idea of lifetime monitoring of a woman's body and decisions. Well-known *Arthashastra*, on the other hand, shows that similar concerns are dealt with by the state, through rigid systems of control, punishment and surveillance, and that together these two texts provide a couple of different ways in which women's freedom is tightly restricted, socially and politically.

The study of contemporary moral policing, or gendered control, in a historical continuum, gives a new perspective that women assuming new social roles in the 21st century is the primary reason of the restrictions on women's mobility and autonomy today. The phenomena that we are witnessing today, like institutional surveillance, digital shaming, and violent control in the name of 'honor', are more than isolated aberrations, rather a logical consequence of long-standing and rigid socio-legal customs. Recognizing these continuities is crucial for understanding why moral policing persists despite legal reforms and changing social realities.

In terms of women's rights, legal and policy-based interventions can only do so much, and their effectiveness is often hampered by the deeply ingrained cultural norms that still exist in the shadows. The moral norms and practices which legal and policy reformers often fail to address are the root cause of gender-based violence. Constitutional protections and progressive laws could be insufficient when it comes to disarming mentalities which justify control over people's lives. As Agnes and Kapur argue, law often mirrors social morality rather than transforming it, particularly when patriarchal norms remain unchallenged (Agnes 63; Kapur 102).

Feminists' perspective highlights the importance of critically studying these ancient texts instead of rejecting or celebrating them. The application of feminist hermeneutics in reading and interpreting these texts enables a much-needed contextual understanding and highlights the power dynamics at play in the way the cultural narrative goes. It's important not only for academic scholars, but also because the fruits of scholarly endeavors can be borne in society to bring about change.

Lastly, a multi-dimensional strategy is necessary to fight the historical, cultural, and institutional causes, if the issue of gendered moral policing in India is to be addressed. By laying out the continuities between ancient and present-day norms, this study forges a new path in the ongoing feminist debates in the country. Challenging moral policing will take more than mere resistance to individual acts of control. Only through such critical engagement can a more equitable and genuinely emancipatory vision of women's autonomy emerge in contemporary Indian society.

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