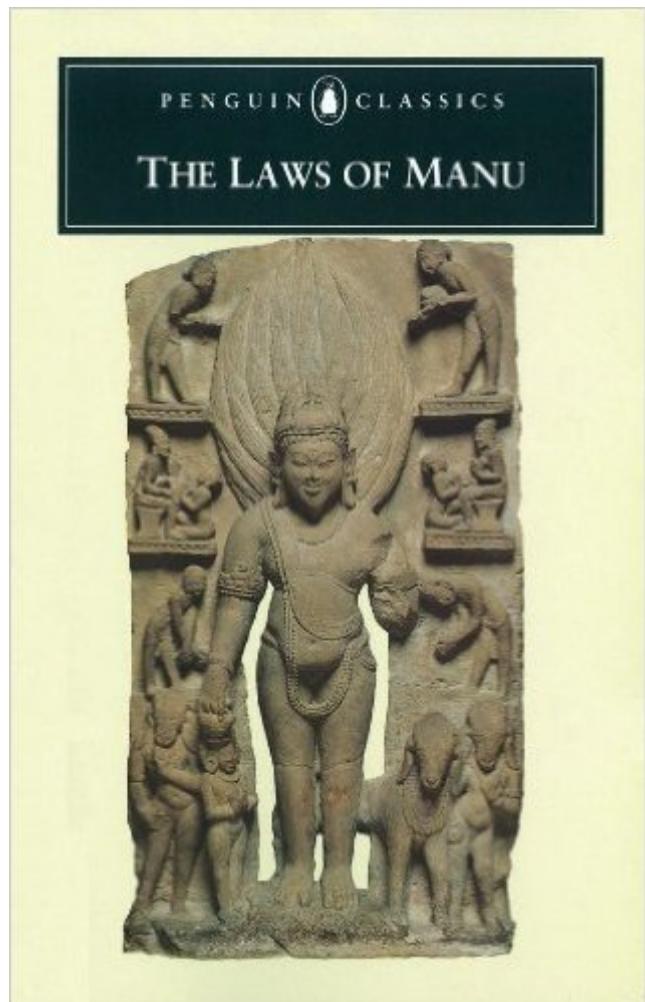


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The Laws Of Manu (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

The Laws of Manu form a towering work of Hindu philosophy. Composed by many Brahmin priests, this is an extraordinary, encyclopaedic representation of human life in the world, and how it should be lived. Manu encompasses topics as wide-ranging as the social obligations and duties of the various castes, the proper way for a righteous king to rule and to punish transgressors, relations between men and women, birth, death, taxes, karma, rebirth and ritual practices. First translated into English in 1794, its influence spread from Nietzsche to the British Raj, and although often misinterpreted, it remains an essential work for understanding India today. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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Customer Reviews

Wendy Doniger's translation of the Hindu Moral Law is fairly lucid and readable. The Manu Smriti maybe only one of the Smritis in the Hindu tradition, but it is the primary Smriti accepted as the authoritative text on Dharma within the Hindu canon. In the ancient Indian social and cultural structure, the Laws of Manu constitute the Vaidika Dharma, applicable to those enfolded within the way of the Vedas. While this may not encompass the entirity of the habitants of ancient India, there is no justifiable reason to belittle the importance of the Laws of Manu, as has been done by the

previous reviewers here. Their reviews betray a lack of knowledge of the structure of Hindu society, and appear to be biased. The Manu Smriti is traditionally accepted as one of the supplementary arms of the Vedas. Doniger's translation is refreshingly objective. It is remarkably free of Western bias that one often finds in works by Western authors on Indian texts. It is also free of the bias introduced by apologetic Indians, and other modern Indians trying to appear politically correct in an age of humanistic leanings. There are many things in the Laws of Manu that a modern reader would find revolting; but there are many things too that are as timeless as they were during the time it was written, especially the openness in the applicability of Law depending on situational, cultural and historical contingencies. Whatever may be one's opinion on these matters, Doniger has given us a narrative translation of a book that is as important to us today as the Upanishads are if we are to understand ancient Indian culture in its totality. The Manu Smriti also gives us the four-fold structure of Hindu "classes", the "Varnas", which have been the object of much malignment in recent times.

The 1991 Penguin Classics translation of "The Laws of Manu," by Wendy Doniger (thus on the cover; earlier known as Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, and often so listed) and Brian Smith, is one of two relatively recent translations of the text. The other is "The Law Code of Manu: A New Translation," by Patrick Olivelle, in the Oxford World's Classics (2004), which was also published elsewhere with a new critical edition of the Sanskrit original. Olivelle had earlier translated four other, related, works as "Dharmasutras: The Law Codes of Ancient India" (1999), for the same series. The reader may want to give precedence to Olivelle's newer translation, which has an elaborate commentary offering access to more recent literature. However, the Penguin version is still worth consulting; and I find some sections of it much more readable than Olivelle's version, although the reverse is sometimes true of other passages. Both are annotated (the Penguin with footnotes; there is some overlap with Olivelle's end-notes, but they tend to be complementary), and both have extremely detailed indexes (the Penguin volume's being in rather more legible type). Their introductions take different approaches, but cover much the same territory. Those already somewhat familiar with the legal literature of ancient India may want to skip to the end for the rest of my comparison of these two to each other, and to an older (1886) translation, which has also been in paperback in recent years; and some general observations on its reputation.

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