

## THE DHARMA SUTRAS

One might wonder what exactly “Dharma Sutra” means and how it came about. It is a blend of the two components ‘*dharma*’ and ‘*sutra*’. Therefore this blend obviously means ‘*sutras*’ dealing with ‘*dharma*’ (Banerji 1). It is hard to define Dharma itself as it could be interpreted in many ways. However, it is often understood as religion or moral code (Sekhar 1). Hence, I would say that Dharma Sutras deal with directions about our domestic, social and religious lives.

The origin of Dharma Sutra, just like the many other ancient Indian literature, is veiled in shadows. The Dharma Sutra is part of the Kalpa Sutras which is derived from the Vedas. Therefore from this significance we can say that Dharma Sutra is also written during the Vedic age. The Vedas have two different aspects, speculative and ritualistic (Banerji 7). Much later into the Vedic age, literature becomes more focus on rites and rituals. As the civilization was growing, this led to the preparation for shorter and easier manuals of these ritualistic works. In the process of trying to do this, the Kalpa Sutras were composed. To distinguish heterogeneous matters within the Kalpa Sutras, it was classified into three distinct classes. These were the Śrauta which deals purely with Vedic rites, Grhya which deals with domestic rites performed before the domestic fire and Dharma which deals principally with the rules of conduct and Vyavahāra.

People tend to overlap and think that Grhya Sutra and Dharma Sutra deal with the same idea. However, they do not deal with the same idea; instead they have a close comparison of the contents within these sutras. Grhya Sutra deals absolutely with just the domestic rites and the procedure of how one is supposed to go about doing the rites. Dharma Sutra not only deals on the ‘law’ or righteousness but also on the broader stand about the conduct of men, secular law (*Vyavahāra*) and duties of the king (*rāja-dharma*). Even then still, people wonder “What is the

reason of the overlapping of the contents of these two types of works in respect of certain rites, e.g. *upanayana*, *vivāha*, etc (Banerji 10)?" The easiest response to this would be that, Grhya Sutra really stresses on the procedure of the different rites and goes really into details. On the other hand, Dharma Sutra accounts for the various customs and practices connected with these rites excluding the details of procedure. Although some of the topics covered in both the sutras are similar, they are both independent types of works apparently composed to serve different purposes.

Before going any further into the details of the Dharma Sutras, we should know the differences between Dharma Sutras and Dharma Sastras. Both of these texts are closely connected as both deals with the same or allied topics (Banerji 2). Even then there are differences to be noted between them. There are eight main points of differences; Form, Language, Divine Origin, Arrangement of topics, Historical priority, and Affiliation. Form: majority of the work of Dharma Sutras is composed in text intermixed with verse, however for the Dharma Sastras, it is entirely in verse. Language: Dharma Sutras contains many outdated forms than the Dharma Sastras. Affiliation to Vedic School: most of the Dharma Sutras betray some preference in the quotations for certain Vedas or Vedic Schools whereas the Dharma Sastras do not (Banerji 2). These are just some of the differences between Dharma Sutras and Dharma Sastras.

To this day, the only four remaining works which are related on the topic of Dharma are the *Āpastamba*, *Baudhāyana*, *Gautama* and *Vasistha* (Olivelle 3). *Āpastamba* and *Baudhāyana* are the only two Dharma Sutras that were brought down from Kalpa Sutras (Olivelle 3). Majority of the work which dealt with *dharma* appeared to have been composed during the Common Era.

The *Āpastamba* contains thirty *praśnas* (lit., “questions”) or books. Of these, the first 24 comprises of the Śrauta Sutra, 25-26 comprises of the collections of ritual formulas to be used in domestic rites, 27 comprises of the Grhya Sutra, 28-29 comprises of the Dharma Sutra and the final book on Śulva Sutra. The *Āpastamba* belongs to the Taittirīya branch of the *Black Yajurveda*. It has been conserved better than the rest of the Dharma Sutras. This could be proved by the only one surviving commentary of Haradatta (Olivelle 20). The laws of the *Āpastamba* are very straight forward and strict as it is the oldest Dharma Sutras. It deals with matters of civil law such as inheritance and brief sections on the orders of life. An example of a law of the *Āpastamba* underlying the caste system is that: “If someone kills a Ksatriya, he should give a thousand cows to erase the enmity, a hundred if he kills a Vaiśya, and ten if he kills a Sudra.” (Olivelle 61)

The *Gautama Dharma Sutra* did not have any connection with the Kalpa Sutras. It was composed as a separate thesis. Traditionally, the *Gautama* has been associated with the *Sāmaveda* (Olivelle 116). This is proved in the book, the twenty-sixth chapter, where the atonement is taken from the *Sāmavidhāna Brāhmaṇa* which belongs to the *Sāmaveda*. Only one of the two commentaries could be said is a useful source. That was by Maskarin; however the other commentary by Haradatta is not really a useful source as he merely worked on what Maskarin had wrote before. This would be plagiarism in today’s world. An example of a law of the *Gautama* underlying the caste system is that: “If someone kills a Ksatriya, he should observe the standard vow of chastity for six years and give a thousand cows together with a bull; if he kills a Vaiśya, he should do so for three years and give a hundred cows together with a bull; and if he kills a Śūdra, he should do so for one year and give ten cows together with a bull.” (Olivelle 175)

The *Baudhāyana Dharma Sutra* is also part of the Kalpa Sutras just like the *Āpastamba*. *Āpastamba* was preserved really excellent compared to the rest of the Dharma Sutra; however *Baudhāyana* text was tampered around and inter-mixed a lot. *Baudhāyana* contains more detailed descriptions of rituals- sacrifices, twilight worship, bathing, quenching libations than any other Dharma Sutras (Olivelle 191). An example of a law of the *Baudhāyana* underlying the outcaste system is that: “When someone associates with an outcaste- not, however, by officiating at his sacrifices, by teaching him, or by contracting a marriage with him- but by traveling in the same vehicle or sitting on the same seat as he, or by eating together with him, he himself becomes an outcaste within a year.” (Olivelle 249)

The *Vasistha Dharma Sutra*, just like the *Gautama Dharma Sutra*, did not have any connection with the Kalpa Sutras. It also came down as a separate text. Traditionally, *Vasistha* has been associated with the *Rgveda* (Olivelle 346). It does not have a strong ancient commentary to prove its work; therefore, *Vasistha Dharma Sutra* might also have addition of works from different people over time. The *Vasistha* represents a transitional phase from the prose Dharma Sutras to the verse Smritis (Olivelle 346). An example of a law of the *Vasistha* is that: “If someone kills a Ksatriya, he should do the same for eight years; if he kills a Vaiśya, for six years; and if he kills a Sudra, for three years.” (Olivelle 435)

The Dharma Sutras were not really investigated well in Hindu studies in the past. It has limited sources and commentaries notes to prove its accurate date and existence. However, from the following books of sources, which guided me through this article, the related websites which gave me some knowledge on this topic, Dharma Sutras is indeed a wide text. From the four remaining Dharma Sutras, *Āpastamba*, *Gautama*, *Vasistha* and *Baudhāyana* we can see similar laws but phrased in different ways. The punishment for the same concept of sin done is different

or phrased differently within the Dharma Sutras. Therefore one has to read and understand the different Dharma Sutras in general and also in detail.

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### **Websites Related to the Topic**

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