



Laidlaw Scholars Undergraduate Leadership and Research Programme

Summer Research Reflection

The Concept of Rights in the Sanskrit World

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Title

How does the concept of *Adhikāra* in the *Manusmṛti*, as interpreted by Medhātithi, illustrate the cultural contingency of rights, particularly in the context of criminal justice?

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Introduction

Growing up in India, surrounded by diverse traditions of law, religion, and culture, I was always struck by how differently people framed justice. Sometimes it meant fairness, other times it was bound up with duty or responsibility. These experiences nurtured my early curiosity about law not only as a set of rules, but as a cultural and philosophical framework.

When I began my Laidlaw summer research, I carried this curiosity forward. I wanted to challenge the modern assumption of universal rights, and instead ask how earlier legal traditions conceptualized justice. This led me to one of the foundational texts of Dharmaśāstra called the *Manusmṛti*, and to its authoritative commentator, Medhātithi. My project focused on the concept of *adhikāra* as the principle through which justice was organized. Unlike modern frameworks, where rights are equal for all, *adhikāra* is contextual: determined by role, competence, and responsibility. I hoped this project would not only uncover alternative models of justice but also provoke reflection on how current systems might be strengthened.

The Research Journey

My research unfolded along two paths: textual study and fieldwork.

On the textual side, I worked closely with the *Manusmṛti* and Medhātithi's commentary. While I was familiar with Sanskrit, these texts challenged me in unexpected ways. The language of legal philosophy is dense, layered with technical vocabulary and subtle argumentation. Often, a single verse demanded hours of careful parsing. My supervisor played a vital role in guiding me through this process. She trained me not only in how to dissect texts, but also in how to think critically, not settling for the "obvious" interpretation but asking deeper questions: What assumptions does this passage rest on? What does Medhātithi emphasize or silence? Her feedback on my drafts taught me how to connect small textual details to broader theoretical frameworks. This mentorship transformed the way I approached scholarship, teaching me rigor, patience, and intellectual humility.

The fieldwork component took me to Banaras Hindu University in Varanasi, India, where I interviewed Sanskrit professors and scholars. This was especially meaningful because, although

India is my home country, I had never been to Varanasi before. Known as one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world and celebrated as the spiritual heart of India, it felt both familiar and foreign. I vividly remember one moment: after a long, winding conversation with a professor that had stretched late into the evening, he pointed to the ghats of the Ganga and remarked that “law here is not just written in texts, but lived in rituals, in relationships, in responsibilities.” Standing there, in a city where history and spirituality are inseparable, I felt my research come alive in ways no library could offer.

Arranging these meetings, however, was not easy. Many professors were not digitally responsive; emails went unanswered, and scheduling required repeated phone calls and follow-ups. At times, I wondered whether the meetings would materialize at all. This experience taught me that research is not only about ideas but also about persistence, negotiation, and resilience.

When the interviews happened, they exceeded my expectations. What would begin as a one-hour interview often expanded into four hours of dialogue, full of generosity and insight. Professors emphasized that *adhikāra* is not a static definition but must be understood through broader hermeneutic traditions like *Mīmāṃsā*, which balance obligation and competence. Each conversation led to another, as scholars connected me to colleagues, enriching my network and deepening my understanding.

The language of the interviews added another layer of complexity. While my academic research is conducted in English, the scholars I spoke with were more comfortable in Hindi. All interviews were therefore carried out in Hindi, and I later transcribed and translated them into English for analysis. This process was difficult but rewarding: translating sharpened my sensitivity to nuance and forced me to reflect on how ideas shift across languages.

Between the complexity of Sanskrit texts and the practical demands of conducting interviews in Hindi, I grew more aware of how language itself shapes scholarship, what is expressed, what is sometimes lost, and what must be interpreted carefully.

Leadership Skills in Action

- **Communication.** Analyzing a Sanskrit skill while communicating with scholars in Hindi required me to step outside my comfort zone and adapt my communication style. Explaining my project clearly, listening carefully, and then translating those conversations for an English speaking academic context tested my ability to bridge linguistic and cultural worlds.
- **Adaptability.** Delays in email responses, shifting schedules, and inaccessible archives required flexibility. Rather than being discouraged, I learned to see these disruptions as opportunities to reorient my approach.
- **Independence and Initiative.** While guided by my supervisor, the day to day responsibility of structuring the project and organisation was mine. I had to design a reading schedule, set deadlines, and take ownership of interviews. This independence was daunting, but it gradually built my confidence and gave me freedom to set my own path.
- **Critical Thinking.** My supervisor's insistence on not stopping at surface-level interpretations transformed how I read. I now see research not as the hunt for quick answers, but as the slow uncovering of deeper questions. Even my interview questions were structured in a way that made the interviewee think thoroughly and not have an immediate obvious answer.
- **Collaboration.** From the mentorship of my supervisor, the generosity of professors in Varanasi, to PHD scholars in Vienna University of Technology, I experienced how knowledge emerges in dialogue. Strong research and leadership is therefore built on trust, reciprocity, and respect. Equally transformative were the bi-weekly "deep dive" sessions with my fellow Laidlaw Scholars. Hearing about their challenges like navigating archives, arranging interviews, or working in unfamiliar languages just reminded me that these struggles were not mine alone. The solidarity of sharing setbacks and breakthroughs made the process less isolating and much more enriching.

Personal Growth and Reflection

More than anything, this summer shaped me personally. I grew in resilience, patience, and confidence. The process of reading Sanskrit texts reminded me that expertise is never immediate; it comes from sustained engagement, trial and error, and willingness to admit confusion. The fieldwork tested my perseverance from arranging interviews with professors who were often difficult to reach taught me persistence and the importance of respectful insistence.

The act of translating interviews from Hindi into English gave me a new appreciation for nuance. Words carried shades of meaning that did not always have perfect equivalents. This taught me to slow down, to avoid oversimplification, and to represent others' voices with fidelity.

One of the most important lessons was learning to be open minded about my research design. At the start of the summer I was very strict with my title and question, determined to pursue it exactly as I had planned. As the research progressed through difficult texts, unexpected insights, and long conversations with scholars, I realised that allowing my question to shift and adapt made the project stronger. What began with a rigid framework grew into a more nuanced and responsive study. This experience taught me that strong research is not rigid but alive, and that openness often leads to better questions and deeper understanding.

Therefore, I learned to embrace uncertainty. At the beginning, I wanted clear answers. By the end, I realized that good research often leaves us with better questions. That shift in mindset from seeking certainty to navigating complexity has been one of my most valuable lessons.

The leadership lessons I learned go beyond research. In academics, I now write with sharper analysis and clearer structure. In leadership roles, I am more comfortable with ambiguity and more patient in building consensus. The project also reshaped how I think about leadership itself as responsibility. This insight mirrors the very concept of *adhikāra*: entitlement always comes with heightened duty. Just as the king in the *Manusmṛiti* is held to a thousand-fold higher liability, I now see leadership as holding oneself to higher standards.

Looking ahead, I hope to expand this research by comparing *adhikāra* with modern theories of human rights, highlighting how responsibility and entitlement can be balanced differently across traditions. I also plan to share my findings in interdisciplinary settings, where dialogue across cultural perspectives can be most fruitful.

The Laidlaw program gave me more than the chance to complete a research project — it gave me the courage to embrace difficulty, to grow through setbacks, and to see leadership as a practice of responsibility. If leadership begins with guiding oneself, then this summer taught me to do so with patience, humility, and openness. These are lessons I will carry into my future research, my career, and my broader role as a leader.