



**Laidlaw Scholars Undergraduate Leadership and Research
Programme
Research Proposal**

Deontic & Legal Concepts in Sanskrit Philosophy

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**STUDENT
LIFE**

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Abstract

My project examines the interplay between *adhikāra* and *daṇḍa* within Sanskrit legal philosophy, primarily through Medhātithi's commentary on the *Mānavadharmasāstra* (Laws of Manu), and analyzes how this dynamic differs from the way punishment is treated within Euro-American rights-based frameworks through similarly interpretive literature on Western common law. Through this comparison, I aim to draw a more globally cohesive understanding of how “entitlement” and “accountability” play out across culturally distinct legal theories. Additionally, I seek to apply these findings to contemporary legal theory on artificial intelligence in order to clarify how artificial intelligence (AI) may operate within frameworks historically designed for human behaviour — specifically what AI is entitled to, how it may be held accountable, and what remains wholly unaccounted for across both Sanskrit and Western legal interpretation, but ought to be an essential part of AI legal governance.

This research will primarily make use of literature analysis, alongside scholarly collaborations across the University of Toronto (UofT), Vienna University of Technology (TU Wien), and Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität (LMU Munich). Through these collaborations and comparative textual analyses, this project aims to bridge historical legal traditions and emerging debates in AI legal regulation.

Introduction

Hailing from the New York City metropolitan area, I've been interested in legal rights analysis since my involvement with the High School Law Institute at New York University, which linked constitutional law with New York City-specific case studies — a passion I've further honed through legal appellate simulations within moot court portfolios at the University of Toronto. Additionally, I've taken on a strong interest in Hindu advocacy, initially channeled through establishing my town's Hindu Students Council to address the underrepresentation of Hindu identity in world history education and broader community development.

Together, these experiences have shaped my academic interest in legal theory and international law, with a regional focus on South Asia; a trajectory which led me to participate in the Research Opportunity Program under Professor Elisa Freschi, where I studied the concept of *daṇḍa* to examine how its scope and application vary across class status and categories of wrongdoing in Sanskrit legal theory. This granted me the perfect opportunity to bridge my interests in South Asia with the law.

Last summer, I gained exposure to technology-driven regulatory concerns through a cybersecurity internship with a supply-chain firm, where I worked on projects focused on case studies of certain security breaches. This experience highlighted to me just how rapidly artificial intelligence systems are reshaping traditional legal and regulatory frameworks. Upon reflecting on how this infrastructure is increasingly pivotal in reshaping AI within legal domains, I ultimately hope that through “Deontic & Legal Concepts in Sanskrit Philosophy,” I can not only channel my interest in South Asian regional representation within a more holistic legal worldview, but also evaluate how global legal understandings can evolve from their historically static nature to account for emerging technologies.

Research Objectives & Questions

1. How does ‘adhikāra’ in Sanskrit legal parlance structure ‘danda’ differently from punishment in rights-based frameworks in Euro-American legal theory?
2. How does this comparison clarify what AI is legally entitled to and how it may be held accountable?

Background

The institutions that shape international law fashion themselves as universal and broadly representative of fundamental legal protections, though ironically the legal frameworks that encompass these protections remain grounded predominantly in Western schools of thought. As a result, many legal systems and philosophical traditions outside the Euro-American sphere are often treated as peripheral to broader conversations surrounding legal theory, despite their extensive historical engagement with questions of obligation, accountability, and governance.

A notable example of one of these non–Euro–American legal traditions is the Mānavadharmasāstra, or the Laws of Manu, a foundational Sanskrit legal and ethical code composed in ancient India between roughly the 2nd century BCE and 3rd century CE, which comments on questions of law, duty, punishment, governance, and social order. Given that the legal language associated with the Laws of Manu can often be highly dense and interpretively complex, the commentary of Medhātithi subsequently emerged as a powerful interpretive tool. Crafted by a medieval Sanskrit scholar, Medhātithi’s analyses examine questions of punishment, obligation, hierarchy, and legal authority through highly developed forms of deontic reasoning. In light of the Laws of Manu’s position as one of the most influential and extensively commented upon legal texts within the South Asian legal tradition, I view it as a very helpful medium through which to develop a comparative understanding of legal thought relative to Western common law norms — with Medhātithi serving as a particularly useful comparative framework for understanding how the Laws of Manu are interpreted in relation to Western common law interpretation.

Additionally, there is a fundamentally static nature through which global legal exchange is often viewed — where it has historical roots, but its core principles are largely kept intact to ensure fundamental protections. That said, this has become particularly problematic given the advent of artificial intelligence, which has challenged this static structure we have historically given to legal thought, as our current legal systems were constructed to serve humans but are increasingly raising questions surrounding other agents who ought to be accounted for within that very same legal system.

My research serves a dual purpose in contributing solutions to these challenges by (1) analyzing historical interpretations of legal thought from two vastly different cultural constructs to cultivate a more global understanding of legal entitlement and punishment, and (2) utilizing this understanding to analyze contemporary literature on artificial agents in order to evaluate how our traditionally static legal model can evolve to account for rapidly developing technologies.

This past year, I worked with Professor Elisa Freschi through the University of Toronto (UofT) Research Opportunity Program to assess how daṇḍa (or “punishment”) plays out in the Vedic

context by deconstructing its manifestations across social class and sanction type. Building on this foundation, my proposed research seeks to understand how this notion of *daṇḍa* relates to the similar concept of *adhikāra* (or “entitlement”) relative to Western conceptions of rights and punishment, while further speaking to the evolving challenge of regulating artificial intelligence within human-centered legal systems.

Methodology

My methodology includes (1) analyzing *adhikāra* and its interaction with *daṇḍa*, (2) comparing these findings with Euro-American legal theory, and (3) applying this framework to legal theory on artificial intelligence.

Step 1 (Weeks 1–2.5) includes a literature review of the *Medhātithi* commentary to examine ‘*adhikāra*’ within the *Mānavadharmasāstra*. Through my current research with Prof. Freschi, I have analyzed Books 7 and 8 on *daṇḍa*, focusing on variation by social status (e.g., caste) and sanction type (corporal versus pecuniary), serving as a comparative basis for my study of *adhikāra*. I will segment *Medhātithi* with Prof. Freschi to identify passages relevant to ‘*adhikāra*’. For each excerpt, my annotations will assess how *adhikāra* is applied and how it conditions the manifestation of *daṇḍa*, drawing on my prior findings. Where *Medhātithi* alone does not sufficiently clarify this relationship, I will consult Patrick Olivelle’s *Dharma Reader* to situate these concepts within their broader historical and doctrinal context. I will document all findings – including *adhikāra* passages, corresponding *daṇḍa* discussions, textual references, and supplementary context from the *Dharma Reader* where necessary.

Step 2 (Weeks 2.5–3) introduces a comparative framework examining foundational Euro-American legal theory, with a focus on rights and punishment. To parallel *Medhātithi*’s systematizing role, I will analyze William Blackstone’s *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, a formative text for common law traditions. I will focus on Books I and II for discussions of rights and legal status, and Book IV for theories of punishment. Excerpts will be annotated using the same analytical lens applied to *Medhātithi*: namely, how legal entitlement or status conditions exposure to sanction.

Week 4 will synthesize findings from the Sanskrit legal analysis and Euro-American comparative framework, serving as a conceptual bridge between my first and second research questions, by conducting targeted scholarly consultations abroad. At LMU Munich, Prof. Freschi has connected me with PhD candidate Alessandro Giudice, whose dissertation, *The Smṛti of Pitāmaha in Medieval Indian Jurisprudence*, examines how Hindu legal doctrines were interpreted and applied in medieval Indian courts; discussions with him and affiliated scholars will help situate ‘*danda*’ within broader judicial and interpretive practices beyond prescriptive texts. I will also meet with researchers at TU Wien, host of the DEON Conference on Normative AI, including members of the Theory and Logic Group. Their research framework focuses on developing AI systems in accordance with societal norms; I aim to understand how this is operationalized and what challenges this poses for my comparative analysis.

Step 3 (Weeks 5–6.5) consists of a focused literature review of contemporary legal theory on artificial intelligence, addressing my second research question. The primary text will be Laurence F. White and Samir Chopra’s *A Legal Theory for Autonomous Artificial Agents*, one

of the most developed attempts to articulate legal agency and accountability for nonhuman actors. I will focus on Chapter 1 (“Artificial Agents and Agency”) to examine how modern legal systems construct agency and entitlement for artificial agents, and Chapter 4 (“Tort Liability for Artificial Agents”) to analyze how liability and sanction are imposed once such eligibility is established. My annotations will assess the rights–punishment relationship in White and Chopra’s framework and highlight what remains unaccounted for when contemporary AI theory is compared to the aforementioned historical legal discourses.

The last half of Week 6 will be used to synthesize annotations and draft my report.

Training/ Certifications Needed

Professor Freschi will provide training on text mining, but no additional training or certifications needed.

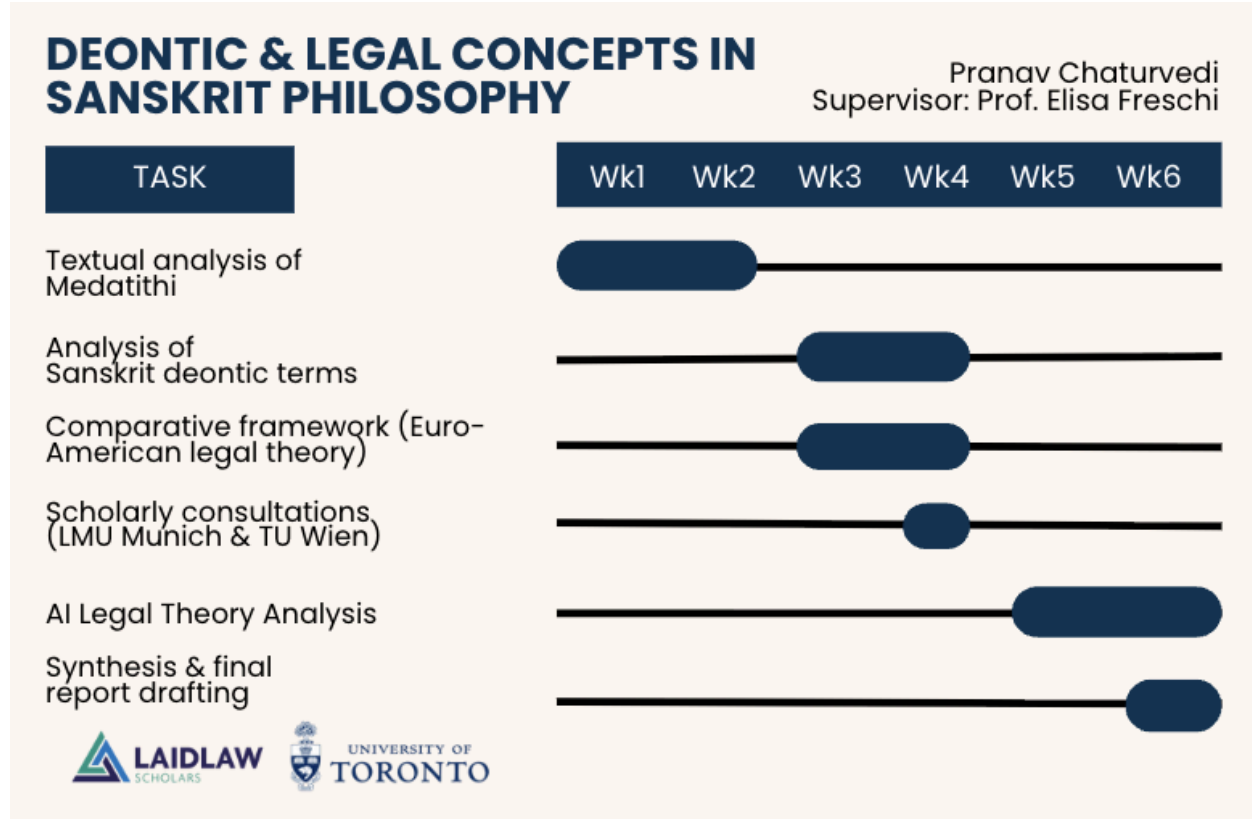
Research Location

Toronto, Ontario, Canada; Munich, Bavaria, Germany; Vienna, Austria

Research Ethics Board

This project won’t require REB approval.

Timeline



Resources & Support Needed

Beyond the literature and thematic analysis, and mentorship associated with faculty and scholars at UofT, TU Wien, and LMU Munich, no additional resources and support are needed.

Potential Impact

Given the global nature of my research, one impact I foresee is using my findings to better understand how international legal systems can represent non-Euro-American populations. Through my comparative analysis of Sanskrit legal philosophy and Euro-American legal theory, I hope to contribute to broader discussions surrounding legal entitlement, punishment, and accountability across different historical and regional contexts. Given my supplementary focus on artificial intelligence, I also believe this project could help bridge older legal traditions and rapidly expanding technologies by clarifying legal language historically centered on personhood, helping support the development of more compliant AI systems.

References

Manusmṛti with the Manubhāṣya of Medhātithi Jha, Ganganath, trans. *Manusmṛti with the Manubhāṣya of Medhātithi*. 5 vols. Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1920–1926.

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