

Pleasure, Power, Prestige and Shame: The Paradoxical World of Prostitutes in Ancient India (C. 600 BCE TO 550 CE)

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Abstract: In ancient India (circa 600 BCE to 550 CE), the institution of prostitution, encompassing both courtesans and sex workers, was a multifaceted and paradoxical component of society. While often marginalized and associated with shame, these women simultaneously wielded significant cultural, economic, and political influence. Courtesans, or *ganikās*, were highly educated women skilled in music, dance, poetry, and intellectual discourse. They often served as patrons of the arts and were integral to the cultural fabric of their time. Despite their influence, prostitutes were subject to societal stigma and legal restrictions. Texts like the *Kamasutra* and the *Arthashastra* provide insights into the regulation of their profession, including state oversight and taxation. However, these texts also acknowledge the autonomy and agency of these women, indicating a nuanced societal view. The urbanization of ancient India, particularly during the Maurya and Gupta periods, facilitated the prominence of prostitutes in city life. They were often seen as symbols of wealth and refinement. Their dual role as both revered and marginalized figures emphasises the paradoxical nature of their existence in ancient Indian society. This paper examines the complex roles of prostitutes in ancient Indian society, highlighting their contributions to art, politics, and urban life, as well as the societal contradictions surrounding their status. This study utilizes historical analysis of primary and secondary sources, including religious and secular texts, to explore the various roles of prostitutes in ancient India. It aims to provide a better understanding of their contributions to society and the complexities of their social status.

Keywords: Ancient India, Prostitutes, Courtesans, Society, Position.

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Introduction

Women are not a homogenous category, and studies on women of ancient India suggest that the identities of women can be constituted in a variety of ways. The present paper seeks to explore and analyse the roles and portrayal of prostitutes in different Brahmanical and Buddhist texts. The study also seeks to explore their contribution to society and how they carved a niche for themselves. The present study is based on the translated works of the Brahmanical and Buddhist primary sources, and also uses secondary sources as works of authors in the form of books and articles. Among the Brahmanical

primary sources which have been used are the *Dharmasūtras* (Law Books) the *Arthaśāstra*, Smṛti texts, i.e. *Manu*, *Yājñavalkya* and *Nārada*, and *Kāmasūtra of Vātsyāyana*, and some early Purāṇas like *Viṣṇu* and *Matsya Purāṇa* have been used. Buddhist sources mainly comprise the *Jātakas*, *Therīgāthā*, *Vinaya Piṭaka Buddhist Sūtras*, *Mahāvastu*, Buddhist Mahāyāna Texts, i.e. the *Buddha-carita* of Aśvaghosha and *Gaṇḍavyūha* sutra.

The existence of institution of prostitution throughout the history cannot be denied. We have several terms denoting these ladies right from the time of the *Ṛgveda*. We have term like *nṛtu* denoting a female dancer right from the time of the *Ṛgveda* (Sinha & Basu, 1992: 10). Terms like *gaṇikā*, *nagarśobhinī* (“ornament of the city”), and *veśyā* appear in both Brahmanical and Buddhist texts, indicating a nuanced hierarchy within the profession. The *gaṇikā*, typically associated with elite clients and courtly circles, was expected to possess a range of talents, while the *veśyā* represented more common sex workers, and the *vaṇṇadāsī* indicated a combination of sex work and servitude (Roy, 2010: 201). These women were integral to the urban cultural milieu, often enjoying a degree of autonomy uncommon for other women in the same period.

Dharmasūtras and Smṛti literature talk about the institution but they considered them as an unwelcome but unavoidable and a social stigma. For instance, the *Gautama Dharmasūtra* (XII.27) notably states that killing a *brāhmaṇī* who survives by harlotry requires no expiatory rite (*prāyaścitta*) (Roy, 2004: 139). Similarly, according to *Baudyana* (III. 6. 10) and *Vashistha Dharmasūtras* (XIV.10) forbids brahmana from accepting food from prostitutes (Banerji, 1962: 166), reflecting the broader moral disregard towards the profession. However, rules were made for their protection as well. Kauṭilya and Yājñavalkya prescribe a fine of 12 and 24 *paṇas* respectively for forcible intercourse with a prostitute against her will (Kane, 1930-32: 534). Kauṭilya and Nārada provide detailed references to prostitutes, rules for their conduct and salary etc. As per the text this profession was regulated by the state. A special officer called *gaṇikādhyakṣa* was appointed for the purpose. Nārada says that if a prostitute doesn't provide services after receiving payment, she should be fined double the amount, but if her client refuses the prostitute's services, he loses prepaid amount (Jolly, VI, 1981: 68). It further says: If a client engages in non-consensual or unconventional acts with a prostitute or if multiple people approach her, the client pays eight times the agreed amount and an equal fine. These rules seem to focus on protecting prostitutes' rights and regulating client behaviour.

According to G. Kuppuram, ‘Chanakya divided the institute of harlots into three categories: royal prostitutes, city-level prostitutes and private prostitutes or a group of prostitutes under the control of a private person’ (Kuppuram, 1979: 215). The term *gaṇikā* was used for royal harlots of the Mauryan empire which were appointed by the state administration. The other terms used by Chanakya are ‘*pratigaṇika*, *rūpajīvā*, *veśya*, *dāsī*, *devadasi*, *pumschali*, *silpakarika*, *kausikastrī* and *rupadasi* which means special kinds of prostitutes’. Kauṭilya says that the prostitute who is beautiful and young and also well-versed in singing and dancing should be appointed as a superintendent of courtesans (*gaṇikā*) by paying them one thousand *paṇas*. Likewise, other or deputy *gaṇikā* should be appointed by paying half money to that of main *gaṇikā* and half of that to the family establishment (Gairola, 2.27, 2009: 207).

It seems that there were categories of prostitutes as per their beauty and talents. Kauṭilya says that there are three categories of prostitutes: (i) the best (ii) the better (iii) the lowest. Their work was divided according to their category. They were paid their salary as per their category. For example, the best would be paid three thousand *paṇas*. The second one would be paid two thousand *paṇas*,

and the lowest category would get one thousand *paṇas* respectively. Kangle opines that *gaṇikās* were appointed mainly as attendants of the king, for holding the umbrella over his head, or carrying the water jug for him, or fanning him, or accompanying him on procession, and so on (Kangle, 1965: 164). At the same time, she had to entertain the visitors as the king may direct her. However, her relations with visitors are to be governed by a 'strict code of conduct'. The woman called '*rūpājīvā*' used to earn her livelihood by her beauty; however, *rūpājīvās* also appear among attendants in the palace. There is reference to *bandhakīpoṣakas*, and the expression can only refer to brothel keepers. It is recommended that 'income earned through them may be used to replenish the treasury'. Different terms used for prostitutes in the *Arthaśāstra* make us believe that prostitution was a socially recognised institution, and it was under state control during the Mauryan period.

The Dharmaśāstras strictly prohibited the consumption of food cooked by the prostitutes (Saxena, *Manusmṛti*, IV. 209; *Yājñavalkya*, I. 160-165, 2019: 166). H. C. Chakladar opines that during the Gupta period, women skilled in various arts were highly respected and admired for their talent. People who appreciated art sought their company, valuing their expertise and companionship, and such respected position was acquired by *gaṇikā* in the society (Chakladar, 1990: 201). There are mainly three category of prostitutes mentioned in the *Kāmasūtra*: *gaṇikā*, *rūpājīvā* and *kumbhadāsī*. Vātsyāyana mentions that 'the courtesans court their paramour partly for physical pleasure but basically for their own livelihood' (Upadhyaya, VI. I.1, 1963: 205). The category of *gaṇikās* within the institution of prostitution was proficient in different skills. In addition to earn their livelihood by various skills, they played important role in political, social and religious life and therefore they were treated with respect. Vātsyāyana lays that the *gaṇikā* type of courtesans must make some donations to construct temples, tanks, gardens, groves, bridges, mud-huts, providing for the worship of deities and other religious gift (Upadhyaya, VI. VI. 25, 1963: 224). For the '*rūpājīvā*' type of courtesans whose livelihood relied on physical beauty, would focus on adorning themselves with beautiful ornaments and jewels, decorating their homes luxuriously, using fine vessels and possessions and maintain a number of servants. (Upadhyaya, VI. VI. 26, 1963: 224). In essence, they invested in their appearance and surroundings to attract patrons and maintain their profession. The third categories of courtesans are *kumbhadāsīs* show the acquisition of wealth by always wearing white garments. They have sufficient food to overcome hunger, and confine their make-up to the daily use of perfumes, betel leaves, and few golden ornaments, usually gilded (Upadhyaya, VI. VI. 27, 1963: 224). It suggests that there were various categories of women engaged in the profession of prostitutes and there was a marked difference in their socio-economic status within the broad classification, and the category of *gaṇikās* seem at the top of the hierarchy.

There are many references of prostitution in the literary works of Kālidāsa. These prostitutes were expert in music and dance and these skilled performers were often employed in royal courts, where they would entertain nobility and aristocrats with their artistic abilities, showcasing their proficiency in music and dance. They also used to perform on auspicious occasions like festivals and child birth (Jain, 1990: 243-4). Kālidāsa also refers to the prostitution of Ujjain. The description suggests that in the temple of Mahākāla, they danced while holding fly-whisks in their hands (often symbols of royalty and spirituality) as part of their ritual or ceremonial practices (Jain, *Meghadūta Pūrv*, 35, 1990: 244). K. C. Jain further highlights the notable practice of courtesans performing in the Mahākāla temple, showcasing their artistic skills and captivating poses, indicating their significance role in temple rituals or ceremonies (Jain, 1990: 244). Even in the *Mṛichchhakaṭika*, we find reference of prostitutes. One of the famous was Vasantasenā. *Mṛichchhakaṭikā* shows that some of these prostitutes were wealthy

enough and lived in the large mansions, containing a lot of courtyards (Kale, *The Mṛichchhakaṭika*, IV, 1924: 157-71). People of various backgrounds, such as aristocrats, generals, traders etc. used to visit the houses of courtesans (Jain, 1990: 244). K. C. Jain further opines that ‘they may be compared to the old Greek courtesans whose houses were freely visited by kings, ministers and other distinguished persons without any guilty conscience’. The *Raghuvamśa* also mentions *Nartakīs*, i.e. dancing girls (Jain, *Raghuvamśa*, xix, 14; 19: 244). There is another term i.e. *parijanāṅganas*, mentioned in the *Raghuvamśa*, it is said that they were another category of prostitutes because they were loose in morals (*Raghuvamśa*, xix, v. 23: 244).

Some Purāṇas talk about the institution of prostitutes and these writers of the Purāṇas seem to be more or less ambivalent towards them. Unlike the Dharmaśāstric treatment of prostitution as a professional calling, the Purāṇa writers, instead of demeaning the institution, not only give it due recognition (Nath, *Brahma Purāṇa*, XVII. 68-70; 81-9, 2009: 102), but also gave tips to make the profession lucrative. Prostitutes are advised not to have love for one particular person, especially if he is poor; their main purpose should always be money, irrespective of the person being handsome or deformed (Nath, 2009, *Brahma Purāṇa*, XXIII. 106-9: 102). The *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* does not contain much information on prostitutes. It only refers to mahiṣaka (Dayal, 1983, *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, II. 6. 22: 158). The commentator of the Purāṇa, quoting a text from the smṛti, opines that this term means a person who lives by his wife’s prostitution (Dayal, 1983, *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*: 158). This profession might have been a means of income for certain women and their families. The Purāṇa refers to the public performers as raṅgopajīvī (Dayal, 1983, II. 6. 21: 158). It appears that a section of people might have followed the profession of entertaining people to earn money. In the Purāṇas, ‘we get references to different terms for prostitutes like *kalyaṇī*, *kāminī*, *paṇyastṛī*, *vārāstṛī*, *veśyā* etc.’ (Saxena, 1983, *Matsya Purāṇas.*, 70.1, 19, 60; *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, 1.11.20, 9.14.38, 10. 47.7, 75, 15, 11.8.22: 164). *Veśyā* seems to be generic term for different categories of prostitutes. The author of the *Matsya Purāṇa* has listed prostitutes among objects that ported good luck (Nath, 2009: 102). In the *Matsya Purāṇa* institution of prostitutes appears well established. The *Matsya Purāṇa* prescribes certain rules on the conduct of prostitutes as well (Basu, 1916, *The Matsya Puranam*, LXX. 26-32, 60: 211). It reveals that in addition to giving alms of cooked meals to beggars and religious wanderers, they also did works of public utility and charity (Basu, 1916: 211). It refers to an example of a prostitute named Līlavati in this context (Basu, 1916, *The Matsya Puranam*, XCII. 24-29, 31: 244).

Prostitutes were able to carry out certain religious activities and are actually mentioned as donors in the Purāṇas. Some of these women were clearly wealthy, as it is apparent from the fact that they could make large donations and give valuable gifts at religious events. Charity by these women was made out of their personal income.

Early Pali texts refer to courtesans living in towns, for example, Ambapālī lived in Vesālī, Sālavatī lived in Rāgagaha, Aḍḍhakāsī courtesan of Kasi, etc. A passage in the *Mahā-Parinibbāna-Sutta* and *Mahāvagga* suggests that the category of courtesans in the institution of prostitution was wealthy enough in terms of their material access to resources. This is evident from the example of Ambapālī, the courtesan of Vesālī. The courtesan offered a gift (the mansion) to the order of mendicants, of which the Buddha was the chief (Rhys Davids, 1980, *Mahā-Parinibbāna Sutta*, II, 24: 33). It shows that the category of courtesans was prosperous enough to donate such gifts to the Buddhist order.

In order to make cities flourish and attract people, courtesans were appointed to attract the visitors to the city. It is evident in the *Mahāvagga* of Vinaya Texts that Ambapālīka who used to ask fifty

kahāpanas for one night was beautiful, elegant, pleasing, gifted with highest beauty of complexion, well-versed in dancing, singing, and lute-playing, much visited by desirous people and through whom Vesālī became more and more flourishing (Davids & Oldenberg, (1982), *Mahāvagga*, VIII, 1, pp. 171-72). In the city of Rājagaha also there was also a girl Sālavatī by name who was appointed as a courtesan in order to make the town flourish like Vesālī. A passage in the *Mahāvagga* states that ‘the Rājagaha merchant, after having done his business in Vesālī, returned to Rājagaha and went to the place where the Māgadha king Seniya Bimbisāra was’. The merchant said to the king, just like Vesālī, to make our city prosperous and opulent, let us also install a courtesan. It shows that courtesans were very useful members of society. They were important connections to showcase their state’s culture, prosperity, and opulence.

In the *Milindapañha*, Nagasena gave an illustration to the king Milind by saying that a city is gradually built and gradually people from many walks of life start to live there and do various professions. In this connection, he has also made reference to prostitutes (Davids, 1965: 211). The *Milindapañha* further tells us that there were certain women, known as *gaṇikā*, *lasikā*, *kumbhadāsi*, who lived on prostitution and were probably treated as ‘ornaments of a city’ (*nagaramaṇḍana*) (Basu, 1978: 48).

Harlots were often hired for enjoyment. Vinaya texts provide that in a certain grove on the way to Uruvelā, some young men sporting with their wives. One of them had no wife; for him they had procured a harlot. (Davids & Oldenberg, 1982, *Mahāvagga*, 1, 14: 116-17).

Some like Vimalā (Hornor, 1930, *Therīgāthā*, xxxix, p. 88) and Sirimā (Sutta Nipāta Commentary, I, 144) appears to have been prostitutes because their mothers were. Many a time, prostitution was not inherited but was chosen as a profession. Adḍhakāsī was born in a merchant’s family, but preferred to become a harlot (Talim, 2015: 290). In Jātakas we come across those women who were called as Vaṇṇadāsi (Talim, 2015: 291-92). As Meena Talim suggests that here Vaṇṇa can be denoted as colour or complexion but nothing to do with caste (*jati*). In *Aṭṭhānajataka* (no. 425) there is another reference of Vaṇṇadāsi. She was beautiful and used to charge thousand coins per day. One day a son of rich merchant from Banaras went to her without carrying any wages to pay her, she welcomed him and said, ‘Oh master, we are Vaṇṇadāsi and without giving thousands no one can enjoy us’, here it seems that she is talking on behalf of her community of *Vaṇṇadāsi* and they seem to follow the community rules strictly. Sometimes wealthy courtesans could enjoy honourable titles such as ‘Janapada Kalyani’ or ‘Nagara Shobhini’ means beautiful lady of the city. They were not only a medium through which the nobles satisfied their thirst for fair sex, but they were also the real custodians of such arts as singing, dancing, and music through which the aesthetic emotions of the people were aroused and satisfied (Tayagi, 1994: 72). *Buddhacharita* also talks about the presence of *ganikās*. They are referred to in the context of Suddhodana’s son (Siddhartha) when they surrounded him in a royal grove and seduced him by a variety of gestures (Cowell, 1985: 40-41).

Mahavāstu provides that there was a particular street for the prostitutes (*gaṇikā-vīthi*) in all big cities and there were chief prostitutes (*agra-gaṇikā*) probably famous for their wealth and the power they exercised (Rahula, 1978: 330). It seems likely that charges for the company of these ladies of pleasures were fixed according to their skills like physical attributes, and mastery in dance and music. For example a charming beauty used to charge one thousand pieces per night whereas a prostitute with some physical deformity had to be content with just a half of that amount (*ibid*). Their availability was sometimes on a contract basis. We find a rich bachelor having such contract with Śyāma the courtesan

which was originally effective for as long a period as twelve years. Another prostitute refuses an enamoured young man's pleas as she had already accepted the wage from another man. They were usually rich and held fairly strong position in the network of the social organisation. Āmrāpālī's mango-grove was one of the most beautiful places in the vaiśālī. Syāmā displays the power of her money by bribing executioners to set free a man condemned to death. Buddhaghosa also refers to prostitution. He calls them *Stri*, *Nāri*, *Padmalochana* and *Vāramukhya* and they were a part of the affluent society of the time (Khosla, 1986: 244). Buddhaghosa also tells that state patronised professional story tellers, and those whose main profession was to be the companions of princes or kings and to entertain them (Khosla, 1986, Buddhaghosa, V, 2: 245). *Gaṇḍavyūha* sutra describes Vasumitrā, a prostitute who was beautiful and skilled in arts and sciences, possessed true knowledge and mastery in guiding others had a large, impressive entourage, embodied goodness and wisdom. (Cleary, 1993: 1272). Far from being marginalized, courtesans like Āmrāpālī, Śyāmā, and Vasumitrā were powerful figures who combined sensuality with intellectual and artistic prowess. Their participation in social, political, and spiritual spheres points to a role that was simultaneously economic, cultural, and ethical.

It seems that prostitution in ancient India was a most prevalent pursuit for women to choose as a profession. However, there would have been many reasons to adopt this profession. But it was a space that was available for women professionally. There were mixed thoughts on the characteristics of prostitutes. Sometimes they were appreciated for their accomplishments in various arts, and they were known as custodians of the various forms of art. Sometimes they were represented as full of vices like falseness, deceit and instability, and so on. Varieties of titles were given to the well-qualified courtesan like *nagarashobhinī* or the ornament of the city, and varieties of terms were used for prostitution like *gaṇikā*, *rūpājīvā*, and *kumbhadāsī*. Various terms for prostitutes indicate that there were several categories of women in this profession, which indicates the hierarchy within the profession itself. Probably not every prostitute had the same kind of material access and status as a *gaṇikā* had. The highest category in the profession must be a palace courtesan or *gaṇikā* who was supposed to offer her services to the elite clients and was also a part of elite culture. The other categories of prostitutes were probably those who used to render their services to the commoners. References to courtesans in textual sources show that some of them used to be a leading figure in the public life. *Gaṇikās* were considered custodians of art. They used to be well skilled in dancing, singing and lute playing and often played key cultural and social roles.

Prostitutes also contributed to the state economy as they had to pay a certain amount of tax on their income to the state. However, in society, it might be a taboo to join prostitution as a profession. But for some, it might have a survival plan. The *Arthaśāstra*, *Kāmasūtra*, the Purāṇas and Buddhaghosa advocate the institution. During the time of Kautilya and Vātsyayana, the institution of prostitutes was a source of state revenue, so the safety and security of these women were looked after by the state. It is a fact that in the ancient Indian social system the institution of prostitutes enjoyed social acceptance. Apart from the queens, if any other category has received considerable attention of scholars exploring early Indian social structure, it is that of *gaṇikā* or courtesan setting her apart from the family women. This space can also be seen as strategies for survival and access to and control over material and cultural resources within their sphere of social structure. Whatever might be the reasons, we can assume that they constituted a section of women who had to be their own breadwinners and guardians.

These accounts revealing a historical reality where prostitutes were respected professionals with agency, influence, and public presence. Rather than only symbols of moral decay, they often embodied

beauty, intellect, and even spiritual wisdom—suggesting that ancient Indian society, at least in literary traditions, allowed for a more layered and humanized understanding of sexuality, gender, and social function.

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