



The Ganikas in Early India: Highlighting the History of Women in the Margins

Sweta Jha

Research Scholar, University of North Bengal, Darjeeling, West Bengal, India

Received: 07.03.2026; Accepted: 21.03.2026; Available online: 31.03.2026

©2026 The Author(s). Published by Scholar Publication. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

Abstract

The focal discourse on women in early India's society, derived mainly from brahmanical texts, has been limited to the household. But there is a category of women who are important to society but are always kept silent. The focal point of this article is ganikas, a category of such women. It examines the history of ganikas, who were the embodiment of culture and enjoyed high status, yet were simultaneously treated as state-managed assets or chattel. These women were financially independent, and many had high status in society due to their beauty and talents. Ganikas were also considered carriers of culture because, besides dancing, they had to be proficient in other skills such as painting and singing. This research proposal intends to analytically review the history of prostitution, women's history, the socio-economic role of ganikas, and their contradictory role in society, and how society sees them.

keywords: ganika, courtesan, margins, chattel, skill, dakshina, diplomatic.

Introduction:

History writing is not simple. It always involves silences as well as selectivity, and one of its consequences is the Ganikas and other prostitutes being left out. As students of history, we should work towards recreating a complete picture, moving away from a male and elite perspective. If we fail to understand women's history, the picture of the past will remain partial. The feminist movement of the 1960s and the development of Women's Studies have drawn attention to the fact that, though women, like men, have been actors and agents in history, their presence has never received importance and their actions have not been recorded. Traditional historiography has always given priority to male-dominated fields such as war, diplomacy, politics, and commerce. Women's participation in history is regarded as outside the realm of historical study and pushed to the margins.

Inception of Women's History:

In women's history, we intend to evaluate the role, experiences, and contributions of women across time, aiming to correct traditional, male-centered historical narratives. It challenges traditional historical narratives that often overlook or minimize women's roles, seeking a more complete understanding of the past. We have so far ignored women's history. We have seen men's history as universally human. These universal histories present interests, concerns, and experiences from the perspective of men (Mathew, 1985).

At the time of inception of women's history, sources were re-evaluated to shed light on the contributions and roles of women. The first women's history, called additive history, is where we hear voices of women who achieved at par with men but never found their place in men's history. The feminist perspective provides the foundation to the second approach where social relations are analyzed on the basis of gender differences. An effort was made in this gendered history to have women being focused as women where their lives trials and tribulations were told. In contributory history, we have seen female agency being privileged while the impeding effect of patriarchy over women's actions were recognized (Forbes, 1998:2). The prevalent discourse on gender examines hitherto unrecorded impact of constructions of femininity and masculinity on historical events.

A significant gap in most discussions about women's history is their foundation in the European framework, with few efforts made to investigate the experiences of women in the historical context of ancient and medieval India. Furthermore, when we analyze women, the focus tends to be on either elite or ordinary women, neglecting other groups of women. The issue primarily lies with the existing sources used to reconstruct women's history, as these often reflect male biases and are predominantly elitist. To craft a new history that truly deserves the name, it is essential to acknowledge that no singular methodological or conceptual approach can fully encompass the complexities of the historical experiences of all women. To create a new narrative of women's history, we must reevaluate the current materials, chronicles, literature, and archival records, delving deeper and consistently asking, "What about the women?" It is essential to recognize that some facts and figures are not universally applicable. Consequently, the history that is presented to us often overlooks these nuances, becoming a dominant narrative or metanarrative that explains why various individuals at different times and locations have relied on generalizations without highlighting these specific facts. As a result, the historical accounts we receive transform into a collection of accepted generalizations. Despite the contributions of numerous scholars, while we do now pay attention to women's history, those women who exist in the margins tend to be excluded from the overarching discourse. It is essential to examine these women and incorporate their stories into mainstream historical narratives. Figures such as courtesans, prostitutes, temple dancers, and serving women have historically been undervalued in historical accounts. Conventional historiography has consequently either overlooked the constructive contributions of these women or depicted them as trivial. We have analyzed these women through a patriarchal perspective that characterizes them as immoral. Sexual differentiation has been one of the fundamental distinctions within society, prompting one group to perceive its interests in a manner distinct from another. Similar to class or race, gender has been utilized to forge a separate identity for men and women. By examining men's history and presuming it includes women, we cannot accurately grasp the realities of women's experiences in any particular era. Gender, similar to other categories such as class or race, has consistently been a significant influence in historical contexts. Consequently, it is essential to analyze the evolution of women's history from the feminist viewpoint, recognizing women as a separate sociological group that encounters both internal and external limitations imposed by legal, political, and social constraints.

Who were ganikas?

The *ganika* was the most prominent female personality in urban centers, as represented in early Indian culture. There were several contemporaries of the tradition of *ganika*. For example, the 'hetaira,' literally meaning 'female companion' in Greek, was one of the classes of professional, independent courtesans in ancient Greece. The 'geisha' of Japan originated in the pleasure quarters and were defined as entertainers or artists. We can also find 'veshya' or 'rupajiva' being mentioned in early indigenous sources like the Arthashastra, who were sex workers but without any talent. When examining the word's origins, the English term 'courtesan,' similar to the French 'courtesan' which comes from the feminine version of the Italian 'cortigiana,' essentially refers to a woman who often visits a court, shows affection for a courtier, and is elegantly dressed, refined in manners, and adept in diplomatic skills. The ganikas represented the most skilled group and were also the category with the highest professional fees (Saxena 2006: 13). *Ganika* is derived from the term 'gana' to which the feminine suffix 'ika' is added. The meaning of gana ranges from 'group' to 'troop' to 'company,' 'association,' and 'corporation.' Ganika in ancient India occupied a unique position in society that placed them simultaneously in the center of cultural life and the margins of conventional patriarchal structure. While they were "courtesans deluxe" and highly respected members of urban society, they existed outside the traditional family structure, allowing them freedoms denied to household wives.

Ganikas in the Margins

Women like the ganikas, or prostitutes, were considered marginal figures in historical society, yet they were essential to the social and economic framework of that era. Even though they held a significant position in society, both ideologically and culturally, they never occupied the forefront. The overall pattern concerning women indicates a varied audience, along with differing material contexts and the various social environments in which they resided. This is also connected to the different models of production present in the Indian subcontinent. Since these originated from various methods of surplus appropriation, numerous layers of intermediation came into existence. Nevertheless, when discussing categories of women, we still observe a division based on the moral standards of the patriarchal family, which distinguishes between elite and common women who fall within the respectable bounds of the family, and history tends to emphasize them.

Ganikas in Ancient Indian Literature

One of the oldest occupations in the world is prostitution. The Rigveda has the earliest reference to prostitution. Although it may have been widespread in society long earlier, prostitution as a vocation first emerges in writing a few centuries after the Vedas. In the later Vedic literature, some women were often coerced into becoming prostitutes. They picked this line of work for a variety of reasons. But when a woman chose prostitution as a profession, they found themselves in a unique position as their own breadwinner and guardian and lived independently. They had a socio-economic status reflected in later Vedic literature. There were different names for courtesans, and their roles and statuses varied. They had important economic roles, such as paying taxes to the state.

The veshyas in the Epic have taken up an essential role in the life of the city. In the great Epic Mahabharata, the ganikas served as essential attendants at weddings and other domestic ceremonies. They formed guilds, held meetings, agitated for greater civic and

domestic rights, and competed for proficiency in all branches of fine arts and culinary science. In Indian mythology, one may find numerous instances of high-class prostitution where celestial demigods act as prostitutes. They are highly accomplished in various crafts, including music and dance. In Lord Indra's court, they entertained gods and their visitors. They were also used to gauge the true level of penance or tapasya. Since the early Epics, prostitution has been assembling forces and penetrating every nook and cranny of society. Originally used to refer to all sorts of prostitutes, the term "ganika" eventually came to refer exclusively to the courtesan class. The lawmakers established a stringent rule that prohibits anyone from accepting hospitality under the roof and eating from the hands of a guy who sells his daughter for immoral motives or permits his wife to have an affair for nefarious benefit. At that time, immoral traffic was taking place; Vishnu and others have undoubtedly stated that it is an unacceptable sin to act as a procurer or go-between, to lure a girl away from home and coerce her into becoming a prostitute, and to live off of her opprobrious income. Jagnavalka created precise legislation pertaining to prostitutes and concubines. On the other hand, in every instance of non-political murder, our old Smritis always go for "the women" first. After the Vedas, the three notable traditions of ancient India are the Epics, the Smritis, and the Puranas. The Puranas, which date from the 10th century B.C.E. to the 5th century C.E., may provide a final touch to first-hand knowledge and provide us with sufficient reliable sources for the era in which they were written. They will create for us a very comprehensive and composite framework of knowledge about prostitution from the fifth century BCE to the fifth century CE if they can be supported by additional modern evidence or enhanced by the writings of Kautilya, Vatsayana, and some of the Greek ambassadors. Here, we witness a woman who betrays her marriage being punished in hell with a number of exceptionally harsh penalties. Puranas state that the woman who attaches body and soul to one husband is called a Pativrata, whereas one who lends her couch to five is branded a Veshya.

The well-known "Arthasashtra" by Kautilya describes how prostitutes should behave and how their lives are structured. It also offers laws regarding prostitutes and their activities. For those vying for their favor, a code of conduct was established. They had clear obligations and rights. In his monumental work "Kamasutra," renowned Indian philosopher Vatsayan dedicated several pages to prostitution and their passionate lifestyles, prescribing standards of conduct for the effective and widespread practice of their trade. His categorization of the prostitutes shows that the common, secret, covert prostitutes of today had their ancestors back then. It is important to study how women gradually lost social mobility. It is also important to examine societal attitudes towards prostitutes. They have seen women as a commodity, part of Dakshina.

The prevalence of attractive and youthful women in any list of presents offered to a man in exchange for a favor or as a sign of respect supports the idea that women are chattel or commodities for men's enjoyment. She is therefore compensated to a sacrificial priest and is a part of dakshina. Other monarchs donated ladies to Yudhisthira's horse sacrifice as an essential component of the entertainment. These girls could occasionally find husbands, but most of them were probably forced to become prostitutes because prostitution was more frowned upon and maidenhood became a necessary condition for marriage in the Smriti scriptures.

Conclusion:

In ancient India, the status of a *Ganika* was complex, representing a paradoxical position between high social status and, in some contexts, a form of state-controlled chattel. While they were revered as educated, artistic, and wealthy figures, texts such as the *Arthashastra* show that they were sometimes considered state property or subject to rigid, owner-like control. Gender relations in patriarchal historical cultures are unavoidably taking center stage in these societies' social histories. We hope that this paper will be seen as a guide to the intricate social landscape of early India rather than just a peep into the lives of early Indian women. Thus, the *ganika* was a representative of the "margin" that was, in fact, essential to the state's operations and the elite's cultural life, residing at the nexus of social exclusion, creative ability, and economic power.

Bibliography:

1. Bhattacharji, Sukumari. 1994. *Women and Society in Ancient India*. Calcutta, Basumati Corporation Limited.
2. Bhattacharji, Sukumari. 2011. *Prostitution in Ancient India. Women in Early Indian Societies*. Manohar, New Delhi, p.201.
3. Bentley, Michael (ed). 2002. *Companion to Historiography*, U.K. Routledge.
4. Burton, Richard. and F. F. Arbuthnot. 1992. *The Kama Sutra of Vatsyayana*. The classic translation. The Promotional Reprint Company.
5. Chakravarti, Uma. & Kumkum Roy. 1988. In *Search of Our Past: A review of the Limitations and Possibilities of the Historiography of Women in Early India*. *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 23, p. WS-2.
6. Datta, Manmathanatha. 2010. *A Prose English Translation of the Mahavarata*. (Tr. Literally from the original Sanskrit Text). Nabu publisher.
7. E.B.Cowell, ed., Robert Chalmers. translated, 1895. *The Jataka or Stories of the Buddha's Previous Births*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
8. Forbes, Geraldine. 1998. Reprint. 2000. *Women in modern India*. New York. Cambridge University Press.
9. Olivelle, Patrick, and Suman, Olivelle. 2005. *Manu's Code of Law. a Critical Edition and Translation of Manava-Dharmasastra*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
10. Olivelle, Patrick. 2013. *King Governance, and Law in Ancient India*. Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, New York. Oxford University Press.
11. Roy, Kumkum. 1996. *Justice in the Jatakas*, *Social Scientist*. Vol. 24, No 4/6 April-June, pp 23-40.
12. Roy, Kumkum. 2010. *The Power of Gender and Gender of Power*. *Explorations in Early Indian History*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi, pp.333-334.
13. Saxena, Monica. 2006. *Ganikas in early India: Its Genesis and Dimensions* *Social scientist*, Vol. 34, pp. 2-17.
14. Singh, Upinder. 2009. *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India*. Pearson India Education Services, Noida.