7.1 DEFINITION

'Prostitution, often known as the world’s oldest profession, can be traced throughout recorded history'. This is the view of some experts and the common perception, making prostitution appear as a 'natural' byproduct of human social formation, needing no explanation. Other experts disagree. 'Prostitution,' as we are told in the New Encyclopaedia Britannica, 'has not, so far as is known, been a cultural universal. In sexually permissive societies it is often rare because it is unnecessary, whereas in other societies it has been largely suppressed.' In his work on the history of prostitution, the German physician Iwan Bloch tells us that it develops as a byproduct of the regulation of sexuality. According to him prostitution appears among primitive people wherever free sexual contact is curtailed or limited. It is nothing else than a substitute for a new form of primitive promiscuity. While this is true, it does not explain under what conditions prostitution arises and becomes institutionalized in a society. It also ignores the commercial aspect of prostitution by treating it as though it were simply a variant form of sexual arrangement among consenting partners. Bloch accepts the existence of a 'natural' state of promiscuity which is later supplanted by various forms of structured marriage. This nineteenth century theory, which was elaborated by J.J. Bachofen and the American ethnologist, Lewis Henry Morgan, formed the foundation of Friedrich Engels's analysis, which has influenced so much of modern feminist theory;

- .......hetaerism derives quite freely from group marriage, from the ceremonial surrender by which women purchased the right of chastity. Surrender for money was at first a religious act; it took place in the temple of the goddess of love, and the money originally went into the temple treasury........Among other peoples hetaerism derives from the sexual freedom allowed to girls before marriage......With the rise of the inequality of property .........wage labor appears sporadically side by side with slave labor, and at the same time, as its necessary correlate, the professional prostitution of free women side by side with the forced surrender of the
Further, Engels refers to prostitution as 'the complement' of monogamous marriage and predicts its demise 'with the transformation of the means of production into social property'. We must note his insight that the origin of prostitution derives both from changing attitudes towards sexuality and from certain religious beliefs, and that changes in economic and social conditions at the time of the institutionalization of private property and of slavery affected sexual relations. He was the first to alert us to see the essential nexus of social and sexual relations. With his formulation of the analogy between the coexistence of free and slave labor and the coexistence of the 'professional prostitution of free women side by side with the forced surrender of the slave', he has pointed us toward a redefinition of the concept of 'class' for men and women.

To understand the historic development of prostitution we need to follow Engel's lead and examine its relationship to the sexual regulation of all women in archaic patriarchal states and its relationship to the enslavement of females.

7.2 THE EARLY BEGINNINGS

In ancient India, the courtesans were regarded as an urban institution and constituted an important part of Indian society, giving an impetus to the arts and the life of luxury. The courtesans did not only serve the basic needs of society, they were also a symbol of culture and *ars amoris*. The institution of courtesans in ancient India has not received as much attention from scholars as it deserves.

While tracing the history of courtesans from the beginning, archaeological findings have shed a great deal of light on the highly urbanized culture of the Indus Valley people, but we cannot definitely confirm or refute the existence of sacred prostitution in the absence of any concrete evidence. There is the possibility that the bronze figure of the dancing girl from Mohenjodaro represents a sacred prostitute within

---

the precincts of the temple of the Mother Goddess, a cult which was very popular in the
Indus Valley culture. But, in the absence of any concrete evidence to support this view,
we cannot be sure that our contention is correct.

The institution of courtesans is a distinguished feature of developed urban society
and therefore, in Vedic and post- Vedic literature though the courtesans are mentioned
casually, we hardly know much about their life and accomplishments. Vedic culture
though based on high moral values and metaphysical speculations did not turn its back on
the pleasures of life. In spite of the rural bias of Vedic culture, there is evidence pointing
to the fact that prostitution existed in Rig Vedic times.

The earliest mention of prostitution occurs in the *Rig Veda*, the most ancient
literary work of India. At first, however, we hear of the illicit lovers, *jara and jarini* —
male and female lover of a married spouse. What distinguished such an illicit lover from
the professional prostitute or her client is the regular payment for favours received. When
we hear of an illicit lover, there may or may not have been an exchange of gifts; in a case
of mutual consent, gifts must have been optional. In the days of barter economy, when
money or currency was yet unknown, such gifts were equivalent to payment in cash.
Hence love outside marriage was a familiar phenomenon even in the earliest Vedic age.

Extramarital love may have been voluntary and unpaid but it might have been
regarded by the male partner as a form of service for which he was obliged to pay in some
form. But till it was confined to a particular person, it was a temporary contract and not
regarded as a profession. The later Pali term *muhuttiya* (lasting for an instant), or its Sanskrit equivalent *muhurtika* signified purely temporary unions with no lasting
relationship or obligation. Such affairs may have been voluntary or professional,
depending on the attitudes of the partners.

Gradually, there arose a section of women who, either because they could not find
suitable husbands, or because of early widowhood, unsatisfactory married life or other
social pressures, especially if they had been violated, abducted and so denied an
honourable status in society, or had been given away as gifts in religious or secular
events- such women were frequently forced to take up prostitution as a profession. And
when they did so, they found themselves in a unique position; they constituted the only
section of women who had to be their own bread-winners and guardians. So, women who took up prostitution had to be reasonably sure of an independent livelihood; their customers had to make it a viable proposition for them.\(^2\)

### 7.3 ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

We have absolutely no way of knowing when prostitution in India arose as a recognizable profession or how much the prostitute received by way of payment. The terms *sadharani* or *samanya* (common), synonyms for prostitute, distinguish her as a woman not possessed by one man; this is the desideratum. When a woman does not belong to one man but obliges many, as the terms *varangana*, *varastri* and *varamukhya*\(^3\) signify, since she is not the responsibility of any one man, she looks after herself. She does by accepting payment from each of the men she obliges; she then becomes *panyastri*, one whose favours can be bought with money.

The process of the emergence of prostitution must have been slow, varying from region to region and from age to age. By the later Vedic age, we have references to a more regularized form of prostitution recognized as a social institution. Early Buddhist literatures, especially the *Jatakas*, bear testimony to the existence of different categories of prostitutes, and incidentally provides some information about their fees as also their financial position.

Professional prostitution presupposes an economic condition in which surplus was produced, a surplus which also earned prosperity from abroad through trade and commerce. It also presupposes the rise of petty principalities, the breakdown of tribal society, the rise of joint family and the social subjugation of women in general. In a settled agricultural community the woman gradually lost social mobility and a measure of freedom that she had been enjoying before. She was regarded as a man’s ward, possession, an object of enjoyment by the patriarchal society. Society was now

---

\(^2\) Sukumari Bhattacharya- Prostitution in Ancient India; *Women in Early Indian Societies*, (ed. By Kumkum Roy), Delhi, 1999, p. 197.

\(^3\) A woman with whom men take turns (*vara*), i. e. one who can be possessed or enjoyed by different men in turns.
polygamous; pleasure outside the home had to be paid for; hence prostitution had to be institutionalized.

In Vedic literature, especially in the *Aitreya* and *Sankhayana Aranyakas*, the prostitute is mentioned in an apparently obscene altercation with the neophyte (*brahmacarin*). In the *Vratyasukta* of the Atharvaveda, she follows the *magadha*. These are clearly part of a fertility ritual. It is in this role that she has persisted in ritual and literature down the ages.

Around the 6th century BC, as cities and townships grew up along the trade routes in northern India, there was flourishing internal and external trade, hence towns and cities become centres where the courtesans plied their trade, receiving money from travellers, merchants, soldiers and men of various trades. The courtesans were trained in many arts, but it was only the exceptionally beautiful, young and accomplished who were fortunate enough to amass a fortune.

Chief courtesans of prosperous cities and towns maintained their own train of singers and dancing girls. Royal courts also patronized such singers and dancers. They could be enjoyed by the king and his favourites and they could also be employed as spies. To the upper class of courtesans came men of refined aesthetic sensibilities and intellectual ability, hence they were obliged to provide entertainment like the hostesses of the French salons of the last century or the Japanese geisha girls. They were themselves trained in the various arts including literature, for their training was quite lengthy and elaborate. We hear of texts composed for such training; these were called *Vaisikatantra*.

There are various myths and legends regarding the origin of prostitution. The *Mahabharata* account of the destruction of the *Yadavas* and *Vrsnis* ends with the women of these tribes being abducted by barbarian brigands. In the Kuru and Panchala regions inhabited by the *Madras* and *Sindhu-Sauviras*, the brahmana sages *Dalbhya Caikitayana* and *Svetaketu’s* nephew, *Astavakra* were said to be associated with the teaching of erotics in which prostitution constitutes a section. In the *Mahabharata* and the *Matsya Purana*

---

4. Described in the *Mausalaparvana*
5. VIII. 27, 30, 57-59
6. ch. 70
we are given fictitious accounts of the origin of prostitution. Vatsyayana in his Kamasutra gives detailed instructions on how a chaste girl was to be seduced cleverly. Later, when the man abandoned her, she had no recourse left other than to take up prostitution as a profession. We also come across the Jayopajivins or Jayapajivins, husbands who lived on the wife’s income which she earned by selling herself. This was regarded as a minor sin on the husband’s part, which could be expiated by taking the comparatively mild candrayana vow.

Through these texts we also come to know about the channels by which women came to prostitution. An old channel of supply of prostitutes was young virgins given on special religious and secular occasions. The number of such girls given away to brahmanas, guests, priests, sons-in-law is overwhelming. In later Vedic times we come across daksinas, sacrificial fees to officiating priests. These fees included cattle, horses, gold and women of various types – unmarried, married with and without children. It is indeed intriguing as to what the priests did with so many such women. Some he could marry, some he would enjoy and abandon, while still others he would employ as maidservants. Many of these would later find their way to brothels or to slave markets.

Another important source of supply was the royal palace. A king could summon pretty maids to his palace, enjoy them for some days and then abandon them. In Vidarbha, pretty maids were enjoyed by the king for a month and then sent away. In some places ministers wives had to oblige the king by paying visits (on being summoned) to the palace. When such women came out of the palace, one obvious recourse for them was prostitution. Sometimes, some courtiers married them, but their number was few. Kautilya says that prostitutes were recruited from four sources- either they were born as prostitutes’ daughters, or they were purchased or captured in war, or they were women punished for adultery.

Finally, another manner of procuring women for temple prostitution was buying women and giving them to the temples. Such donors were said to become wealthy

---

7. III.5.14-26
8. Visnu Purana, ch.37,Yajnavalkya Smriti,240
9. Arthasastra, II. 27, X.1-3
in this life and live in heaven. We also come across a reference that he who gave a host of prostitutes to the Sun God went to the region of the sun after death.10

7.4 VARIATIONS IN NAMES, STATUS AND FUNCTIONS

The profusion of synonyms cannot be explained by regional or temporal variations only; it also signifies the social and financial status of the various categories of courtesans. The numerous synonyms also testify to the widespread presence of the institution through the ages. There are various terms indicating that prostitution existed in Rig Vedic times. Pumschali11 and mahanagni12 were probably prostitutes. The Rigveda knows the hasra, a frivolous woman; the agru13 and the sadharani14. The Vajasaneya Samhita recognizes prostitution as a profession by the use of terms like atishkadvari and apaskadvari.15 In the Rig Veda, however, there is a clear reference to a dancing girl. For instance, Ushas is likened to a dancing girl wearing embroidered garments (adhipesamsi) and baring her bosom.16

There are some significant words in Vedic literature which provide us with some idea on the character and functions of courtesans. In the Rig Veda17, the Maruts are said to have become associated with the young lightning in the way a man becomes associated with a young courtesan (sadharani). Rama18 and hasra19 indicate a courtesan. The Vajasaneya Samhita and Taittiriya Samhita while listing the victims at the Purushamedha mention victims whose designations mean courtesans (attitvari, atishkadvari). The female dyer, rajayitr (Vajasaneya Samhita, XXX.12; and Taittiriya Brahmana, III. 4, 7, 1) is said to have been dedicated to sensuality.

10. Padma Purana, Srstikhanda 52.97
11. Atharva Veda, XV. 2 etc
12. Ibid, XIV. 1.36; XX. 136.5
13. IV. 19, 9, 16, 19, 30
14. I. 167, 4; II. 13, 12, 15, 1
15. Taittiriya Brahmana, III, 4.11.1.
16. RV. I. 92.4; X. 95.9
17. RV. I. 167.4
18. Vedic Index, II, 222
19. Ibid., II. 502
Pumschali was a whore who enticed men.\textsuperscript{20} In this aspect, the view of J.W. Hauer is worth noting.\textsuperscript{21} The cardinal point of his thesis is that the Vratyas were not outcastes or one of the robber tribes. A vratya was connected in ancient lists with pumschali and magadha. Pumschali, in the opinion of Hauer is not an ordinary whore but a sacred prostitute. In the Vratya ceremony, music played an important part, so magadha would denote a holy wandering musician and pumschali is the forerunner of the later devadasi. The Jaimini Brahmana (II. 404. ff.) speaks of the pairing of a magadha and pumschali.

The Atharvaveda speaks of pumschali, she who walks among men\textsuperscript{22}, mahanagni, she of great nakedness, (i.e. who bares herself to many) is also mentioned in the Atharvaveda\textsuperscript{23}. Atiskadvari and apaskadvari, women with fancy dress and bare bosom are mentioned in the Taittiriya Brahmana\textsuperscript{24}. Samanya and sadharani are generic terms for the common woman.\textsuperscript{25}

The Jatakas mention vesi, nariyo, gamaniyo ganika, vannadasi, kumbhadasi. Muhuttia and janapadakalyani are mentioned in several Buddhist texts in the sense of the most beautiful women who could be enjoyed by the entire janapada. It is significant that in some Jatakas the courtesans are described as nagarasobhani (ornaments of the city)\textsuperscript{27}. Devraj Chanana,\textsuperscript{28} while discussing the meaning of some of these terms, says for instance that if a dispute arose in an oligarchy for the hand of a beautiful girl, the elders asked her to become a ganika so as to make her accessible to all (sabbesamvoharika). The oligarchy paid her some money to establish herself in the profession. She received a stipulated fee from the clients visiting her. Salavati of Rajagriha was elected a ganikathan and was counted among the important citizens.

\textsuperscript{20} V.S. XXX. 22; AV, XV.2; Kau Bra. XXVII. 1 etc.
\textsuperscript{21} J.W. Hauer, Der Vratya, pp. 144, 149
\textsuperscript{22} XV; Also the Pancavimsa Brahmana, VIII. 1. 10, Kausitaki Brahmana, XXVII. 1; Vajasaneyi Samhita XXX.22
\textsuperscript{23} XIV. I. 36; XX. 136.5. Also Aitareya Brahmana, I. 27.2
\textsuperscript{24} III. 4. II.1
\textsuperscript{25} Vaja. Sam. XXX : 12, Tait. Br. III. 4.7s
\textsuperscript{26} Vinaya Pitaka III. 138
\textsuperscript{27} R. Mehta-Pre- Buddhist India, p. 294-7
The *ganika* had an important position in the king’s court. She was also called *vannadasi* or *nagarasobhani*. The *ganika* must initially have connoted a woman at the disposal of all the members of a *gana*, a tribe, and later of the political unit, or constituent of a confederacy. The *ganika* because of her youth, beauty, training and accomplishments belonged to a superior social status. With an extensive and elaborate education she frequently quoted her price, which the Buddhist texts quote as being prohibitive. She was patronized by the king and wealthy merchants. Keeping her high fees in mind, it was obvious that only the wealthy could approach her. She alone enjoyed the position where as long as her youth and beauty lasted, she could not be exploited.

The numerous synonyms of the courtesans testify to the widespread prevalence of the institution. The *Rupajiva* was not accomplished in the art like the *ganika*, her only stock in trade was her beauty and charm; she owed the state two days income for a month. Vatsyayana also mentions the *rupajiva*.29 Another name of the mistress of one individual man is *avaruddha*. The *rupadasi* was unaccomplished and was employed in the personal attendance of a wealthy man. Like the *vannadasi* mentioned in the Jatakas she could entertain customers on her own or serve under some other person.30 Devraj Chanana is of the view that *vannadasi* was a slave in the establishment of a *ganika*, but in certain cases the word stood for a common prostitute. Perhaps *vannadasi* as a slave woman in the establishment of a *ganika*, received less affluent visitors and earned money for her mistress. It was also possible for a *vannadasi* to attain the position of a *ganika*. The professional musicians accompanying these women were known as *gandhabbas*.

*Vesiya* seems to have been different from *ganika* as is evident from references as *vesi cha ganikayo cha*. From Pali literature we can make out that the *vesiya* plied her trade alone and lived by selling her charms. Buddhaghosha equates *vesiya* with *rupajiva*. She was not talented artistically like the *ganika*. She was in fact a much poorer creature who was forced due to her poverty to go to the river for her bath, since she could not afford servants.

*Itthi* in some Jatakas also denotes a prostitute. *Muhuttika* (*Vinaya Pitaka, III. 138*) means a woman engaged for a short duration. *Bhati* and *paribayam* denote the

fees of prostitutes. It was said that the houses of ill-fame were run by some people to make profits (Vinaya Pitaka, II. 267). Kumbhadasi meant a slave woman, expert in dance and music, with loose morals. Other common and late names are varangana, varamukhya which stand for a prostitute while vrsali, which initially meant a sudra woman, later come to mean a harlot; pumsula and lanjika are later synonyms of harlots. Kulata was a married woman who left home to become a prostitute and vandhaki was a housewife turned whore, her husband was known as vandhakiposa (being maintained by a vandhaki).

Temple dancers do not appear before the last few centuries B.C. and are mentioned frequently in the early centuries A.D. in some regions. They are not mentioned in the Jatakas or by the Greek authors after Alexander. Even Kautilya does not speak of temple prostitution. It is probable that the institution arose in the troubled period of foreign invasion before and after the early centuries A.D. The existence of devadasis (temple prostitutes) in the third century B.C. is testified by the Jogimara cave inscription. M. Boyer has translated it as "Sutanuka by name, Devadasi. The excellent among young man loved her, Devadinna by name, skilled in sculpture." However, T. Bloch has translated it as “Sutanuka by name, a Devadasi made this resting place for girls Devadinna by name, skilled in painting.” It thus becomes obvious that the institution of devadasis was well known. It can also be derived that the Devadasi Sutanuka was wealthy enough to construct for actresses or dancing-girls a resting place. Kalidasa in the fifth century A.D. speaks of them as an established tradition. From the sixth century A.D. onwards however, we find many evidences of its existence from literature and epigraphy. The devadasis have been dealt with in detail in the next chapter.

7.5 WOMEN AS COMMODITY

In the patriarchal society the concept of women as commodity for man’s enjoyment is borne out by the inclusion of women—pretty and young—in large numbers in any list of gifts given to a man in return for a favour or as a mark of respect. The Rig Veda mentions the present of slave girls to rishis by kings. Along with the gift of cattle, vadhu (bride) slaves were included; chariots are described as full of slave girls. The

32 ct. the Meghaduta, verse 35
practice continued in the *Brahmana* and *Upanishadic* periods for the *Sathapatha Brahmana* speaks of four hundred serving maids (*anuchari*) and in the *Upanishads* the king is said to have been attended by five hundred women carrying perfumed water etc.\(^{33}\)

It is not clear in the Vedic literature whether slave women were classed with prostitutes as such, but we do find instances where slave girls were forced to lead a life of shame, they offered love in exchange for money. In later literature, *dasi* came to indicate a low class of prostitutes. *Dasa* in the *Rig Veda* is primarily an enemy and secondarily a slave, but *dasi* is a slave girl from the *Atharva Veda* onwards. This might indicate that the first conquered slaves were *dasa* women.

The idea of women as a commodity is also borne out by the fact that she is part of *daksina* fees to a sacrificial priest. At Yudhisthira’s horse-sacrifice women were sent by other kings as a donation to make up a necessary part of the entertainment.\(^{34}\) Yudhisthira himself gives away pretty maids to guest kings\(^{35}\), he is even said to have given away hundreds of thousands of pretty girls as did King Sasabindu of old at his horse-sacrifice.\(^{36}\) Pretty maids as part of *daksina* are also mentioned when King Bhagiratha gave hundreds of lovely maids, well decked out with gold ornaments.\(^{37}\) Even at a *sraddha* ceremony *brahmins* received numerous pretty maidens as gifts.\(^{38}\) These girls could sometimes find husbands but presumably, since maidenhood was regarded as an essential prerequisite for marriage, most of them were forced to become prostitutes.

In heaven, heroes are rewarded with a large number of beautiful girls.\(^{39}\) The same idea is also seen in classical Sanskrit literature as in the *Kumarasambhava*, *Raghuvamsa*, *Kiratarjunya*, and in *Sisupalavadha*.\(^{40}\) In Subandhu and Bana, we have references to courtesans as a prestigious decoration of a royal palace and an indispensable


\(^{34}\) *Mahabharata*, XIV.85.18.

\(^{35}\) *Ibid.*, XIV.80.32.


\(^{37}\) *Ibid.*, VII.60.1,2; XII.29.65.


\(^{39}\) *Mahabharata*, III.186-7; VIII.49.76-8; XII.64.17.30; XII.96.18,19, 83, 85-6,88. Also in the *Ramayana*, II.71;22,25,26.

\(^{40}\) XVI.36,48.

\(^{41}\) VII.50.

\(^{42}\) IX.51.

\(^{43}\) XVIII.60,61.
part of city life. Bhaguri calls her *puramandana*, an ornament of the city. Thus, her status was that of an inanimate object of enjoyment, it was sub-human and subject.

The institution of courtesans is taken for granted in the *Epics*—'the public woman, open to the visits of all'. They enticed virtuous men, served the king, accompanied armies on the march and gained for themselves an important place in society by virtue of their training in the arts and crafts.

*Vesya* in the *Mahabharata* was considered an important adjunct of urban culture and participated in the victory celebrations. On the eve of the Great War, when both the sides were prepared for battle, Yudhisthira sent his greetings to these granters of delight: “My dear friend, ask after the welfare of the fair—decked, fair—clad, scented, pleasing, pleasure—fraught women of the houses of joy (*Vesastriyah*) whose glance and speech glide so easily and sweetly along (M.B.V.30.38)”. The presence of these women made the grim and severe life of the camp somewhat bearable for the soldiers. The Pandava army, while marching to the battlefield of Kurukshetra, included wagons carrying the prostitutes.

The prostitutes took their place in the rear of the army. It is said that Duryodhana’s forces were accompanied by not only craftsmen, professional singers, spies but also by courtesans (M.B. V. 195, 18-19). In fact, courtesans marching with the army seem to have been a common phenomenon in the India of the *Epics*. In the *Ramayana* (*Ramayana* II, 36, 3), Dasaratha, when he equipped a strong army for Rama, also included in it women who lived by their beauty. Even on somber occasions, as when the Pandavas went with Draupadi to meet their mother who had retired to the forest, the splendid royal household included in its retinue “chariots, traders goods and brothels” (M.B. X 22, 21). We find that even in the time of Harsha, prostitutes and bawds accompanied an army on the march. There is a description of the march of Harsha’s army. The slow and awkward movements of the fat bawds slowed down the progress of the army and the women had to be forcibly dragged forward.  

---

44. IV.34.17,18.S
Courtesans were an important adjunct of urban life and were not merely camp followers. Virata, after gaining victory with the help of the Pandavas, asked his messenger to proclaim that young girls should come out of the city bedecking themselves. Courtesans playing musical instruments were also invited to participate in the victory celebrations (M.B. IV. 34, 17, 18). After his son’s victory, Virata made similar arrangements for his reception by the young men and the courtesans of the city (M.B.IV. 64, 24, 26, 29). At the consecration ceremony of Rama (Ram II.3, 17-18), the royal paraphernalia included courtesans also, and when Rama returned from his long exile, the crowd that welcomed him included courtesans (Ramayana. VI. 127, 1 ff).

When Krishna visited Duryodhana on a peace mission, Duryodhana had rest houses with women prepared for him and Dhritarashtra gave orders that along with his sons, fair harlots, decked beautifully, should go to meet the great Kesava (M.B.V. 86, 15-16). Speaking of the prostitutes mentioned in the Epics, Meyer observes; "As so often in other literature, the strumpet is not only the camp’s ornament but the ornament too of civic life, that lovely-coloured, scented flower that the city puts in its hair for all to see, when a festival or some other joyful event is being celebrated."46

The names of various types of courtesans give us an inkling of their roles. Thus, the devavesya was the temple dancer, something like the Greek hierodoules; the rajavesya served the king; while the brahmavesya or the tirthaga visited holy places or pilgrimages. In the Brahma Purana, we have the description of Ekamratirtha, where lived many prostitutes,47 presumably to cater to the pilgrims and visitors. In the samaja public functions, there used to be a separate gallery where the courtesans sat to give musical performances for the samaja. Kautilya assigns them the duties of common maidservants at the palace. We hear of a prostitute serving Dhritarasra when Gandhari was pregnant.48

Uddyota Suri, in his Kuvalayamala, describes nymphs in Indra’s heaven who carried water- vessels, fans, fly-whisks, parasols, mirrors, harps, ordinary drums, clothes and ornaments. In the Ramayana and the Mahabharata such women followed the king in

46. J. J. Meyer-Sexual Life In Ancient India, ch. IX
47. XI. 30-35.
48. Mahabharata, 1.115.39.
the palace and served him in his train. The *Lalitavistara* mentions women who carried full pitchers, garlands, jewellery and ornaments, the throne, the fan, jars full of perfumed water etc. Evidently in all these, as also in many references in the *Puranas* and later literature, the pretty damsels giving light personal service to the king are projected to heaven where the earthly prostitutes figure as celestial nymphs serving the gods. Whether on earth or in heaven monarchs or wealthy potentates used such women to enhance their glory and pleasure.

The retired temple prostitute was employed by the state for spinning cotton, wool and flax. In the palace the courtesans held positions as the royal umbrella-bearer, masseuse in charge of the king's toilet, dress and ornaments, and also as the king's bathroom attendant. They also had a place in the royal entourage in hunting and military expeditions, and on occasions entertained royal guests. What is true of her function with regard to the king is also true of the rich courtier merchant and nobles described as *nagaraka* in the *Kamasutra*. In the non-monarchical *gana* states, the chiefs gambled and indulged themselves in the company of prostitutes. Courtesans thus belonged to kings or wealthy citizens' train in their amusements and festivals, their garden parties, boat trips, musical soirees and bathing and drinking parties. The *Kamasutra* describes the various sports and festivals of the rich citizens to which the courtesans were invited.49 The text in fact lists twenty different sports and festivals which depended on the seasons, the moon and auspicious days of the year.50 The various festivals, sports and the other pastimes could be enjoyed by the *nagaraka* either with one or a group of courtesans, depending upon his financial resources. It was their sound financial base which enabled them to lead a life of luxury.

Vatsyayana states that the love of a courtesan was based on physical attraction; since it was a means of livelihood for her. As her profession demanded of her, a courtesan was always well-dressed and adorned with a lot of jewellery and without being fully visible she walked discreetly 'because she is a commodity'.51 She briefed the pimps to bring young men to her, who were adept in this task.

---

49. 1.4.34-41.
50. 1.4.42.
51. VI. 1.4
Whether the prostitutes spied, massaged, bathed, dressed or carried the umbrella – we do not hear of any extra payment for these additional tasks to which they were definitely entitled since their main job as prostitutes only earned them a place in the king’s or rich man’s establishment. Thus, in a way, the organized brothel prostitutes were in a better position, since they did not have to perform other chores for their clients, although they too sometimes performed minor services. It really all depended and varied on the social and economic status of the prostitute. Avaruddha and Kritavarodha were professional prostitutes who lived as mistresses under one man. She enjoyed freedom from manual work only if her patron was rich, otherwise she had to work for herself and him. Hers was like a ‘contract marriage’ and, as in marriage, the status of the woman depended on the man’s income. On the other hand a poor and common strumpet had to cater to many customers who were able to pay very less to her. Hence she had to do all the menial chores for herself and her customer for their bare subsistence.

7.6 COURTESANS AND THE STATE (MAURYAN)

In the Arthasastra, the king was the pivot around which the state machinery revolved. Kautilya was a stark realist in administrative matters and no ethical concept deterred him from what he considered right for the good of the state. In order to enhance the patriarchal state’s finances he even advocated morally dubious means of earning revenue. One such source of revenue was the organization of courtesans and prostitutes under a Superintendent. Since prostitution yielded substantial revenue to the state, Kautilya with his shrewd economic sense came up with the unique idea of state-controlled prostitution. He thought it prudent that it was bound to yield the state higher revenue than the collection of taxes from individual prostitutes. The information gleaned from the Arthasastra depicts to us that the different grades of courtesans and prostitutes paid money to the state by way of taxes. Since they provided an important source of revenue for the state, it was but natural that their rights and privileges were recognized. In fact, by this time prostitution had been raised to the status of an art (Vaisika-kala) which was studied and taught by experts.
These courtesans formed a class of their own apart from the courtesans who were exclusively in the service of the king. According to Curtius, when the Indian king went out for hunting, they hunted to the accompaniment of the courtesan’s song. To quote Curtius, who was extremely prejudiced against the extravagance of the royal procession: ‘That no form of shameless profligacy may be wanting, he is accompanied by a long train of courtesans carried in golden palanquins, and this troop holds a separate place in the procession from the queen’s retinue, and is as sumptuously appointed. His food is prepared by women who also serve him with wine which is much used by all the Indians. When the king falls into a drunken sleep, his courtesans carry him away to his bedchamber, invoking the gods of the night in their native hymns.” In the palace the courtesans held positions as the royal umbrella-bearer, masseuse, in charge of the king’s (also of the royal family’s) toilet, dress and ornaments, and as the king’s bathroom attendant. They also had a place in the hunting and military expeditions as depicted earlier, and on occasions, entertained royal guests. In the non-monarchical gana states the chiefs gambled and indulged themselves in the company of prostitutes.

In the Arthasastra, various terms like ganika, pratiganika, rupajiva, vesya, dasi, devadasi, pumscali, silpakarika, kausikastri, rupadasi for courtesans and prostitutes are used. The ganika, rupajiva, vesya and vandhaki had to pay taxes to the state but a careful study leads to the conclusion that almost all categories had an actual potential obligation for paying taxes; the collection, however, depended on the degree and nature of the organization. Organized brothels enjoyed greater security from the state in lieu of the taxes they paid while individuals who paid ‘hush money’ to extortionist officers could hardly demand any protection from injustice, man-handling, coercion and cheating. The Nammayasundarikatha, a twelfth century text, says that the state received 25 percent to 30 per cent of the prostitute’s income.

We have references to extremely high fees of some famous ganikas in the Buddhist texts. Bhatti\textsuperscript{54} and parivvayam\textsuperscript{55} denote two kinds of fees. Vasvadatta of Mathura charged very high rates per night. Salavati of Rajagriha charged a hundred

\textsuperscript{52} Arthasastra by Kautilya, ed. By R. Shamasasatry, Mysore, 1924, Tr. By R. Shamasasatry under the title Kautilya’s Arthasastra, Mysore, 1925, Book II, ch. 27 deals with prostitutes.

\textsuperscript{53} R.C. Majumdar, The Classical Accounts of India, Calcutta, 1960, p. 105

\textsuperscript{54} From Sanskrit word bhrti, fees

\textsuperscript{55} Sanskrit parivyayam, expenses
karsapanas per night while Ambapali's fees led to a dispute between the two cities of Rajagriha and Vaisali. A Jain text\textsuperscript{56} says that a courtesan who had a faultless body and whose attainments were complete may charge 1000 karsapanas per night. Evidently only the richest merchants could pay such fees.

In the chapter on Ganikadhya\textsuperscript{57} we get detailed information of prostitution organized by the state. Ganikadhya\textsuperscript{4} grants (karayet) the status of ganika (courtesan) to a deserving prostitute. The requisite qualifications for the status are beauty, youth and artistic ability (........rupayuvanasilpasampannam sahasrena ganikam karayet). Ganika is obviously a high rank among public women. According to Vatsyayana, "A Prostitute (vesya) who has good character, beauty and virtue (silarupagunanvita) and has progressed through the arts shall attain the title of ganika and a place in the public gathering."\textsuperscript{58} She will always be worshipped by the king and extolled by gifted persons. She will be desirable, sought after (by people) and an object of notice.\textsuperscript{59}

Kautilya states that special provisions were made for the training of a ganika in various arts at the expense of the state. She drew 1000 panas from the state presumably for her establishment. The ganika have aptly been compared with the hetaira in ancient Greece. The hetairas were distinguished by refined education and a wit quick at repartee; they knew how to fascinate the most distinguished personalities of their time. The hetaira alone among their sex saw the plays of Alexander and Aristophanes, they alone heard Socrates reason and discussed politics with Pericles, they alone shared in the intellectual movement of Greece.\textsuperscript{60} The hetaerae had indeed a prominent part in Greek society. They can be compared with the Indian ganikas having intellectual and aesthetic attributes—hence men sought their company in preference to their wives (who lacked these qualities) in Greece as well as in India.

It would be interesting to refer to the lives of a few of the celebrated hetairae. A Milesian prostitute, named Thargelia accompanied Xerxes on his invasion of Greece. Some idea may be formed of the position in society occupied by prostitutes from the fact

\textsuperscript{56} Jnatadharmakathā, I.
\textsuperscript{57} Arthasastra, II.27
\textsuperscript{58} K.S. I.3.20
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.21
\textsuperscript{60} William W. Sanger-\textit{History of Prostitution}, Inter-India publications, New Delhi,1986, p.54
that Xerxes employed this woman as negotiator with the court of Thessaly. Thargelia later
married the King of Thessaly.

Another Milesian girl, Aspasia counted among her patrons and lovers the first
men of Greece including Socrates, and Pericles. Pericles married her and was accused of
allowing her to govern Athens, then at the height of its power and prosperity.61 Other
famous *hetaerae* achieved political and literary distinction. After the death of Pythionice,
no queen of Babylon was ever consigned to the grave with the pomp or show which did
honour to the memory of the Athenian prostitute. Another *hetaerae*, Glycera too became
the Queen of Babylon, issued decrees, held her court, submitted to be worshipped, and
saw her bronze statue as large as life, erected in the Babylonian temples. In Greece, the
prostitutes were an aristocracy, exercising a palpable influence over the national policy
and social life and mingling conspicuously in the great march of the Greek intellect.62

*Ganika* of the *Arthasastra* however, is not the wealthy courtesan of Buddhist
literature, who led a flamboyant lifestyle and charged exorbitant fees from her clients.
She was in fact, a government servant in the Mauryan state whose rights and
responsibilities were clearly defined by the state. The *ganika* of the *Arthasastra* received
a monthly salary from the government in lieu of her services to the state. She was
answerable to the Superintendent of Prostitutes (*ganikadhyaksha*), and if she had a
daughter, she too was expected to follow her mother’s profession. She had a measure of
social security in the sense that those who harmed her physically, financially and socially
were liable to be punished heavily by the state. Needless to say that such a coveted
position was not accorded to many; only a handful of the prostitutes were made *ganikas*
whose favours were enjoyed by the kings, princes and the richest of the merchants.

Kauutilya has classified the *ganikas* into 3 categories – the first, middle and
highest rank depending on the beauty and the jewellery that they possessed. The few
privileged ones amongst them waited on the king – they held the royal umbrella, the
golden pitcher and the fan when he was seated on the throne and the chariot. The state
also made arrangements for the training of *ganikas* in the various arts since the degree of
their beauty and artistic accomplishments governed their income. *Ganikas, dasis* and

61. Ibid., p.55
62. Ibid., p.60-62
actresses were taught singing, dancing, acting, instrumental music, writing, painting, playing on the vina, shampooing etc. This crystallized later into the sixty-four arts and proficiency in these was considered desirable for courtesans.

The pratiganika was a substitute prostitute employed on a short-term contract in the absence of a ganika, but she could become a full-fledged ganika in the future. Till she remained a mere substitute, she received only half the ganika’s salary. This also depicts the inexorable ways of the state where the economic motive was supreme. The rupajiva had to pay a monthly tax to the government amounting to two days earnings, though she was a not a government employee. In the event of a financial crisis, she had to pay half her earnings to the state. The rupajiva’s status was next in rank to that of the ganika. This is also demonstrated by the fact that she had access to the royal harem, which was denied to ordinary prostitutes. She also resided to the south of the fort.

Vesya is a general term in the Arthashastra, used for all kinds of prostitutes. They were not directly employed by the state and were placed along with spies, artisans, singers etc. in order to keep an eye on the activities of the military personnel. Pumschali in the Arthasastra was a very low-grade prostitute who was also used as a spy. Dasi was used by Kautilya in a dual sense - as a slave girl attached to the palace and also as a common prostitute, who also acted as a spy.

In order to ensure the smooth functioning of the work of the prostitutes, they were placed under the Superintendent (ganikadhyaksha) who enjoyed full power over them. He employed and classified them, paid them their salaries, fixed the amount of their fees, determined their gross income and expenditure from all sources, checked their extravagances and kept an account of all receipts, fines and redemption money. He looked after their well-being at the time of their old age. He was responsible for the entire system of state prostitution. He had the same rights and responsibilities as the Superintendents of other departments.

\[63. \text{Ludwik Sternbach - "Legal Position of Prostitutes according to Kautilya's Arthasastra", } J.A.O.S., \text{ Vol.71,1951,p.28}\]
\[64. \text{Sternbach., p. 29}\]
\[65. \text{Ibid., pp. 29-30}\]
\[66. \text{Ibid., p. 30}\]
Keeping in account the strict rules governing the conduct of courtesans in state employment, it was laid down that a *ganika* could not become the mistress of one (avaruddha). The *ganika* was an important source of revenue for the state, hence she was forbidden to seek the protection of a single person. But there was a condition that if a man took a *ganika* to his home, he had to pay 1 1/4 *panas* as well as the monthly salary that she received from the Superintendent, in order to make up for the monetary loss to the State. There is also the probability that their palatial establishments and gardens were state property with life interest. Regarding the law of inheritance, Kautilya says that after a *ganika*’s death, her daughter, or in her absence her sister inherited her personal belongings. Her daughter inherited her property but only for use, she could not sell, mortgage, exchange or donate them. However many outstanding *ganikas* were mistresses of their own property. We find in the Buddhist literature of instances where she gave away her property. A *ganika* could bought out by a sympathetic customer, her redemption money (*niskraya*) was 24,000 *panas*, a very high sum in view of the fact that her annual salary was between 1000 and 3000 *panas* paid by the state. A rupajiva’s fees were 48 *panas*, she usually lived with actors, wine-sellers, meat-sellers and vaisyas.

Kautilya stated that a courtesan should never encourage or entertain a suitor of reduced means. Usually a *ganika* chose her own customer except when the king forced one on her. If she refused in that case, she was whipped with 1000 lashes or was fined 5000 *panas*. Thus, she did not have any right on her own body where the royal wish was concerned. The punishment for forcing an unwilling *ganika* was 1000 *panas* or more. Once a courtesan received a customer in her house, she could not throw him out. If she did so she had to pay a fine equivalent to eight times her fees. She could only refuse if he was diseased. If the client cheated her of her fees, he had to pay eight times of the fees.

Kautilya however, had no moralistic notions regarding the prostitutes, being the shrewd administrator and realist that he was. To him, the prostitutes were state property and any harm to them meant a loss to the state. It was laid down that for killing a *ganika* a fine of 72,000 *panas* was imposed—which was considered to be the loss suffered by the state. The offender was punished with the highest punishment for killing a rupadasi or the *ganika*’s daughter. This just proves that the economic motive was the

67. *Arthasastra*, IV .13
uppermost in Kautilya’s mind and that the sanctity of human life had no role in
determining the severity of the punishment. Kautilya also laid down rules which gave
security to the courtesans against the misdeeds of their paramours. Offences committed
against a ganika were very severely punished since they violated the King’s interests. To
ensure the safety of the ganika, the punishment ranged between 1,000 to 48,000 panas
subject to the nature and condition of the crimes and the status of the ganika who was
injured. If a ganika was placed under forceful confinement, the person was fined 1,000
panas. In case she was a willing party to it, the fine amounted to her monthly pay plus a
fine of 1(1/4) panas.

The Arthasastra has also prescribed a set of rules governing the conduct and
relationship of ganikas among themselves. Kautilya in the Arthasashtra says that the fine
for defamation of a courtesan was 24 panas, for assault 48 panas and for chopping off her
ears 51 ¼ panas and forced confinement. The Yajnavalkya Smriti lays down that the fine
for molesting a prostitute is 50 panas and in the case of gang-rape, each person had to pay
24 panas to her. For the safety of her person, some laws had to be framed and for more
serious crimes, the penalty varied between 1000 and 48000 panas according to the degree
of heinousness of the crime and the status of the injured courtesan.

If after receiving her fees, a prostitute refused to oblige her customer she paid
a fine of double her fees; but if she refused him before accepting the fees, she paid her
fees as fine. Hence, it becomes clear that she did not have the option of refusing to sell
herself. It thus becomes apparent that the patriarchal society refused to look upon her as a
human being; she was just a commodity for use. If a price had been accepted, the
commodity was the customer’s for use.

Though prostitution was a state managed institution and the ganikas were not
free persons legally, they had full authority over their jewellery, salary and gifts from
lovers. Jewellery was considered an integral part of their profession and its possession
added to their prestige. For stealing a ganika’s money or ornaments and for not paying

68. Yajnavalkyasamhita, II.293.
69. Yajnavalkyasamhita, II.295.
her stipulated fees, the penalty for the client was eight times the sum invoked. But the basic fact could not be changed – that inspite of a certain degree of legal protection, the ganika was not a free agent. The Arthashastra prescribed a set of rules in order to ensure the safety of the clients who visited the courtesans. If a ganika killed her lover the capital punishment was given to her; she was either burnt or thrown into the water and forcibly drowned. This heavy punishment was given in order to assure clients that their lives were safe.

The prostitute in the Mauryan state was employed for other functions too. As the prostitutes had access almost everywhere and did not arouse any suspicion, they were employed as spies. Ganikas however did not act as spies as they had to earn an income for the state but as a safety precaution they were expected to inform the Superintendent about the clients who visited them. As spies, the prostitutes had to seduce important men who were potential sources of vital political information, to collect such information and supply it to the concerned officers through the Superintendent (ganikadhyaksha).Prostitutes were also employed to kidnap the princes and military personnel. A dasi or low-grade prostitute was employed for regular spying while whores (pumascalī) spied on thieves. The dancing girls and strumpets acted as spies and led the enemies of the state to their destruction by using various stratagems.

A remarkable feature of the Mauryan state was the principle of providing some sort of old age pension to the old and infirm prostitutes which depicts the benevolent attitude of the state toward them. Kautilya realized the value of same kind of pension for ganikas and the other prostitutes who in the prime of their youth had brought considerable money to the state. This was regarded by the state partially as provident fund contributions against old age, disability, retirement and penury. We are not told what the pension was in terms of money, or whether it was adequate for their sustenance. But a steady income, however small, must have meant some amount of security to the elderly women who otherwise would be totally destitute. Retired prostitutes were also employed as cooks, store-keepers, cotton- wool and flax spinners and in other manual jobs, so the state did not have to pay them pension until they were too old and weak to work anymore. In their old age some prostitutes became mātrkas i.e. matrons in charge of a brothel.

70. Moti Chandra- The World of Courtesans, New Delhi, 1973, p. 52.
Women of all categories were found in the royal harem and Vatsyayana provides detailed information regarding their relations with each other and their attitude towards their lord. The harem administration dealt with the various categories of women residing there— the lawfully wedded wives, remarried widows, concubines, courtesans etc. The king first called on his wives, honoured them as per the occasion and status. He next met the widows whom he had married and treated them like his queens. In the end he visited the courtesans and concubines. The apartments of the ladies were also arranged in the order of precedence. The king decided later which inmate of the harem he would pass the evening with—it was all decided by turns.

While speaking on the issue of illicit love, Vatsyayana mentions the various customs prevalent in the different parts of the country. In the Andhradesa the custom prevailed that a courtesan (Janapada-Kanya) came to the palace with presents and after enjoying the king’s company left on the tenth day. In Vatsagulma (modern Vashim), the wives of the ministers paid visit to the palace to be with the king. In Vidarbha, beautiful women spent a month in the palace pretending to be friends of the harem inmates. In Saurashtra, women from the cities and districts came to the palace for the king’s pleasure. In Aparanta (Konkan) a minister sent his beautiful wife as a present to the king.71

In Harsha’s time also, courtesans, as in the previous periods, had an important role in the royal court and the associated functions and festivals. Bana states that they waited upon the king while he held court. Bana also describes them wearing agaru tilakas on their foreheads and arching their eyebrows coquettishly. Courtesans employed in the service of the king also served as bath attendants. Bana describes a picture of the dancing girls participating in a function to celebrate a birth ceremony. They sang songs and their vocal music was accompanied by the music of drums, pipes, cymbals and the vinas. They wore chaplets and tender shoots in their ears. Their foreheads were smeared with sandal. They raised their arms adorned with bracelets and their anklets tinkled as they danced.72

Courtesans also waited upon the king while he held court. Bana again describes the pretty courtesans waiting upon Harsha in his court. They wore agaru tilakas

---

on their foreheads and they arched their eyebrows coquettishly. They demonstrated the fatigue they experienced after the dance by breathing heavily. Their heads were encircled with chaplets and the jewels on the centre of their necklaces moved all the time. To conceal their yawns they at times covered their mouths with their palms and their eyes flickered as the pollen of the flower-ornaments fell on them. Sometimes they looked around or simply smiled and at times they danced with their hands interlocked over their heads. Sometimes they cracked their knuckles and moving around in a circle they performed a dance.\textsuperscript{73}

7.7 \textbf{SOCIAL STATUS}

At this distance of time, it is quite difficult to form an adequate picture of the social status of prostitutes. We have seen that not all prostitutes belonged to the same category. The accomplished young beauty could name her price, sometimes at an apparently exorbitant rate, because she was in great demand. Every city had a chief courtesan who was\textit{ an ornament to the city}.\textsuperscript{74} The \textit{janapada kalyani} or the \textit{sadharani} of the non-monarchical state of the Lichchchavis were in great demand because of their beauty and culture and hence could ask for her price. The Buddhist texts also confirm that they got their exorbitant price. The \textit{Janapadakalyani} meant the most beautiful woman in the country. The \textit{Digha Nikaya}\textsuperscript{75}, the \textit{Majjhima Nikaya},\textsuperscript{76} and \textit{Samyukta Nikaya} refer to her. She was wealthy person of high rank who had a host of servants for the menial chores, she being too accomplished, rich and respectable to do the chores herself. The \textit{Kurudhamma Jataka} when speaking of the rank of royal attendants, says that the \textit{dvarika} (door-keeper) occupies the last place but one among the courtiers, for even he is above the \textit{ganika}.

Buddhist and Jain literature provides us with valuable data about the social institutions of ancient India. Buddhist literature provides us real and convincing information of the flourishing cities, of the men engaged in various professions and

\textsuperscript{73} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 142.
\textsuperscript{74} In the drama \textit{Mricchakatika} the heroine is described as an \textquoteleft an ornament to the city\textquoteright (She is a beautiful courtesan, accomplished in the various arts.]
\textsuperscript{75} Rahula Sankrityayana's Hindi Trans, Banaras, 1936, pp. 73-88.
\textsuperscript{76} \textit{Ibid.}, pp.321-5.
castes, merchants, shopkeepers, kings and their officers as well as the women. In Buddhist literature women receive full attention. Here we are face to face with the highly developed institution of courtesans and there are many stories in the Jatakas which throw light on their artistic achievements and the modes they employed in enticing their lovers.

An interesting story of the cupidity of courtesans is related in the Mahavastu iii, 35-38. The chief courtesan (agraganika) of a city used to invite a clever and handsome person to sleep with her. Once a banker's son quarrelled with her. He had offered her a hundred thousand pieces for spending a night with her, but she refused on the plea that she had already received her fees from someone else. The poor lover told her the next day that he had passed the night dreaming that they were united in love. She at once demanded her fees (bhatakam) from him. The poor man was thunderstruck and refused to pay but she stuck to her absurd demand. When other people also failed to resolve the issue, the members of the negama of Kampila asked Prajnavanta to intervene. The resourceful man ordered a mirror and a hundred thousand pieces to be brought into the room. He asked the banker's son to hold the basket with the money against the mirror and he asked the courtesan to receive the reflection.

In the Kanavera Jataka, the love of a courtesan for a robber is illustrated. It is said that in the city of Banaras there was a robber whom the king ordered to be executed due to his wrong doings. The city governor arrested the robber, and while being led to the execution ground, Sanaa, a famous courtesan of Banaras saw him. Her price was a thousand pieces a day and she was also the king's favourite. She fell in love with the robber at first sight. In order to secure his release she sent a thousand pieces to the governor, who was prepared to release him on condition that somebody else be substituted for him. Sanaa persuaded one of lovers to go to the governor with the bribe, who sent the robber in a closed carriage and had the lover executed. Sanaa passed her time joyfully in the company of the robber but he was always suspicious of her, so he decided to leave her after robbing her of her ornaments. He made a plan that they spend the day in a garden, where he made a violent show of affection for her, and as she become unconscious he fled with her ornaments. Unmindful of his perfidy, Sanaa waited for his return. She sent a band of actors to the robber's city where they sang a song expressing

the yearnings of Sama. The robber heard the song but refused to return. Full of regrets, Sama reverted to her old profession.

The Sulasa Jataka,\(^7^8\) recounts the infatuation of a courtesan for robber. Sulasa, a renowned courtesan of Banaras charged a thousand pieces per night from her customers. Her story is practically the same as Sama, but unlike her, Sulasa was a woman of wisdom and courage. Her robber lover, after living happily with her for a few months, decided to steal her ornaments and leave her. One day, under the pretext of offering a sacrifice to a tree deity, he persuaded Sulasa to deck herself with ornaments and come with him. Later when she learnt of his intentions, under the pretext of a last embrace, she pushed him down to his death from the hill top and then returned to the city.

In another Jataka, a courtesan (Vannadasi) is said to have received a thousand pieces from a youth who only visited her once and then disappeared. She, for honor’s sake did not accept new clients and gradually become poor. Unable to bear any longer, she went to the Chief Justice to seek his advice and was told to return to her former profession\(^7^9\).

The Indriya Jatakam\(^8^0\) mentions of courtesan sitting along the banks of a river in which many men bathed. The Atthana Jataka\(^8^1\) relates how a courtesan charged thousand pieces a day from a merchant. One day he forgot to bring her fees and was driven away by her maids. Shocked at this kind of treatment from her, he turned an ascetic. When the king came to of this, he ordered her to bring him back. She entreated him but he refused to return. In the Mahasara Jataka the chief musician is supposed to have stolen a necklace from the royal chaplain and handed it over to a courtesan as a present.

Courtesans such as Sama and Sulasa commanded a high position. There were other renowned courtesans in Buddhist literature, who made handsome contributions to the Buddhist Church. Ambapali had been picked up from the foot of a mango tree; hence she was named after the mango (ambu). In course of time, her beauty attracted many

\(^{79}\) R.L. Me.ta, *Pre-Buddhist India*, Bombay, 1939, p.294.
\(^{80}\) Cowell, *op. cit.*, Vol. III, p.277
\(^{81}\) Ibid., pp. 282-83

196
young men, so according to the prevailing custom, the gana in order to stop the rivalry among the eligible young men, appointed her a ganika.\textsuperscript{82}

Ambapali’s devotion to Buddha has been emphasized in Pali literature. It is stated in the \textit{Mahavagga} (VI, 18, 30) that when Ambapali came to know of the arrival of Buddha at Kotigama, she went to meet the Blessed One accompanied by a large retinue. The carriage could only pass where the ground was level, so she got down from her carriage and walked the rest of the distance on foot to meet the Buddha. Being impressed by his sermon, she asked the Buddha and the \textit{Bhikkhus} to dine at her house which he accepted. The Lichchhavis of Vesali, on hearing of Buddha’s arrival also proceeded to meet him. Ambapali, being elated, refused to give up her invitation to Buddha for anything in the world. Ambapali gave a big feast to the Lord and his hundred thousand followers. She also gave away her big mango grove to the Order.\textsuperscript{83}

In the \textit{Vinayavastu of Mulasarvastivada}\textsuperscript{84}, the story of Ambapali has received greater attention. She appears to have been a psychologist of sorts, for to assess her clients she came up with a clever device. She invited painters from all over the country and asked them to paint realistic portraits of kings, ministers, bankers, merchants etc. on the walls of the picture gallery of her mansion. After completion of the portraits she inspected them and on this basis chose her clients. She was impressed by King Bimbisara of Magadha and thought him to be a man fit to consort with her.

Bimbisara, on hearing of Ambapali’s youth and beauty as well as her accomplishments in the sixty four arts, proceeded to Vesali to visit her along with his minister inspite of the hostility of the Lichchhavis. When he entered the mansion of Ambapali, a bell started pealing which was an indication that an enemy had entered. When she was questioned about this commotion, Ambapali informed him that they were bound to search her home. Bimbisara wanted to leave but she asked him to stay on, for according to the agreement between her and the \textit{Gana} they could search her house only after a week. The Lichchhavis, however, learnt of his presence and decided to leave the question of settling a score with Bimbisara in the future. Soon, Ambapali gave birth to

\textsuperscript{84} N. Dutt, Gilgit Manuscripts, Vol. III, Part 2, Srinagar. 1942, pp. 15 ff
Bimbisara's son. Later the boy met his father. The boy was named Abhaya and the appellation of prince was employed for him.

Salavati (Mahavagga. VIII. 1, 3-4), a beautiful girl of Rajagriha was also installed as a courtesan. She was well-trained in dancing, singing, flute playing and her fees were fixed at a hundred karshapanas a night. She gave birth to a boy and she asked her maid to abandon him on a dust heap. He was found and brought up by Abhaya and later grew up to be the famous physician, Jivaka Kumarabhritiya.

In Buddhist literature courtesans are very closely associated with dancing, singing, drinking and other forms of amusements. The Epics and Jatakas depict that wherever people gathered for pleasure, the courtesans followed.

If we take into account the Jain Prakrit literature, we find that we get more detailed information about the courtesans than in Buddhist literature. One might wonder as to why such information exists in the terse, dry, ascetic and ethical tone of Jain literature. A probable reason appears to be the Jain writers' love for minute details. They wrote about the life of the people around them—the kings, nobles, the merchant community (with whom the courtesans were associated), whose piety was the mainstay of Jainism as well as Buddhism. Jainism dealt with the issue of prostitution in a candid and matter-of-fact way.

The JnataDurma Katha lists the attainments of a highly accomplished courtesan of Champa. Her body was faultless (ahina), imbued with auspicious signs (lakshana), and was proficient in the seventy-two traditional arts. Her fees were a thousand a day. She had the special privilege from the king of using the umbrella (chhatra), chauri and fan and travelled in a covered wagon (karniratha). According to the Sutrakritanga churni, courtesans were well versed in Vaisika (a section of the science of erotics) which is exclusively devoted to the problems of courtesans. The commentary mentions that when Dattaka was cheated by a courtesan, he refused to make love to another courtesan in spite of all the blandishments sanctioned by the science of erotics.

85 Sutrakritanga churni, Ratlam, 1940, IV, 1-24.
According to Jain sources, prostitution was so rampant in the country that Jain nuns were cautioned against it. *Apanagrihas*\(^{86}\) (drinking houses) and houses with markets in lanes on one or both of their sides were considered dangerous\(^{87}\) because from these houses the nuns could see the prostitutes who carried on their profession in the adjacent houses. The Jain nuns had to be careful in their choice of lodging during their religious tours. In keeping with the stern ascetic principles of Jainism, the Jain canonical works warned the monks at every step to keep away from women.

In Jain literature, we came across courtesans of lofty character who belie the usual notions about the lust and greed of ordinary prostitutes. Kosa a famous courtesan of Pataliputra loved Shulabhadra and after his retirement from worldly life she refused to consort with anybody. Devadatta, a renowned courtesan of Ujjain turned down the love of a rich merchant of the town due to her love for Muladeva. She requested the king not to force anyone on her. A *ganika*’s position was respected by the king to such an extent that she was considered to be a jewel of his capital, and almost all big towns had a chief courtesan.

The most striking development of the early centuries of the Christian era was the thriving trade between India and Western world. The Eastern part of the Roman Empire became the chief customer of luxury goods from India like- pearls, pepper, ivory, silk, diamonds, precious stones, muslins etc. The balance of trade being in favour of India, Roman gold poured into the country. There was great internal demand for luxury goods which found expression in the art and culture of that period. It was the rich merchant princes who benefited the most. They spent lavishly on splendid buildings, religious grants, public works and also on courtesans, who were very accomplished culturally. The Kushana sculptures from Mathura, the Satavahana bas-relief from Andhra Pradesh in the form of *Mithuna* and *Yakshi* figures are an ode to them. They depict them inviting and soliciting men or engaged in their toilet or enjoying the pleasures of drinking and dancing, singing and roaming in gardens in the company of their lovers. The courtesans of the time lived in capitals and large commercial centres such as Ujjain,

---

\(^{86}\) Punyavijayaji- *Brihatkalpa Sutra Bha.* (BKSB), Bhavnagar, 1933-38, III.p. 651.

\(^{87}\) BKSB., III. 2301.
Pataliputra, Mathura, Bharukachchha, Kausambi, Varanasi and Vaishali, where the rich merchants lived who could afford to patronize them.\textsuperscript{88}

Apart from literary evidences which support the view that the \textit{Vaisika} culture flourishing in the great Indian cities was a wealthy and prosperous one, an inscription of the second century from Mathura depicts the important position of \textit{ganikas}. It is inscribed on a tablet of honour (\textit{ayagapata}) with a \textit{stupa} and railing along with an ornamental gateway. It may be translated as\textsuperscript{90} –

\begin{quote}
Adoration to the \textit{Arhat Vardhmana}. The daughter of the matron (\textit{araye}) courtesan Lonasobhika (Lavanasobhika), the disciple of the Jain ascetics, the opulent (\textit{vasuye}) Nanda has erected a shrine of the \textit{Arhat}, a hall of homage (\textit{ayagasabha}), a cistern and a stone slab at the sanctuary of the \textit{Nirgrantha Arhats}, together with her mother, her daughter, her son and her whole household in honour of the \textit{Arhats}.
\end{quote}

This inscription has immense significance for the history of \textit{ganikas}. It becomes apparent that no stigma was attached to the \textit{ganikas}, and even the Jain ascetics, who were austere moralists, did not hesitate in accepting them as their disciples, and also accepted their donations.

In ancient India, Vatsyayana’s \textit{Kamasutra} (which was written in the early centuries of the Christian era) is the most important source of information about courtesans and prostitutes. Vatsyayana’s work, though was not an original one, he just systematized a lot of floating material about courtesans and their ways. Babhravya from Panchala was the first person to write on prostitutes.\textsuperscript{90} Dattaka wrote the \textit{Vaisikamadhikaranam} at the instance of the courtesans of Pataliputra.\textsuperscript{91} Vatsyayana compressed Dattaka’s work as a separate chapter in the \textit{Kamasutra} along with his conclusions.

\textsuperscript{88} Moti Chandra- \textit{The World of Courtesans}, p. 57.
\textsuperscript{90} J.Ph. Vogel, Catalogue of the Archaeological Museum at Mathura, Allahabad,1910, pp.184-86.
\textsuperscript{90} Vatsyayana’s \textit{Kamasutra},ed. Damodarlal Goswami, Banaras, 1929
\textsuperscript{91} K.S 1,1-11
The sixth chapter of the *Kamasutra* deals exclusively with courtesans. In the very beginning, Vatsyayana asserts that the love of a courtesan was based on physical attraction and basically it was intended to earn her a livelihood. Her love, therefore, was natural as well as artificial. In the first case it was instinctive but in the latter case it was for monetary gain, but the art of love had to be learned. The courtesans and prostitutes received training in the art of love from confidantes, experienced nurses, and old maids. Vatsyayana speaks of the sixty-four arts which the courtesans and prostitutes were expected to master. These arts were in fact vital tools of the courtesan’s profession. Some of the *Kalas* listed by Vatsyayana are\(^{92}\) -


This list of the sixty-four arts given by Vatsyayana is significant for it includes broadly speaking all the items which could claim inclusion within the term art. The acquisition of these arts by men and women of culture was considered highly desirable. Naturally it was impossible to acquire all these arts. Ordinary men and women engrossed in the drudgery of everyday life could hardly be expected to achieve these. But as these arts were supposed to be the props of Indian culture, their cultivation was entrusted to a body of men and women who were by nature and circumstances placed in a position which gave them ample time to study them. Naturally the exacting profession of a courtesan demanded the knowledge of certain arts. They had to acquire them in order to keep trim; these arts were matter-of-fact instruments of their profession.

\(^{92}\) K.S., I. 3. 16.
The list being very exhaustive, it is very doubtful if a person could master all these arts. Some of these arts served as a kind of stock-in-trade for the courtesan. To quote Vatsyayana—

- The courtesan (Vesya), her fame enhanced by the acquisition of these arts, imbued with politeness, beauty and virtues, gained for the word ganika an honourable mention in the assembly of the people. Forever honoured by the king, praised by the connoisseurs of arts, her company much sought after, she became the focus of attention of all\(^{93}\).

It is clear that the prostitute especially the ganika, the most accomplished among them, offered men something which by the early centuries A.D. had become absolutely rare among the women of the gentry, viz., accomplishment. We read in the Manusamhita:

- The sacrament of marriage is to a female what initiation with the sacred thread is to a male. Serving the husband is for the wife what residence in the preceptor’s house is to the man and the household duty is to the woman, what offering sacrifices is to the man.\(^{94}\)

This series of neat equations deprive the woman of education, dooming her to household chores only, especially service of her husband and in-laws, but also thereby indirectly doomed her to the loss of her husband’s attention. With an unaccomplished wife at home the man who cared for cultured female company went to the brothel for it. There are numerous references to the fact that senior government officers, rich merchants and bankers regularly visited courtesans not only for sensual satisfaction but also to enjoy their cultured and pleasant company, since this was denied to them at home. Manu belongs to the early centuries AD\(^{95}\), a steady deterioration in the status of the women and the sudra followed his codification of the social norm and the brothel flourished because it catered to the cultured man-about-town’s (nagaraka) tastes in women.

---

\(^{93}\) K. S., I. 3. 20–21
\(^{94}\) Manusamhita, II. 67.
\(^{95}\) Probably to the first century AD.
Part I, chapter 4 of the *Kamasutra* deals with the life of the *nagarakas*, who were members of the *goshthi*. They were very refined men with good taste. But in order to lead the life of a *nagaraka*, certain requirements had to be met. Vatsyayana is of the opinion that the life of a *nagaraka* should be adopted after receiving a liberal education. To become a *nagaraka*, a person had to acquire sufficient wealth – by receiving gifts if he was a *brahmin*, by prowess of his arms if a *ksatriya*, by trade and commerce if a *vaishya* and practice of crafts for a *sudra*. A person aspiring to become a *nagaraka* established himself as a gentleman in a city, or a business centre. He had a palatial house near a river or a tank for water-sport. The house was divided into two sections – outer and inner, former was a living room and the inner portion was occupied by women. There was an element of opulence all around with the flower - garden, the river, swing and the drinking booth – all provided the required back drop for the *nagarakas’s* love-intrigues with the courtesan.

In the daily routine of the *nagaraka*, the evening was a very important part of the day; while he gave vent to his artistic inclinations at night. In the afternoon after the routine business was over, the *nagaraka* had discussions with numbers of the *goshthi* or other *nagarakas* who were also accomplished artistically. There was a programme of music, dance as well as instrumental music after which he went to meet his lady – love.

Besides his daily routine, the *nagaraka* took part in some functions and festivals such as\textsuperscript{96}.

*Goshthivihara* – a specialized *goshthi* of the assembly of *nagarakas* in order to discuss arts and poetry.

*Ghatonibandhanam* – *ghata* was a festival in honour of the gods, its administration was like that of a *gana*.

*Udyanagamanam* – Garden picnics enjoyed by the *nagaraka* along with the courtesan. There was also music, dancing and love-play along with joyful staking large sums of money in cock-fights.

*Samapanakam* – Drinking in the company of his friends and courtesans was an important aspect of the *nagaraka’s* life.

\textsuperscript{96} *K.S.*, I.4.26.
Samasyah – Sports and amusements were enjoyed here.

It was however, in the periodical meeting of the goshthi that the nagaraka got full escape to indulge in his artistic activities and love affairs. The goshthi met in the house of one of the nagarakas, a courtesan’s house or in a gambling house. It was attended by all nagarakas who were at par in terms of education, wealth, social standing along with the courtesans. Here, they discussed the problems of art and literature.

The vita was an important companion of the nagaraka. He was noted for his knowledge of the arts, his wit and camaraderie. He was able to hold his own in the goshthis and his lifelines were the goshthis and courtesans. A vidushaka was a jester, but also a skilled musician and a trustworthy person. They acted as counsellors to the nagaraka and acted as his advisers during the quarrels with the courtesan. The nagaraka in his love intrigues was helped by the Budhhist nuns (bhikhshuki), widows (munda), strumpets (Vrishali) and the old courtesans who were all experts in the arts.

The nagaraka could indulge in all these pastimes in the company of a single courtesan or a group of courtesans, accompanied by their attendants and their mothers. All this depended on his financial resources. It is evident from the Kamasutra that the nagarakas were proficient in the arts and their financial resources enabled them to lead a life of luxury. Though association with courtesans was condemned by the Sastras, Vatsyayana states that society did not hold any stigma against it. A Vesya was recognized as a kind of nayika or heroine.

In keeping with the growth of luxury and wealth in the Gupta period the institution of the courtesan became fully evolved and played a very important role in the social and cultural life of the people. In the post-Gupta period also the elaborate and luxurious lifestyle is depicted in the literature of the time. We find the huge palaces with the harem inmates, courtesans and attendants. The king too led an opulent lifestyle and patronized the festivals, music, dancing and goshthi. Gambling, drinking and prostitution prospered as before in spite of the Sastric injunctions against them.

97. K.S.1.4.47
98. K.S.1.4.48
99. K.S.1.5.4.
In that period, Ujjain was a great centre of learning, where the various arts and science were taught. One of the sciences taught was called gandharva-kala. (Gandharvasastra). Dr. Agrawala's contention that this art included diverse information about courtesans appears to be correct since in this period the courtesans' quarters held importance. There was close relationship between the courts, temples and dancing girls which gave rise to different sorts of rules and regulations which governed and regulated their relationship with these institutions. A point to be emphasized is that the rich men of Ujjain had become great worshippers at the temple of Kama with which the courtesans were closely associated. Bana also observes that the rich and licentious men of Ujjain worshipped Kama. They even decorated the temple of Kama with red makara standards, with red chauris, corals and tinklers. Courtesans, as in the previous periods had an important role in the royal court and the associated functions and festivals.

The Vasudeva Hindi is full of stories and incidents which provide us details of the courtesan's way of life. There is a story of a beautiful and accomplished courtesan who had the king, ministers and other rich clients. After visiting her, they presented her ornaments as a memento of their visit. Once a banker's son, on visiting her saw a footstool inlaid with five porcelain gems. He asked the courtesan for it as a memento and she obliged him.

As looks, age and accomplishments came down, the price and social prestige also came down so that middle-aged, unaccomplished or plain-looking women had to agree to mere subsistence rates or even less. The Kuttanimata an important text on prostitution describes the plight of such unwanted prostitutes who were forced to beg, steal and resort to various other tricks too. Their condition was so pathetic that there was no guarantee of the next meal or shelter; they also did not have any provision to combat disease, old age and penury. She often resorted to becoming a confidence trickster. It was indeed very tragic for a woman, who all through her life had catered to men's pleasure, was left all alone to fend for herself at a time when she was worst equipped to face such a
situation. In many texts, we hear of the retired prostitutes begging.\textsuperscript{103} We have the tragic story of Kankali, who was sold at the age of seven in the slave-market, lived her life as a prostitute and later on lost her charm. She tried her hand at different professions, but since she was not trained in anything, so she was not successful in anything. In desperation, she tried to seduce people at pilgrimages, dressing up in order to hide her age and loss of looks, but she was eventually caught and then dropped. She tried begging after her repeated failures. She next became a wine-seller, a fortune-teller and an actress in turn and later even pretended to be insane. She enjoyed royal hospitality also for sometime for she claimed to have the ability to paralyze a hostile army, but naturally she had to flee before the actual encounter took place. Eventually she became a procurer for a young prostitute, Kalavati. This story truly epitomizes the fate of old prostitutes. It was indeed sad and tragic that they could not take up any alternative profession for their lack of proficiency in order to earn a livelihood. Also they had no measure of social security to fall back upon. In the Desopadesa we hear of a sixty-year old woman making up herself as a young girl in order to catch hold of a client.\textsuperscript{104}

The children of a ganika, though they had the freedom to marry and beget children, were also not free persons. The daughters were to act as ganikas in case the mother died or went away. Whether a girl become a ganika or not depended on her beauty and cultural accomplishments which appealed to her prospective clients. The sons of ganika were also not free agents. They were trained by state employed teachers to become expert actors, (rangopajivin) and musicians. They became a property of the state, almost a slave, and were obliged to hold musical performances on the stage for eight years. The manumission fee for them was higher than that for the prostitute. Besides, their salary was much lower than that of the ganikas, they were lowly paid (150 per annum) compared to the exorbitant sum fixed for their redemption (12,000 panas). In the play Mrcchakatika we hear of bandhulas ‘who are begotten by unknown clients of the prostitutes.’ Without any social identity, these boys lived in a brothel until they could eke out a livelihood for themselves. The pathetic tone of the verse tells us how these boys were looked upon as waste products, like slag in a factory. The mother of the ganika looked after her personal possessions, like dress and ornaments; she could not deposit her

\textsuperscript{103} \textit{Samayamatrka}, VIII. 102, 103, 112; \textit{Kuttanimata}, 532; \textit{Sarngadharapaddhati}, 4052.

\textsuperscript{104} III. 33
ornaments anywhere else; the daughter inherited them on her mother’s retirement or death, but only for use. The sister could act as her substitute in a commission.

Sometime the courtesans married their lovers. We have the story of Charusami’s adventure with a courtesan, Vasantatilaka\textsuperscript{105}, whom he married subsequently. Vatsyayana lays down a provision whereby a vesya could be given in marriage to one who could provide special musical assistance to the establishment; such a marriage leads to greater prosperity.\textsuperscript{106} Otherwise we hear of a notional sort of marriage which was more in the nature of initiation. The man did not have any exclusive claim on her person or services. The avaruddha belonged to her patron exclusively and the lawmakers say that his exclusive right to her should be respected.\textsuperscript{107} Narada has no objection to a man having sexual relations with a non-brahmana svairini, vesya, dasi and nikasini (one who did not live a secluded life) of a lower caste if she was not another’s wife. A prostitute, according to the Skanda Purana, belongs to a separate caste; if a man of the same or a superior caste enjoys her he is not to be punished, provided she is not another’s concubine. If she is, then he simply performs the prajapatiya (a light) penance\textsuperscript{108} and gets away with it.

That even a prostitute can fall in love is admitted theoretically by Vatsyayana even though he says that they are and should always be after money.\textsuperscript{109} In literature, we have a few instances of the prostitute falling in love.\textsuperscript{110} Vasantsena of the Mrcchakatika stands as a shining luminary among the ganikas described in classical Sanskrit. Though Charudatta is crest-fallen, reduced to abject poverty, her regard and love for him are genuine. Other noteworthy noble courtesans are Vasantatila of the Kathakosa, Kuberasena of the Parisisthaparvan, Madamala of the Kathasaritsagara.

Frequently, when the courtesans amassed wealth, they set up works of public utility: they sank wells, constructed bridges, temple gardens, caityas (sacred mounds), donated money to the needy, gave gifts and generally served the community through such works of public utility.

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., pp. 123-24.
\textsuperscript{106} Kamasutra, VII.23, 24.
\textsuperscript{107} Yajnavalkya Smrti, II.290; Narada, 78,79.
\textsuperscript{108} II.290.
\textsuperscript{109} Kamasutra, I.62-5
\textsuperscript{110} Esp. in Asvaghosa and Sudraka’s dramas.
The necessary corollaries of prostitution in ancient India were musical soirees, clubs and pleasure trips or even religious festivals in which prostitutes and other malefactors formed a part of the crowd. In the sexual life of the Vedic people, certain institutions appear to have occupied a pivotal position, one of which was the *samana* where free love appears to have been encouraged.\textsuperscript{111} In the *samana*, which was held during tournaments, women were present\textsuperscript{112}, they were especially attracted to chariot racing.\textsuperscript{113} They spent the whole night with their lovers and went back at dawn. We have to agree that the *samana* was a general popular festivity where women went to enjoy themselves -- young women and elderly women sought there to find a husband and courtesans to make profit of the occasion.

The *sabha* in the Vedic context denotes an assembly as well as the hall where it met; it appears that the *sabha* served multiple functions. We can also suppose that with the growing complexity of functions, the *sabha* divided itself into several correlated institutions also called *sabhas*. For instance, from the very beginning gambling was closely associated with the *sabha*. One might interpret *sabhavatiyosha* of the *Rig Veda*, a reference to women visiting a *sabha* hall; so *sabhavatiyosha* may have meant a courtesan. The presence of courtesans in the *sabha* is probable keeping in mind that the *sabha* was a place where gamblers assembled, for in later times gambling, drinking and prostitution went hand in hand.

The *Vedic, Epic* and *Smriti* evidences about courtesans are terse and to the point. In the moralistic tone of the *Ramayana*, courtesans and prostitutes are dismissed as mere appendages to royal pomp and show. The heroic nature of the *Mahabharata* also does not really highlight the courtesans. Similarly, the *Smritis* are more concerned with the social and legal position of prostitutes rather than their way of life. Hence, it is surprising to find

\textsuperscript{111} Sarkar, *op.cit.* p. 94
\textsuperscript{112} Vedic Index, *Samana* H3 .R.V.X. 168.2
\textsuperscript{113} R.V. X. 168.2
in the *Harivamsa Purana* (a compendium of the *Mahabharata*) some interesting information about courtesans, goshthis, yatras, and the samajas.

*Samaja* in the *Mahabharata* (I. 134 etc.) means a sort of tournament. Dhritarashtra, with the consent of Drona announced a *samaja* for which the ground was prepared, a theatre (*preksha-gara*) was raised by royal architects. Dhritarashtra attended the show along with men and women. At the time of Draupadi’s *svayamvara* also, a *samaja* was arranged, which was a colourful affair, with actors, dancers, musical instruments etc.

*Samaja* at other places indicates a grand feast accompanied by wrestling matches. *Samaja* indicated a social gathering in which music; dance, dramatic shows or tournaments played an important part. Here members of different social orders, guilds etc. participated. Courtesans played an important part both as participants in the show, as well as spectators. The *Hari Vamsa* (II. 30) has depicted a picture of Kamsa’s *samaj-vata* which he had convened to witness a fight between Krishna and his favorite elephant Kuvalayapida. The *prekshagara* of Kamsa was a splendid affair. The galleries (*prekshagara*) occupied by the inmates of the harem were an elaborate affair. The courtesans (*ganika*) occupied separate galleries where the chief courtesan (*varamukhyah*) was also seated. They had luxurious seats, garden sofas, colourful carpets and flower bouquets. There were drinking booths (*panabhumi*) and pan baskets.

In Buddhist literature, we have reference to *Samajja* which was a show consisting of dancing and music, acrobatic performances, bird and animal fights, wrestling etc. The life depicted in the *Jatakas* is one of a healthy people singularly free from moral inhibitions. Courtesans actively participated in the music, dancing, drinking and water sports. The *Kartika* festival was held on the full moon day of the *Kartika* month when the king went round the city in a procession. In all the revelries the courtesans and prostitutes played an important part. As discussed earlier, the institution of *samaja* and *vihara yatra* were closely associated with the courtesans. Kautilya says that even the rulers were regular visitors to the *yatra* (pleasure trips), *samaja* (festivals with
animal sacrifice), *utsav* (feast) and *pravahanas* (processions). *Samaja* was an important part of the Mauryan social life is testified by Rock Edict I of Asoka.\(^{114}\)

Another important occasion mentioned in Jain literature was *samkhadi*, which is equivalent to the *samajas* of Buddhist literature. It is mentioned in one of the *sutras* of *Brihat-Kalpa-Sutra Bha.* (B.K.S.B.),\(^{115}\) which shows that it was a fairly ancient institution. The word is derived from *sam*, 'in large groups', and *khada*, 'killing', i.e. the festival in which animals were slaughtered in large numbers.\(^{116}\) Such *samkhadis*, full of fun for ordinary men and women spelt difficulties for the Jain monks. The greatest source of distraction and annoyance were the village gardens, where drunken voluptuaries dressed in fantastic garments gesticulated freely and sang erotic songs.

In the ancient *Yatras* and *goshthis* which attracted citizens, courtesans played an important part. The *Harivamsa* (II, 88) gives a detailed account of a *yatra*. Once the Yadavas of Dvaraka decided to visit Pindaraka Tirtha situated on the seashore. In the party, Krishna had his separate group and each prince was accompanied by his own followers. There parties were also accompanied by numerous courtesans who were settled in Dvaraka by the Yadavas. The availability of women had created such a spirit of rivalry in the crowd that there appeared to be the possibility of the Yadavas fighting amongst themselves to gain their favours. All the people gathered there participated in water sports while the courtesans sang and danced for their amusement. Later after drinks and dinner, the party returned to Dvaraka. *Yatra* has been described in *Kamasutra* as one of the forms of amusements that the members of the *goshthis* patronized. The *Brihatkathaslokasamgraha* (VIII, 1-53) provides an elaborate description of *yatras*. The courtesans participated in all this also carrying *makarayoshtri* and red flags, which were the symbols of their profession. They attracted the crowd with their coquetry. In the Mauryan Rock edicts VIII, IX and XI, the word *vihalayatam* has been loosely translated as 'pleasure tours'. This tour was a trip to a fixed place with an intention of hunting and enjoying the other pleasures of life in the company of courtesans – drinking, gambling and sports. The chief idea of such tours was fun, frolic and sport. In the Mauryan period,


\(^{115}\) BKSBJII. 88.

\(^{116}\) BKSBJIII. 3140.
as in other periods of ancient India drinking, gambling and prostitution went hand in hand.

Another well-known institution of ancient India was the Goshthi which was a meeting ground of the connoisseurs of music and of the arts. They listened to music and enjoyed the company of courtesans. Buddhist as well as Jain canonical literature makes reference to goshthi. The patronage of art and culture was an important function of the goshthis, but they were also notorious for their drinking, their patronage to courtesans and their brawls. The Kamasutra gives some important directions for the proper conduct of the meetings of the goshthi. It is ordained that a proper balance must be maintained between the languages used in the goshthi - Sanskrit and Prakrit were given equal preference in the discussions on literary topics. In the opinion of Vatsyayana, the functions of a goshthi were literary and conducive to joy and any deviation from its avowed aims was considered to be boorish. He advises people to join a goshthi which pleased the people and which concentrated on amusements alone.

Music and dancing formed an integral part of the goshthi culture. Accomplishment in dancing and music was an essential qualification for any courtesan. Competitions were also held to judge the dancers. A different type of dance is mentioned where they kept time with water clocks, here a prince acted as the judge. Two dancing girls Hiranna and Suvanna gave a dance recital in which Samba acted as judge. In the Brihakathaslokasamgraha, XI, the dance of Madanamanchuka has been described which was arranged by Udayana, Suyamunadatta's dance was very much appreciated though the competition was won by Madanamanchuka.

Bana's Harshacharita portrays that in the seventh century, the functions of the goshthi had diversified. For instance, in vidyagoshthi the citizens who were bound together by ties of education, wealth, culture and who belonged to the same age-group assembled at an appointed place to discuss the arts or literature. We come across the good and serious goshthi where the people assembled to hear stories, historical episodes and recitations. Stories of heroic deeds were narrated in the Viragoshthi. There was hardly

118. K.S. I. 51-52.
119. Vasudeva Hindi,(Gujarati trans) p.101
any blame attached to keeping low company which often included dancers and musicians. Interestingly Bana’s friends included a drummer, a piper, a singer, a danseuse and an actor.121

The Vasudeva Hindi and the Brihatkathaslokasamgraha provide us with interesting details of the life of the courtesans. They portray the wiles that the courtesans tried on their lovers, their living quarters and their luxurious lifestyle. There is enough evidence showing that drinking, gambling were common features at this time. The bets involved in cockfighting were very high. The Vasudeva Hindi states an instance that Vinadatta once visited the market-place of Sravasti, where there was to be a fight between the cocks of the courtesans Ratisena and Rangapataka. Vinadatta backed the cock of Rangapataka, the wage was a lakh and it won. Later on the stake was increased to a million and Ratisena’s cock won. We have another instance of a courtesan approaching a king, challenging him to a cockfight and the stakes were a hundred thousand.122

7.9 PROSTITUTION IN OTHER COUNTRIES

It would be interesting to have a look at the situation in the other countries of the world. The most ancient historical record is believed to be the Books of Moses. According to it, prostitutes were common among the Jews since ancient times. When Tamar, the daughter-in-law of Judah, desired to defeat the cruel Jewish custom and to bear children, notwithstanding her widowhood, she put her widow’s garments off from her, and covered herself with a veil, and sat in an open place……When Judah saw her he thought her a harlot, for she had covered her face. The Genesiacial account thus shows that prostitutes, with covered faces, must have been common at the time.123

Egypt was also famous for her courtesans in ancient times. There is little reason to doubt that the temples, like those of Baal, were houses of prostitution on an extensive scale. It was not considered wholly shameful for an Egyptian to make his living by the hire of his daughter. In such a society there was no disgrace in becoming a

121. Ibid., p.29
prostitute. The city of Naucratis owed its wealth and fame to the beauty of its courtesans, whose reputation spread throughout Europe, and was much celebrated in Greece. In Greece, Solon formally established houses of prostitution at Athens, and filled them with female slaves called Dicteria. Bought with public money, they were in fact public servants, and their gains were a legitimate source of revenue to the state. Prostitution became a state monopoly, and so profitable that, even in Solon's lifetime, a superb temple, dedicated to Venus was built from this fund. In Sparta, a Spartan husband was authorized to lend his wife to any handsome man for the purpose of begetting children. Aristotle affirms positively that the Spartan women openly committed the grossest acts of debauchery. Hence it may be inferred that prostitutes by profession were unnecessary at Sparta, at all events until a late period of its history. We find that prostitutes were common in the city of Rome at the time when authentic history begins. In the comedies of Plautus, which are among the oldest works of Roman literature which have reached us, the prostitute (meretrix) and the bawd (lerno) are depicted.

In the other countries of the world, besides the existence of regular prostitution there also existed female slave-prostitution. The institution of slavery can be said to be the first institutionalized form of hierarchical dominance in human history. Most authorities have concluded that slavery derives from war and conquest. The enslavement of female war captives and their use as concubines and war spoils continued from the time of the Homeric epic, *The Iliad* written in the eighth century B.C. to the modern period. Speaking of Greece of the ninth and tenth centuries B.C. the historian M.I. Finley states that the victorious killed the males and carried off the females. Thucydides, in his *History of the Peloponnesian War* cites many instances of the killing of male prisoners and enslavement of women. This led to the institutionalization of concubinage, which became the social instrument for integrating the captive women into the households of their captors, thus assuring their captors not only their loyal services but also of their offspring. The free sexual access to slaves marked them off from all other persons as much as their juridical classification as property.

124. Ibid., p. 41.
126. William W. Sanger- op. cit., p. 64.
Speaking of Babylonian slavery, Issac Mendelson writes:127 'In the case of the female slave the master had a right not only to her labor, but also to her body. He or a member of the family could cohabit with her freely without assuming the slightest obligation.' The Babylonian slave woman could also be hired out as a prostitute for a fixed price, sometimes to a brothel owner, sometimes to private clients, with the master collecting her pay.

Describing Greek slavery in the ninth and tenth century B.C., M.I. Finley says, "The place of the slave woman was in the household, washing, sewing, cleaning, grinding meal......If they were young, however, their place was also in the master’s bed."128 Slave girls staffed the brothels and filled the harems of the ancient world. The practice was pervasive throughout the Near East, in Egypt, Greece and Rome of antiquity, in fact wherever slavery existed.

The practice of using slave women as servants and sex objects became the standard for the class dominance over women in all historic periods. Women of the subordinate classes (serfs, peasants, workers) were expected to serve men of the upper classes sexually, whether they consented or not. The feudal droit du seigneur, the right of the first night, which belongs to the master who has granted his serf the right to marry, institutionalized an already well-established practice.

Thus, from its very inception, enslavement meant something different for men and women. Both men and women, once enslaved, were totally subordinate to the power of another, they lost autonomy and honour. For women, sexual exploitation marked the very definition of enslavement, as it did not for men. Clearly, class oppression cannot ever be considered the same condition for men and women. In Babylonia, the increasing importance of keeping private property within the family, spurred the development of concubinage as an institution for the preservation of patriarchal property relations. A couple's childlessness, with its implications of loss of property in the male line, could be remedied by bringing a concubine into the household. A Babylonian sales contract reads as follows:129

128 Ibid. p.87
129 Ibid. p. 91
• In the 12th year of Hammurabi, Bunene-abi and his wife Belessunu bought Shamash-nuri from her father for the price of five shekels of silver. To Bunene-abi she is a wife and to Belessunu she is a slave.

What is interesting here is that the concubine serves a dual function; she performs sexual services for the master, with the knowledge and consent of the wife, and she is a servant to the wife. Thus the nexus between sexual servitude to the master and economic service to the wife seems to be a distinguishing feature of concubinage under patriarchy. A slave woman owes sexual services to her mistress’s husband and the offspring of such union counts as though it were the offspring of the mistress.

Hierarchy among men rested upon property relations and was reinforced by might. For women, their place in the hierarchy was mediated through the status of the men on whom they depended. At the bottom stood the slave woman, whose sexuality was disposed of by powerful men as though it were a marketable commodity; in the middle stood the slave-concubine, whose sexual performance might result in her upward mobility, the bestowal of some privileges and the winning of inheritance rights for her children; at the top stood the wife, whose sexual services to one man entitled her to property and legal rights.130

7.10 VILIFICATION IN LITERATURE

In ancient India, we find that in Buddhist literature the courtesans were called harlots, wenches, street walkers and even murderesses. Expressions like a ‘vile trade’ (nichakamma), ‘a house of ill-fame’ (ganikagaha), ‘this bad life of mine’ (kilitha), and a ‘low woman’ (durithi kumbhadasi) show that the moral aspect of the profession was not lost sight of.131

The condemnation of courtesans on moral grounds is however, a common feature of the Smritis and certain Puranas. The Agni Purana (168.3) considers the eating of food offered by the ganas and courtesans (ganika) a great sin and moral lapse. Cohabitation

130 Ibid., p.96.
131 R.L. Mehta- Pre-Buddhist India, Bombay, 1939, p. 296.
with mistress (avaruddha), slave girls (dasi) and prostitutes (bhujishya) was punished by fines (A.P. 258.12). The Garuda Purana thoroughly condemns courtesans—

- A courtesan is a dependent even in respect of her sleep, the sole aim of her life being to regale the hearts of her visitors as long as they can decently bear their wine. She is a sort of perpetual smiling machine, being obliged to hammer out a horse-laugh, even with the weight of a life-long, grief, misery and futility lying heavy on her heart. Her person is sold to others for money, while she often meets a violent death. 132

The Smritis make thieves and other criminals the constant companions of public women. Yajnavalkya enumerates as one of the four tokens by which the police could trace a criminal,- that of living in a house of ill fame (asuddha vasaka). In the list of tricksters, a harlot is placed in the company of such low characters as gamblers and goondas (Narada, Parasara Smritis 2 and 3; Manu X. 256.ff). Gautama (XXII. 27) sternly lays down the rule that killing of a woman belonging to all merits no punishment. Manu (IV. 209) says that food offered by the prostitute was not to be accepted by Brahmans, he even stipulates death for a deceitful harlot (Manu IX. 259).

But it would not be correct to say that all the lawgivers denounced the courtesans and prostitutes. They had to provide them with recognition of their social status and also a degree of security. Yajnavalkya (II. 290) classifies concubines into two categories - avaruddha (one who kept in the house and forbidden to have contact with any other male) and bhujishya (one who is not kept in the house but is specially meant for one person). If any other person had relations with them, he was to be fined fifty panas.

However, Narada had a more sympathetic attitude towards prostitutes. Their ornaments, being a part of their profession could not be confiscated. Her rights being protected, it was expected that a prostitute should also act honorably towards her clients. Narada states that a prostitute after receiving her fees, refused to entertain her clients, was liable to pay thrice the amount that she had been paid. (Yajnavalkya. II. 292; Narada, 18; Matsya Purana, 227,144-145). According to the Agni Purana, in addition to the above

damages, she was forced to pay a fine to the royal treasury also. Since prostitution was a recognized social institution, the Smritis provided for the maintenance of mistresses and concubines.

Both institutionally and individually prostitutes depended upon certain categories of middlemen and procurers. Chief among these was the kuttani or sambhali. In a brothel, the mother of the chief prostitute was the in charge of her daughter’s and the other girls’ interests. Her responsibilities included checking payments, protecting the girls’ health and wealth, driving away undesirable customers (the impoverished ones), using delay and deceit to spare the girls to the extent possible, bargaining for higher emoluments by pretending that other, bigger customers are making better offers, varying custom i.e. to deprive an eager one for some time in order to extract better payment from him.133 Not surprisingly henceforth, she was vilified in literature. ‘She is like a blood-thirsty tigress; only where she is absent does the client appear as a fox.’ She is often referred to as an old hag with the qualities of a vampire. But, if we think rationally; she was the prostitutes’ only guarantee of safety and fair payment.

The vita was the middlemen and/or companion of the courtesan; he also procured customers for her. The vitas were counsellors of both the courtesans and their clients; they could bring about misunderstandings between them and also reconcile them with each other. The pithamarda, was a teacher of the prostitute as also an associate of the nagaraka, the man-about-the-town, who helped his friend achieve his ends. Both, but especially the vita, looked after the courtesan’s interests when she needed a man to help her. In the Mrchakatika he escorts her at night, instructs her, has no illusion about her profession but respects her as a person. The vitas are depicted as helpers, peace-makers, go-betweens, procurers and counselors of the partners in the four famous Bhanas of the late classical period. The services of the kuttani and vita point out that the courtesan was vulnerable to be cheated, exploited, insulted and physically injured. The vita too, gave valuable service to her where her sex and social position rendered her vulnerable.

On the other hand, later religious and law books have nothing but contempt for courtesans, and hold them solely responsible for the institution. The Smritis had a very

133. All this was taught in the Kuttanimata of Damodaragupta and also in Desopadesa, IV. 12,19,30,36.
low opinion of the *ganikas* and the hatred against them went to the extent that even the killing of a prostitute was not considered to be a sin (Gautama, XXII, 27). This negative feeling against the prostitutes was due to the fact that they were looked down upon as corrupters of morals. They were also considered to be thieves and swindlers (*Manu*, IX. 259). Prostitutes were supposed to be unclean and *Brahmins* were forbidden to accept food offered by them.\(^{134}\) Going even further, the erotic text *Kalavilasa* lists sixty four specified modes in which a courtesan could deceive her customer. It relates the story of King Vikramaditya, who when he fell in tough times sought the shelter of the prostitute Vilasavati. She looked after him well and spent a lot of money on him and when it appeared that he had died, she threw herself on his pyre. With her help he regained his kingdom and appointed her chief queen. Later she told him about her love for a man who had been arrested as a thief. The king then freed him and thus united the lovers. Later he remembered his minister’s warning; the prostitutes are not to be trusted. This innate deceitfulness of prostitutes is a recurring note in all literature. The text ignores her contribution: the reinstatement of the king as sovereign, and betrays only a sneer, shared no doubt by the entire community, for the possibility of a prostitute being so deeply in love that she treads a dangerous and tortuous path to gain her lover appeared totally absurd to them. The text in fact condemns the women for everything and more so the prostitute, ignoring her client’s role, and her own contribution to his career.

According to Vatsyayana, a courtesan had to be very careful in the choice of her lover, and adopt a cautious approach in selecting them. A courtesan usually preferred the company of a wealthy, young man with a secure means of livelihood. She would also like the company of a government officer or a person who held a position of authority in the state. She tried to win over physicians, for though not very wealthy, they would at least look after her during an illness. The courtesans had dealings with police officers, judges, fortune tellers, instructors in arts, florists, perfumers, wine sellers etc. Vatsyasana advises the courtesan that money should not be the only guiding factor in the courtesan’s action. He advises her to win over lovers for their virtues and accomplishments. This was to be done for the sake of fame and material prosperity\(^ {135}\) Scions of an illustrious family, learned men well-versed in the rituals of many faiths, poets good speakers, energetic men

\(^{134}\) Ludwik Sternbach, ‘Legal Position of Prostitutes according to Kautilya’s *Arthashastra*’, *J.A.O.S.* ,Vol. 71, 1951.

\(^{135}\) *K.S.*,VI.1.11.
skilled in arts and crafts, men fond of ghata, samaja, prekshanaka, and goshthi are the type of men a courtesan should pursue. Such men had to be healthy, powerful, compassionate, true lovers of women but not subservient to them, possessed of independent means of livelihood, free of envy and fear.136

However, the ideal customer, according to Vatsyasana should be rich, without having to earn his wealth (i.e. born to wealth), a minister to the king, one who can afford to disregard his elders’ commands, preferably an only son of a rich father. Born in an aristocratic family, he should be learned, a poet, proficient in tales, an orator, accomplished in the various arts, not envious, lively, given to drinks, friendly, a ladies’ man but not under their power, independent, not cruel nor jealous.137 The courtesan is advised not to stick to one client when she has several offers. Since money can buy everything she should oblige him who can afford the highest sum—this is the guiding principle of the profession. The courtesans themselves also had to be endowed with beauty and sweet speech. They had to appraise the beauty of a client and be well-versed in the arts of love-making. It was also required that they be successful participants in goshthi.

When the courtesan decided to bring back her lover from a rival, she had to make an effort to be extra nice to him and even be satisfied with less payment, for the time being. This was to be done keeping in mind the future. She should leave the impoverished lover and not waste time on one from whom there is no hope of return.138 She should be clever enough to read the signs of his disaffection, a long list of such things are given.139 Above all, a courtesan should never encourage or entertain a suitor of reduced means. After extracting all from her customer she should leave him without any remorse and search for a rich one. Normally a ganika chose her own client except when the king forced one on her.

As a preliminary step, it was safer for her to seek the help of shampooers, jesters, musicians and pithamardas to gauge the feelings of her future lovers. Then, along

136 K.S. VI. 1. 12.
137 K.S. VI 1.10,12
138 K.S. VI 6.31
139 K.S. VI 3.28-31

219
with her lover she witnessed cock-fights, quail-fights and ram-fights. After winning over the confidence of her lover she behaved like a chaste woman. She tried to identify herself with his likes and dislikes. Her flattery went on – she heard attentively whatever he had to say and then praised him for it. She concentrated totally on pleasing her lover. She never censured him for his faults and happily accepted whatever he gave her. Even in adversity she stood by him. Whenever he recovered from an illness or he suddenly got wealth due to his good luck she made offerings to the gods. She managed his property carefully and attended *goshthi* only with him. To gain his confidence she restored to flattery in all possible ways. To convince him that she was loyal to him, she criticized her own profession. But she did nothing without her mother’s consent, so far as monetary issues were concerned. Vatsyayana was of the view that a lover, if handled properly would pay double the amount of the stipulated fees.

The courtesan could indulged into various artifices in order to extort more money from her lovers - she could pretend the loss of her own and her client’s ornaments, could engage in a mock quarrel with her mother on the subject of excessive expenses and having to incur debts, could make the client pay her bills, could pretend to be obliged to sell ornaments in order to make both ends meet, could report her rivals greater income. If this long list of deceptions is any index of how society expected her to conduct herself in her profession, it is ironical to justify the censure the patriarchal society meted out to her if she did just that.

The courtesan was, however, always ready for reconciliation with her former lover, if he displayed a genuine desire to be with her again and his finances were sound. Some courtesans attached themselves to several lovers at one time which in turn brought them a lot of money. She fixed her rate for every night, taking into account the time, place and her beauty. There arose a kind of competition in the case of a courtesan with many lovers. Vatsyayana however, preferred security to wealth. The courtesan being a shrewd person knew how to take advantage of a favorable situation. She behaved like a wife when she came to know that her lover was about to gain the favour of the king or there was the possibility of him becoming a high officer. She knew that her feigned love at such an opportune moment would not go unrewarded. The courtesan did earn a lot by

---

140 K.S.,VI 2.3-23
courting men of the higher classes. This also enhanced her social prestige and social standing. She had to be careful that money she received from her client was not obtained by fraudulent means, since that would have a bad influence on her also.

At times, the courtesan was employed by a goshthi of the vitas, hence she was referred to as goshthiparigrihita. Being employed by a number of persons aroused a feeling of rivalry and competition amongst them. She in fact turned this to her advantage to extract more from them.

The courtesans not only paid revenue to the state, she often undertook some works for public welfare. Thus, we read in the Brhatkalpabha, a Jaina text, of a picture gallery set up by a courtesan. The Buddhist texts record Ambapali as also giving similar services. Other courtesans fed the hungry during a famine, gave away money, land, and property for the Buddhist cause. Many treated the Buddha and monks to sumptuous feasts. Frequently, when the courtesans amassed wealth, they set up works of public utility: they sank wells, constructed bridges, temple gardens, caityas (sacred mounds), donated money to the needy, gave gifts and generally served the community through such works of public utility.

Yet we read in the Mahabharata that the prostitutes' quarters should be situated in the south because that is the direction of Yama, the god of death. In the Manasollasa, a medieval text, we read that houses of ill-fame should be situated on the outskirts of the town. But in Greece, the courtesans had a different status. One of the most beautiful sections of any Grecian city was where the richest of the courtesans built their houses.

Bharata says that courtesans, except when they belonged to gods or kings, were available to men for money. Money made courtesans change their attitude to men. Bharata wisely observes: 'Money makes a dear person even dearer, even his wickedness is exalted as good behaviour; he is supposed to be the repository of all the virtues even if he has none. On seeing such a person, their eyes dance with joy, and that simulated joy spreads a flush on their faces. It is therefore, necessary to understand their psychology properly before acting.'

---

141. N.S. XXV 74-78.
Dandin’s romance *Dasakumaracharita* describes the courtesans, *goshthis* and other vices in detail. While dealing with Apaharavarman’s adventures, the story of Kamamanjari is a pointer to the life of the courtesans and the means employed by them to extort money from their victims. Kamamanjari was lauded as the brightest jewel of Champa. Once her mother followed her and saw her worshipping the sage Marichi. On being asked by her mother to do so, Marichi tried to dissuade Kamamanjari from leading a life of retirement in the woods. He asked her to go back to her profession but she refused to do so. Marichi asked her relatives to leave her with him till she changed her mind, hence they went back.

Kamamanjari became engrossed in Marichi’s service and finally managed to make him yield to her. She then took him to her home in the city. The next day was the festival of Kama, which was attended by the king also. A very beautiful woman bowed down to the king saying “Your Majesty, she has won the bet. From this day I am her slave.” The king gave Kamamanjari precious gifts and she received a great ovation from eminent citizens and other courtesans. Before going home, she asked the sage to resume his vocation. When the sage asked her about her fondness for him she replied: “Holy Sir, you saw the girl who just confessed defeat before the royal retinue. She and I once had a tiff, and she said with a sneer, ‘You boast as if you had seduced Marichi’. So I wagered my freedom and went into the business and I won. Thank you so much.”

The sage returned to the forest.

Later literature has no inhibition in mentioning or describing courtesans attached to the palace, to the manor houses of the nobility, especially of merchants, and to temples as well as those who lived in brothels. Such descriptions in Kalidasa, Bharavi, Dandin, Bhatti, Subandhu, Banabhatta, Sriharsa are totally uninhibited and done with great gusto and skill. Other texts are also full of imprecations against prostitutes. The *Visnu Samhita* lays down that he who associates with a courtesan should perform the *prajapatyapenance*. The vituperation against prostitutes is found in the didactic portions of the

---

143. Ryder’s trans., pp.75-77
144. 103.4; also in *Atri Samhita* 267, *Samvarta Samhita*, 161; *Pararsara Samhita*, 10. 15.
Mahabharata, the Dharmsutras, the Puranas and Smriti texts. These texts overlook the fact that courtesans are not born but made; they can only exist as long as society has a demand for them. Therefore, since a section of society calls courtesans into being to cater to their need, the condemnation should be shared by that section as well. But this was not so for the male clients went without any strict censure.

It is both rewarding and revealing to turn the pages of dictionaries on the subject of prostitution. Apart from older, i.e. Vedic, and later Vedic terms like agru, hasra, atiskadvari and vrsali, each of which emphasized one aspect of the public women, we have a host of later synonyms which varied with time and place. The standard Sanskrit lexicon Amarakosa says that vesya, varastri, ganika and rupajiva are synonyms. Jatadhara adds ksdra and salabhanjika; the Sabdaratnavali offers a few more: jharjhara, sula, varavilasini, varavati, bhandahasini, while the Sabdamala adds lanjika, vandhura, kunta, kamarekha and varavati. The standard dictionary of Hemacandra has sadharanastri, parangana, bhunjika and varavadhu to which the Rajatarangini (lexicon) adds bhogya and smaravithika. Even a cursory glance at these names tells us that while some signify the profession itself others (like ksdra, sula, kunta, bhandahasini, bhunjika, bhogya or smaravithika) express society’s sneer and contempt. Banabhatta in his Kadambari (Kale’s ed., 1928, p. 351) refers to vesyalapa (the manner of speaking of a harlot), bandhaki-dharstya (audacity of a harlot).

This double-standard is a product of a rooted ambivalence in the society’s consciousness. The Samayapraddipa, a late ritual text mentions the sight of a prostitute as an auspicious sign; a man gains his desire if he sees her on setting out on a journey. Also, the soil near a prostitute’s house is considered an essential item for making the image of Goddess Durga, who holds a pre-eminent position in Bengal. This was so since her profession involved repeated sexual relations with many men and so potentially symbolized fertility and the power of reproduction. For a community whose prosperity and wealth depended on ensuring fertility of the field and cattle, she symbolized the fertility principle. Hence she had a place in the rituals. This association of fertility of field and cattle with the sexual act, especially magnified in the prostitute’s profession, is not unique to India.
But the fact remains that society unambiguously looked down upon the profession. All efforts were made to segregate the rest of the community from the prostitute’s near abouts, there was a rule of allocating an area in the south specially marked out for prostitutes, which also happened to be Yama’s direction. There was prohibition against eating food offered by her, the rule against touching or associating with her signifies this contempt. But this was a later development for the Kamasutra describes Kings, ministers and the wealthy nobility of the cities and towns enjoying the company of courtesans. The Arthasastra too considers prostitution as an institution and also does not hold any value judgement on them. Both the texts realized the fact that the institution existed due to a social need. In the society female education was not encouraged, the woman was thus reduced to a subordinate position serving her husband, in-laws, children along with her household chores, she thus could not become her husband’s companion.

We hear:

With wives chaste, faithful and of high degree,
A man may circumspect and prudent be,
May curb his passions well in such a case,
Yet in some harlot his whole trust may place.  

The man desired companionship in his intellectual and aesthetic pursuits, which could not be provided by the wife. The wife was too burdened with her household chores, children and in-laws which left her little leisure for the cultivation of either her looks, dress or mental faculties. This was bound to make her less attractive to her husband who craved for charm and companionship in a woman. The very need of combining sexual pleasure which intellectual-aesthetic companionship or simply the attraction of a good-looking, person well-decked in clothes and jewellery drew men to prostitutes. It also repelled them for she could not be exclusively possessed, since she was enjoyed by many. In a society where women became a personal possession, a woman who could not be possessed individually provoked this ambivalent attitude.

Bharata’s *Natyasastra* besides being a compendium for dancers and actors, provides us information about men and women who excelled in the sphere of art, literature and luxurious living.\(^{146}\) Hence, it substantiates to a large extent the information on courtesans supplied by Vatsyayana. The women with whom Bharata deals are not ordinary women, but women connected with the royal court. They are divided into three classes, namely the homely type (*abhyantara*), the public women (*bahya*), and the mixed type (*bahiabhyantara*). Bharata, however, provides us interesting information. According to him, the king ought to enter into a love relationship with only the homely women (*abhyantara*). But a commoner was at a liberty to consort with a public woman. But in spite of this rule, the king was at liberty to marry a courtesan. In love affairs, women in high positions as well as courtesans played an important part.\(^{147}\)

Bharata also provides details about the courtesans and those who courted them. For example, he informs us that a courtesan was to be addressed by her attendants as *ajjuka.*\(^{148}\) The names of the courtesans usually ended in *Datta, mitra and sena.*\(^{149}\) *Vaisika* or gallant is defined as one excelling in all the arts as also one known for his expert dealings with courtesans. He was skilled in the various crafts as also the art of love.

Bharata classifies the courtesans into the superior, middle and low types. The woman of the superior type was attracted to men accomplished in the various arts and crafts, or wealthy men of aristocratic birth. She was full of physical charm, sweet-tempered, did not speak ill of others, always acted appropriately as per the occasion. The woman of the middle type desired men and was also desired by them. Though experienced in *ars amoris,* she was jealous and proud. A woman of the low class was peevish, ill-natured, proud and harsh. The men visiting the courtesans are divided into five classes, namely those who are excellent (*chatura*), those who are superior (*uttama*), those who are average, those who are inferior and lastly the novices.

---

\(^{146}\) Bharata’s *Natyasastra,* (ed.) Manmohan Ghosh, Calcutta, 1951.

\(^{147}\) *Natyasastra,* XXIV. p. 154-55.


\(^{149}\) *Ibid.,* XIX. 33
Bharata has suggested the means to be employed in order to satisfy different types of courtesans. For example, a covetous woman was pleased with gifts of money, an educated woman was attracted to a man well-versed in the arts and a clever woman was pleased by a sportive person. A sensitive woman wished her will to be respected. Bharata states that along with their profession, courtesans were also expert singers and accomplished dancers. He provides important insights into the love of a courtesan. Her love demanded constant effort, display of wealth and the goodwill of the lover. It was also subject to the money she received from him or the pretences he made of transferring his attentions to someone else.

The Gupta period was noted for its wealth and the growth of luxury. The institution of the courtesan also became fully evolved and played a vital role in the social and cultural life of the people. Kalidasa, the greatest poet of India, provides us glimpses of the social life of his times. The fulfillment of worldly desires was possible by acquiring wealth and also by enjoying a luxurious life. Women, dancing, music, the various arts formed an integral part of this luxurious life and they are all an integral subject of his poems and dramas where they appear as animated by the joy of living.

Kalidasa depicts men visiting courtesans and escorting them to the gardens and forests to enjoy themselves. He writes beautifully about women in the Ritusamhara, in the Meghaduta and describes them in a poetic way. He writes about the courtesans dancing in the Mahakala Temple at Ujjain or draws a picture of them plucking flowers in the mountains. His observation about the temple-dancers in the Mahakala temple of Ujjain deserves our attention. “The cloud will catch a glimpse of the temple of Mahakala, of the temple-dancers and their elaborate footwork. The cloud will be able to gaze at the chauri-bearers carrying chauris with jewelled handles. These dancing girls wait expectantly for rain drops to come and soothe their aching feet. The glances they cast on the cloud are as bright as the black bees.”

In the Ritusamhara, Kalidasa paints a vivid and joyous picture of the various seasons and the costumes, ornaments and cosmetics used by women in the various seasons. We must note here that the women depicted in the Ritusamhara are not ordinary

---

150. Meghaduta, 1.35
women, busy in their world of drudgery but coquettish courtesans earning handsomely, enjoying a luxurious life along with their lovers.

Coming to the Sanskrit plays, which usually follow a rigid conventional pattern and do not provide us with information about the contemporary customs and manners. However even here, we find same exceptional dramatists who provide us with an insight into the society’s morals. In these plays we come across the so-called low characters in society -- prostitutes, pimps, rakes, gamblers and tipsters. In this category, the play *Mrichchhakatika* by Sudraka and the *Chaturbhanii*, a collection of four *bhanas* by different authors stand out.

*Mrichchhakatika* was written in about the 5th Century A.D. by Sudraka. The hero of the play is Charudatta, a Brahmin merchant of Ujjayini. The heroine here is the famous courtesan, Vasantasena and the play deals with their love affair. Vasantasena is desired by Samsthanaka (he was the King’s brother-in-law) but she in turn runs away from him. Samsthanaka’s *Vita* understands her aversion for his master but when he speaks aloud he says ‘Vasantasena, your words have no place in the dwelling of a courtesan’. He further says -

> Which, as you know, is friend to every youth;  
> Remember, you are common as the flower  
> That grows beside the road; in bitter truth,  
> Your body has its price; your beauty’s dower  
> Is his, who pays the market’s current rate;  
> Then serve the man you love, and him you hate.  

(Ryder, I.31)

He goes on:

> The wisest Brahman and the meanest fool  
> Bathe in the selfsame pool;  
> Beneath the peacock, flowering plants bend low,  
> No less beneath the crow;  
> The Brahman, warrior, merchant, sail along  
> With all the vulgar throng
You are the pool, the flowering plant, the boat;
And on your beauty every man may dote.
(Ryder, I.32)

In the Fourth Act, Sarvailaka the thief, had stolen Vasantsena's ornaments to free his beloved, Madanika from slavery. Madanika, on recognizing Vasantsena's ornaments, rebukes Sarvilaka. He then bursts forth into a severe condemnation of all courtesans-

"A courtesan will laugh and cry for gold; she trusts you not. A woman takes your gold, then leaves you free; you're worthless, like cosmetics, when you're dry. One man perhaps may hold her heart in trust. She lures another with coquettish eyes, sports with another in unseemly lust, another yet her body satisfies" (Ryder, IV. 14, 15, 16)

Another point worth nothing is Maitreya's (Charudatta's friend) description of Vasantsena's quarters when he goes to see her. He captures the grandeur in which some courtesans lived in the Gupta period. He describes a row of balconies, having golden stairways in laid with gems and crystals windows decorated with strings of pearls etc. The total picture one gets is that of an opulent and luxurious lifestyle.

The Mrichchhakatika deals with the life of a noble courtesan, Vasantsena. Though generally the courtesan is supposed to be an exacting person, this drama portrays that she is also capable of true love and could marry a man of her choice. The Chaturbhani, a collection of four bhanas by different authors all belonging to the early fifth century A.D. deals almost exclusively with life in the quarters of ill-fame. Courtesans and the different types of clients visiting them are all described. Their talks covered a wide variety of subjects such as sports and amusements, drinking, gambling and other vices. Members attended goshthis with their women friends, enjoyed music, dancing and dramatic shows, drinking and gambling. Picnics and garden parties were also an integral part of their culture. It is quite apparent that hardly any stigma was attached to visiting the courtesan's quarters. Government officials, military officers, merchants, pundits and even Buddhist monks visited these quarters.

The authorship of the *Padmaprabhritakam* is ascribed to Sudraka (probably the same person who wrote the *Mrchchhakatika*). *Padmaprabhritakam* deals with the love of Muladeva, the famous rue of the literature of the Gupta period and of Devasena a celebrated courtesan of Pataliputra.

7.12 WOMEN AS CHATTEL

Women had been regarded as chattel in India since the later Vedic times when she was included in the list of *daksina* along with items like cattle, horses, chariots etc. These gifts were made to the priests, who enjoyed the girls and later possibly sold them as slaves, or prostitutes. In the *Epics* we have references to women as gifts. In classical literature too, we have references to prostitutes as part of hunting and military expeditions, as decoration in the courts. Women also came with victories as booty who after serving the generals and other eminent military persons eventually had to become prostitutes. Thus Arjuna brought over women of the enemy as booty. King Virata also gifted pretty maidens to Arjuna to acknowledge his prowess. At Draupadi’s wedding, a hundred slave girls in the early bloom of their youth were given away. At Subhadra’s wedding, no less than a thousand girls were offered to guests for enjoyment in the drinking and bathing sports. Yudhisthira received ten thousand slave girls. We also hear of thousands of beautiful girls as gifts in *sraddhas*. Instances can be multiplied. We are told that pretty young girls are natural gifts to *brahmanas* and that whoever gives this gift lavishly on this earth receives plentiful fruits in heaven i.e. is rewarded with many nymphs there for his enjoyment. In the *Mahabharata* and in the *Puranas*, we find several reference where the host sends his own wife to a guest / or other women. In the

152. *Ramayana*, II.11, 22, 25, 26; IV; 20.13; 24.34, *Mahabharata*, III. 186.7, VIII, 49.76-8, XII. 98; 46, XIII, 96.18, 19, 82
153. *Kumarasambhava*, XVI. 36, 48; Raghuvamsa, VII. 50.
156. *Mahabharata*, I. 198.16.
158. *Ibid.*, II. 51. 8, 9, 52. 11, 29.
160. Cf. Sagara’s gifts to *brahmanas*.
Sanatsujatiya section of the Mahabharata five marks of true friendship are enumerated; one of these is to share one's wife with a friend. Pretty girls also formed part of the dowry.

It becomes clear that there must have been a steady supply of girls. One source must have been the daughters of prostitutes. Distress sale of women in times of crisis was another source. Wives caught in certain cases of adultery were also driven out, such unwanted women probably congregated in the brothel. Women as war-booty were another important source of supply. The royal courts and rich households were another source where abducted women were kept for service and as status symbols. A pertinent point to be noted is that the women were regarded as inanimate objects of enjoyment by the patriarchal society. They are included in the lists of material gifts, donations, sacrificial fees, prizes, rewards, and dowry. After the temporary enjoyment the recipient or donee usually let them go. Thus, there were hosts of women who eventually ended up in the brothel where they catered commercially to men. The women themselves had no control over their destiny in the patriarchal set-up. They were pawned, lost or gained in battles, given as gifts at sacrifices and weddings, were relegated to the position of slaves and chattel in palaces and rich households, sexually enjoyed whenever their owners so wished and discarded when the desire abated.

They were paid only in the brothels, otherwise they were only fed, clothed and decked so that they appeared attractive. Vatsyayana has a long section on how the prostitutes could play - act, feign, seduce, cheat and deceive their customers with or without the help of middlemen and procuresses. So does Damodaragupta teach novices how to make the best use of youth and charm and extort money from customers by hook or by crook. Other texts also teach similar lessons. None of these texts is authored by women. When after being trained in the art of deception, the prostitutes practiced these arts, they are given foul names by all. The very nature of the profession entailed a degree of deceit and the entire social set-up and its attitude encouraged it. Instead of accepting responsibility for it and admitting that prostitutes act as men force them to act and that they exist because they render a service that the patriarchal society needs, the entire blame is squarely placed on the prostitutes.
The situation was very different in Greece and Rome as Aristophanes, Menander or Terence's plays testify. Here in India the exploitation is doubled since male customers often sought to cheat prostitutes of their rightful wages as the law books bring out clearly. Further, they even did not accept their rightful place in society. In the works of Kautilya, Vatayayana and Bhana (which belonged to a lower, less respectable genre), prostitutes come into their own. The customer looks upon them if not with positive respect yet not with contempt and accepts the necessity and significance of their role and profession. But the major, respectable patriarchal literary tradition is that which reflects the upper class reaction to the institution, a class which is not a bit averse to use their services but is yet too respectable to regard them as human beings. Once this attitude is fostered and becomes prevalent, depriving prostitutes of their fees, man-handling or insulting them is condoned. But this was only true of the common harlot with little charm and no accomplishment. The well-trained and well-preserved beauty, the \textit{ganika}, who belonged to the upper class, enjoyed the patronage of royalty or nobility and was comparatively secure and comfortable.

The vital point which needed to be conceded was that the prostitutes render a service needed by the society and they act as the men force them to. So it was not justified to put all the blame squarely on the prostitutes. The literary tradition too, reflected the viewpoint of the upper class patriarchal opposition to the institution, who were not averse to utilize their services but on the other hand were not ready to even acknowledge them as human beings.

Another pointer to society's double standard was that though people were debarred from accepting food from prostitutes, they had no hesitation whatsoever, in accepting the benefits from them. Records in the Tiruvorriyur temple depict that the \textit{devadasis} there made rich donations. These works of public utility were in fact enjoyed by the entire community for whom it was a sin to touch a prostitute or to eat her food. Hence the double standard of the patriarchal society becomes evident that though society readily utilized the fruits of her labour, on the other hand it looked down upon her.

The patriarchal society thus created situations in which many women were deprived of the right to remain respectable and be regarded so, so that such women were pushed to this profession. They could live as prostitutes since there was a steady supply of
male customers. The society only ostracized the prostitutes but not their customers. Whether in the palace, or in the temples or in brothels they served men with an uncertainty regarding payment and the fear of molestation, mutilation, torture and death. They had no provision for old age and infirmity. Their bodies, gifts and charity were enjoyed by the community which otherwise looked down upon them as untouchables and showered curses and imprecations on them. Penalty for maltreatment or deceit is mentioned but one wonders how few wronged prostitutes could actually sue the state for their flouted rights and dues. Hence, the position of the prostitutes was indeed precarious, who with a few exceptions of the upper class or outstanding individuals were exploited by men at will and with impunity.

7.13 PRESENT SCENARIO

Even in the present context, prostitution and trafficking in India is a serious social problem and its solution has been rendered difficult by the problem of poverty. Prostitution is widely rampant in India and its main markets are in the big cities. A very accurate, comprehensive picture of prostitution in India is not available since sexual exploitation and sale of women and children are mostly unreported crimes. According to a recent publication on trafficking (The Coalition against Trafficking in Women – Asia Pacific, www.catwinternational.org), there are about 2.3 million prostitutes in India.

A survey of prostituted women in India reveals their reasoning for staying in prostitution (in descending order of significance): poverty/unemployment; lack of proper reintegration services, lack of options; stigma and adverse social attitudes; family expectations and pressure; resignation and acclimation to the lifestyle. (CATW - Asia Pacific, Trafficking in Women and Prostitution in the Asia Pacific). Most of the research done by Sanlaap (an NGO) indicates that the majority of sex workers in India work as prostitutes due to lacking resources to support themselves or their children. Most do not choose this profession out of preference, but out of necessity, often after the breakup of a marriage or after being disowned and thrown out of their homes by their families. The children of sex workers are much more likely to get involved in this kind of work as well.

One of India's most striking characteristics is its material poverty. An estimated 40% of India's population lives in poverty. This means that almost 400 million people
cannot meet basic survival needs like food, clothing, and shelter. This is an overwhelming, almost unimaginable statistic. Poverty does not create imbalances in gender and sex. It only aggravates already existing imbalances in power and therefore increases the vulnerability of those who are at the receiving end of gender prejudice. In a patriarchal set up, the section in families in societies that is affected is women and girl children. This desperate poverty is often cited as the root of India's growing prostitution problem.

India is a receiving, sending, and transit country for prostitution. Due to its geographical proximity to Nepal and Bangladesh as well as Pakistan, all of which are economically less developed than India, the constant illegal movement of people is a perpetual phenomenon. Every day, about 200 girls and women in India enter prostitution, 80% of them against their wills. Prostitution is widely rampant in India and its main markets are in the big cities. The statistics available on the number of prostitutes operating in the country is not exact because there is so much of clandestine prostitution, in spite of such undetected prostitution the situation is horrifying.

Hence, even though a total eradication of prostitution is impossible, it is time to repeal laws used to punish prostitutes in seeking to protect public decency and order. Legalizing prostitution is one solution, though not a panacea. Legalized prostitution refers to a wide range of situations. It can simply mean that prostitution is not against the law. Usually legalization is synonymous for regulation, with laws enforced by police. Licenses can be issued to prostitutes, for example, with mandatory health-checks for them. Education and economic independence of these women will counter their vulnerability, leading to the recognition and respect of women's dignity as that of a human being.

The general patriarchal notion is that prostitutes are socially redundant and immoral. However, the fact remains that the prostitutes are fulfilling an important social need. Hence, prostitution can be said to be a necessary evil. From the point of view of the woman in prostitution, they should get the feeling that they play an important social role. This is of some importance to a category of woman who has been marginalized socially and politically.

***************