Introduction

The development and explorations of women’s history was witnessed in the 1970s. The initial inclinations and aims in the theme of women’s history were to make women visible and this ambition involved changing of what had been accepted as history, by identifying new sources and reinterpreting other sources.¹ Women’s history later was augmented and included in gender history. The propagation of the feminist scholarship in several disciplines had initiated discussions on femininity, masculinity, sexuality as well as on the institution of prostitution. In the studies on early India, these topics became concurrent from the 1980s onwards and scholars have made an attempt to look into the issues related to the institution of prostitution. Prostitution in early India was an established institution, although both the genders involved with it incurred contempt from the society on moral grounds. Pertaining to gender and sexuality within the institution, there is scope to move beyond the general or popular perception of the organisation. In general the institution of prostitution and the courtesan tradition are not considered on separate footing.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the courtesan as “a prostitute, especially one with wealthy or noble clients”.² The term courtesan can be defined simply as a prostitute, but that equation is simply misleading as the world of the courtesan is far removed from that of a brothel whore or a common streetwalker. Etymologically, the English term courtesan, like the French courtisane, derives from the feminine form of the Italian word cortigiano. Strictly defined, it means a woman

who frequents a court and who, like a courtier, is well dressed, well mannered, and skilled in diplomatic insincerity. The courtesan tradition is also roughly defined as ‘the social phenomenon whereby women engage in relatively exclusive exchanges of artistic graces, elevated conversation, and sexual favours with male patrons’. The gaṇīkā or the ‘courtesan de luxe’ is the most prominent female personality of the urban centres as represented in the early Indian literature. Romila Thapar has defined the gaṇīkās as women who were not required to maintain the boundaries of caste and as women who could deny the centrality of procreation, not observe monogamy and have an independent income and could oppose patriarchy as she was well connected to the royal court and urban rich. The term ‘gaṇīkā’ according to Srinivasan points to the additional way for attaining insight into the reasons for her prestige. Gaṇīkā is derived from the term gaṇa to which the feminine suffix ‘ikā’ is added. The meaning for gaṇa range from ‘group, troop’ etc. to ‘company, association, or corporation’.

The gaṇīkā was the cultural woman or rather the keeper of culture of the urban society and the association of the tradition of the gaṇīkās with various artistic activities had been a continuous process. The tradition that evolved in the urban society, mainly in the cities of early India, was a part of the elite culture. The institution of the gaṇīkās stood in contrast to the patriarchal norms and made her the women who was criticised severely and feared constantly. However, her beauty

7 Ibid.; also see, Monier Williams, Sanskrit-English Dictionary, Munshiram Manoharlal, Delhi, 1994, p. 343.
and skills also made them a woman of desire. An ambivalent attitude encapsulated around this category of women in early India.

Various changes occurred in early India during different historical periods and the second urbanisation was one of the phases that began in the middle Gangetic plains during mid-first millennium BCE. Besides other impacts, out of the transition, the shifting of values and cultural traits received great incentive with the growth of urbanisation and the society acquired a new material life pertaining it. The tradition of the gaṇikās was one of the institutions that evolved into significance with the growing urbanisation process and largely represented the social and cultural picture of the period up to the Gupta era. The tradition continued after the decay/transition/change of the urban centres, in the post-Gupta era and centuries up to around 1200 CE. These centuries witnessed considerable socio-economic changes and the institution of gaṇikās continued in coping with the historical phases. These socio-economic phases have been associated in the study to locate the role of the gaṇikās.

Statement of the Problem

The institution of prostitution in early India has been the theme of a few books and articles over the years. However the writers suggest a general trend when referring to gaṇikās and the works fails to dedifferentiate between the gaṇikās (accomplished courtesans) and veṣyas (common prostitutes). The thesis has made an attempt to understand the various structures of the tradition of the gaṇikās as depicted in the early Indian texts and art remains and identify the differences and hierarchy that existed within the tradition.

The available studies indicate that the institution of gaṇikās was an integral part of the urban society and culture. The issues surrounding the ‘public women’ continue to urge scholars to indulge in studies and debates on them. Apart from the royal women, it is only the gaṇikās who had received attention and had been mentioned in the early Indian literature, setting her apart from the kulastrī, the ideal women of the patriarchal society. The gaṇikās occupy a unique place in the whole range of Sanskrit literature highlighting the social and cultural climate of the period. But in most of the studies their contribution to cultural life is underestimated. Even though the growing number of studies on prostitution is making up for the years of neglect, the gaṇikā still has not been given adequate exposure in the works on socio-cultural history and gender relations. As the cultured woman of the town, the courtesans provide an interesting topic of study, which remain a desideratum and the present work is an attempt to fill this gap.

Review of Literature

A good number of historical studies are available on early India dealing with different aspects of society and culture. There are some particular works available on the institution of prostitution and sexual life in early India as well. These researches do not focus specifically on the institution of the gaṇikās, but are important enough to indicate the perspective and understanding of scholars on early India. An attempt has been made here to review the existing works on the subject which can be broadly categorized into three groups:

1. The first group is consisted of those works which mostly focus on conceptual issues. These works, though not having any direct bearing on the topic of
research, are essential to develop a conceptual framework and understanding of the subject.

2. Another group included general works on early Indian history which do not deal directly with the subject in particular but are equally important for an understanding of early Indian historical processes and changes therein.

3. The third group encompasses the available studies on the history of prostitution and sexual life represented in the literature and art traditions.

A substantial number of feminist works are available pertaining to changes in gender relations. Among the early works is Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex,* which talks about the unequal and underprivileged position of women in the society in comparison to men. Beauvoir’s opinion on prostitution is that a prostitute represents as a whole the types of feminine slavery.\(^9\) However the courtesans were considered as nearly equal to men economically and socially and had greater freedom among women. Sheila Rowbotham’s *Hidden From History,*\(^10\) holds the point that women have important role in the history and examines the part played by women in revolutions, political organisations and trade unions. Mary Beard’s work *Woman as a Force in History* is a study of the tradition that women were members of a subject sex throughout history and secondly the idea of subjection is tested by reference to historical realities – legal, religious, economic, social, intellectual, military, political, and moral or philosophical.\(^11\)

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Gerda Lerner’s *The Creation of Patriarchy*\(^\text{12}\) has been a pioneering work in the study of gender stratification of the society and analysis of the historical subordination of women. Lerner argues that the historical creation of patriarchy was laid on the foundation of the subordination of women. Lerner recognises the two widely accepted forms of prostitution—religious and commercial. She observes that commercial prostitution developed from enslavement of women and sexual regulation and class distinction among them. Among the other works are Ann Oakley’s *Sex, Gender and Society*\(^\text{13}\) and Laura Lee Downs’ *Writing Gender History*\(^\text{14}\) which trace the beginning of gender history through the expansion of women’s history and demonstrates the suggestion of historians about women and gender as well that gender identities were historical construction. On a similar course Sonya O. Rose in her work, *What is Gender History?*, has explored questions regarding sex/gender dichotomy, argued for the relationally formed and intersecting nature of race/ethnicity, class and gender and gender historian’s approach towards the topic of masculinity, its codes and cultural construct. Judith Butler has examined the consequences of the undoing of the normative concepts of gender and sexuality\(^\text{15}\) as well as the sense of problem in the indeterminacy of gender by reconsidering the status of women as the subject of feminism, sex/gender distinction, political construction of body, etc.\(^\text{16}\)

Looking further in the Indian context, are works such as Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid’s *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* which sheds light on issues of gender in the colonial societies, while looking at the class differentiated


\(^{13}\) Ann Oakley, *op. cit.*

\(^{14}\) Laura Lee Down, *op. cit.*


patriarchal system and the formation of public and private sphere in the society;\textsuperscript{17} Kumkum Roy’s \textit{The Power of Gender and the Gender of Power} is a major work on the reconstruction of histories of gender relations through study of institutions and processes, arraying from the household to urbanism and renunciatory tradition which is significant for the perception of early Indian history;\textsuperscript{18} and V. Geetha’s \textit{Patriarchy} looks at the different aspects of the society of India that is necessary to understand patriarchy in the diverse social and cultural context, the inherent relationship of kinship and caste system to the organisation and the persistence of the patriarchal power and authority in India and how patriarchy rather than being coercive, bewitches with social and cultural myths and rituals and involve the society in its working.\textsuperscript{19} Her work \textit{Gender} suggests that the gender is both a part of the world we live in, as well as a way of understanding the world.\textsuperscript{20} These works largely studies the approaches towards gender history and provides useful guidelines in the study of the \textit{ganikās} in the urban society and culture.

The works of historians such as R. C. Mazumdar,\textsuperscript{21} H. C. Raychaudhary,\textsuperscript{22} K. P. Jayaswal,\textsuperscript{23} provide a nationalistic impression of the social, economic, political and cultural situation on the area of this research. Though there is a lack of critical analysis in these works yet they are useful in providing empirical data on early India. In a broader context, the study in early India which serves as a paradigm for the

\textsuperscript{17} Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds.), \textit{Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History}, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1999.
\textsuperscript{18} Kumkum Roy, \textit{op. cit.}
\textsuperscript{19} V. Geetha, \textit{Theorising Feminism: Patriarchy}, Stree, Kolkata, 2009, p. 2.
subject area is the work of D.D. Kosambi\textsuperscript{24} that gives a socio-economic interpretation of the historical processes of the early historical period from the Marxist viewpoint. R.S. Sharma’s \textit{Urban Decay in India}\textsuperscript{25} studies the problems of urban history, the growth and decay of the urban centres in different regions and the consequences of the de-urbanisation. Sharma’s \textit{Perspective in Social and Economic History of Early India}\textsuperscript{26} traces the stages of social evolution and the class structure while giving information regarding references to women in the literature and surveys the major stages of the economy in early period. The \textit{Material Culture and Social Formation in Ancient India}\textsuperscript{27} has assessed the material milieu of the different periods in early India and its relation with the social formations of the time. \textit{A Cultural History of India},\textsuperscript{28} edited by A.L. Basham, has a collection of essays dealing with the early civilisations and culture and literary tradition along with art and architecture of early India. \textit{Gaṇikās} were mentioned in connection with the ruler and economy.\textsuperscript{29} Romila Thapar’s recent work \textit{The Past as Present: Forging Contemporary Identities through History}\textsuperscript{30} is largely a historical perspective on certain socio-political and religious debates on early India. And among the issues stressed upon, the topic of women in Indian past existed as well and reference has been made to the profession of the prostitutes and \textit{gaṇikās} and the link between the \textit{gaṇikās} and later institution of the \textit{devadāsīs}. B. D. Chattopadhyaya’s\textsuperscript{31} collection of essays sheds useful light on the

\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Idem}, \textit{Perspective in Social and Economic History of Early India}, Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi, 1983.
\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Idem}, \textit{Material Culture and Social Formations in Ancient India}, Macmillan, Delhi, 1983.
\textsuperscript{28} A.L. Basham, \textit{A Cultural History of India}, Oxford University Press, India, 1998.
\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 211.
\textsuperscript{31} B.D. Chattopadhyaya, \textit{op.cit.}, 1994.
urban centres and the changes in the urban milieu. Upinder Singh’s work is a new approach to the study of the early Indian history and is a vast work on the social, economic and political history of the period from Palaeolithic to early medieval India. Literary and archaeological sources are used from the gender perspective for the study. Xinru Liu has observed Buddhism and the urban cultural achievements of the Kuṣāna period by examining the material culture of the urban economy and its relation to the contradictory Buddhist theology and practices.

It is important to note however, that these works are no doubt helpful in historically tracing the development of the urban centres and the changes in socio-cultural conditions in early India where the institution of the gaṇikās flourished, yet the institution does not receive a direct reference in these works.

At the same time it is seen that the literature dealing entirely on prostitution in early India in general is inadequate, though a large number of work has included the theme while addressing issues on women. S.N. Sinha and N.K. Basu’s History of Prostitution in India, Vol. I look at prostitution chronologically from the vedic period to the age of Vātsyāyana looking at its causes and relation with wider aspects of social life. The works outlook of the prostitutes and the institution was that of a victim and a developing evil of the society respectively. Other works such as A. S. Altekar, in his Position of Women in Hindu Civilisation, describes the gaṇikās as the “custodians of fine arts, which had ceased to be cultivated elsewhere in society”. But Altekar made this remark in only one paragraph that did not contain any

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conclusive idea. He attempted to discuss position of women in Indian society but did not go further to analyse the issues related with it. In *Myth and Reality*, D.D. Kosambi describes the *gaṇikā* as someone who ‘derives from group wives’.  

He is of the view that prostitution arises as a consequence of the abolition of group marriages. He did not devote much attention to the subject and failed to make any distinction between a *gaṇikā* and a prostitute of common nature. I.B. Honer in her work puts the courtesans under women workers and gives an account of their work and payment on the basis of Buddhist sources. She wrote that the “profession was frankly permitted by the social code of the day and was more openly recognised” then. But these works were related either to the social history or to the study of prostitution and made no attempt to deal with the *gaṇikās* in particular.

The preliminary step to examine the subject and practice of the *gaṇikās* exclusively was undertaken by Ludwik Sternbach in his work *Text on Courtezans in Classical Sanskrit*. His work mainly is a collection of aphorisms, maxims and quotations from classical Sanskrit literature on *gaṇikā* tradition. In the work, the collection is subsequently grouped in accordance with various topics such as the courtesans’ passion for money, their general characteristics, obligations, household and love. However the text itself denotes that it is meant for Sanskrit scholars and not for popular use. The grouping of the aphorisms is problematic since the same aphorism can be viewed from different angles and classified under

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38 Ibid., p. 94.
40 Ibid., p. 4.
various topics. Yet Sternbach’s compilation proves valuable in examining the gaṇikā tradition.

Another early work entirely focused on the gaṇikās was Moti Chandra’s *The World of Courtesans*\(^1\), which explores the institution from the Vedic period to the early medieval times in various traditions from Sanskrit to Buddhists and Jaina. The book has a broad exposure to the ancient and early medieval literature dealing with prostitution and gaṇikā tradition as well. Provided, Chandra’s book furnishes a detailed account of the veśya and gaṇikā tradition and has been informative, but in the process fails to provide the distinction between the two. The author’s approach towards the tradition is more of description or rather narration of the texts than of investigation and though tries to look into the decline of the tradition in the medieval times but stopped short of examining the reason for the decline through the passage of time.

Nonetheless, Chandra’s work provided a standard for subsequent works, as in course of time, we find the work of Ajay Mitra Shastri, *India as seen in the Kuttanimata of Damodaragupta*\(^2\) who has done the study solely on the basis of the early medieval text *Kuṭṭanīmata of Dāmodaragupta*, a kāvya, which describes the counselling of an experienced bawd to a young courtesan, to glean out information on the society and culture of the period. Shastri in his book tries to look at the whole social, economic, political, cultural and religious condition of the period through the information provided in the book. No doubt most of the observations are centred on

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the *gaṇikās* and common prostitutes and also provide substantial information on their life, yet his work lacks the focus on the tradition.

An equally significant aspect of the tradition is seen in P. K. Gode’s\(^4\) article, which observes the association of paintings with the *gaṇikās*. He traces the importance and status attached to the profession of the *gaṇikās* during the early history of Indian culture and its deterioration in the medieval period relating it to the decline of artistic taste. Likewise H.C. Chakladar\(^5\) in his work explores various texts on courtesans and traces their position in the society.

With the augment of works on women’s history, feminist discourse started to crop up on the subject. In *Economic Rights of Ancient Indian Women* while examining the economic status of the women in ancient India, Sukumari Bhattacharji\(^6\) states that though the *gaṇikās* were quite wealthy, the *Arthaśāstra* claims that the property and portion of their earnings were the property of the state. Looking into the text of the *Arthaśāstra*, Suvira Jaiswal\(^7\) stressed on the institutionalised position of the higher class of prostitutes and also the legal status enjoyed by them. The work done by Sukumari Bhattacharji, *Prostitution in Ancient India*,\(^8\) is a conventional understanding of the institution of prostitution in ancient India and location of prostitution and the *gaṇikās* in the economic, social and political scenario. The work

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\(^5\) Haran Chandra Chakladar, *Social Life in Ancient India: Studies in Vatsyayana’s Kamasutra*, Bharatiya Publishing House, Delhi, 1976; Chakladar traces the position of the *gaṇikās*, and states that they receive the designation only after high intellectual attainments and pre-eminence in arts and receives a seat of honour in the assemblies of men.


was among the first feminist discourse on prostitution in early India, yet it provides a negative construction, focusing on the various sufferings and oppression bound with the ancient tradition. The approach has developed the notion of the courtesans or prostitutes as victims of social exploitation. However such view was questioned in the study of the institution of prostitution while examining female sexuality in the classical Sanskrit literature by Shalini Shah in *Love, Eroticism and Female Sexuality in Classical Sanskrit Literature*, where she studies the institution and its different categories in the context of patriarchal dominance. The work examines the veśavāsa, its matriarchy, strategies and ideals that contradicted the values of patriarchy. A brief survey of the gaṇikās, mainly from the cultural angle, is done in the work as well. Shah has also examined the socio-sexual norms of the veśavāsa household of the sex workers and the antahpura of the patriarchally regulated domestic spaces in the Sanskrit literature. The author, while examining the sex workers and the gaṇikā, does not differentiate between the two and looks at both the traditions under one single canopy. On similar grounds, Kavita Gaur has inquired into the distinctive roles of the wives and courtesans in the *Kāmasūtra* and have re-examined the conventional notion of the dichotomy portrayed in the text.

At the same time, a more focused work on the organisation of the gaṇikās was carried on by Kumkum Roy in the article, *Re-presenting the Courtesanal Tradition*, who looks into the tradition through different genres of literature and tries to locate the gaṇikās in the economic sphere and the contemporary socio-political context. The

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48 Shalini Shah, *op. cit.*


work illustrates the diversity in conceptualisation of the institution of the *gaṇikās* through the textual tradition. Monica Saxena\textsuperscript{52} brings out a brief study of the *gaṇikā* as a public woman and explores the ironies and paradoxes that exist in the perception regarding the class of *gaṇikā* and that of prostitution and discusses the issues regarding the term *gaṇikā* and her socio-economic status.

Moving on to Serenity Young\textsuperscript{53}, who devotes considerable space to the *gaṇikās* in her work, uses Buddhist literary source for examining the *gaṇikās* and have concentrated on *Jātakas*, *Ambapālī* and *Maṇimēkhalai*, covering both northern and southern India in the discussion. On similar grounds, Doris M. Srinivasan’s *Royalty Courtesans and God’s Mortal Wives: Keepers of Culture in Pre-Colonial India*\textsuperscript{54} examines the courtesan and wife dichotomy in the pre-colonial Indian society and represents the power of the *gaṇikās* and the sources through which it is derived. Srinivasan’s essay surveys diverse literary tradition of early India, including literature from south India and touches the topic of *devadāsīs* as well. The studies exploration into diverse arena gives a new outlook to the culture of the *gaṇikās*.

A considerable amount of space is given to the *gaṇikās* by Shonaleeka Kaul in her works where she for the most part concentrates on the urban society of early India in the *kāvyas* of the Sanskrit literary tradition. In her work *Imagining the Urban: Sanskrit and the City in Early India*,\textsuperscript{55} observes the location of the *gaṇikā* quarters in the cities and represents her as one of the professional characters that exemplify

\textsuperscript{52} Monica Saxena, ‘*Ganikas in Early India: Its Genesis and Dimensions*’, *Social Scientist*, vol. 34, No. 11/12, 2006, pp. 2-17.


\textsuperscript{54} Doris M. Srinivasan, ‘Royalty Courtesans and God’s Mortal Wives: Keepers of Culture in Pre-Colonial India’, in Martha Feldman and Bonnie Gordon (eds.), *op. cit*.

\textsuperscript{55} Shonaleeka Kaul, *Imagining the Urban: Sanskrit and the City in Early India*, Permanent Black, Ranikhet, 2010.
the urban world. The articles *Women About Town: An Exploration of the Sanskrit Kāvya Tradition*\(^{56}\) and *Pleasure and Culture: Reading Urban Behaviour through Kāvya Archetypes*\(^{57}\) as well observes the *gaṇikās* as one the archetypes represented in the *kāvya* literature along with other two, the *kulastrī* and the *nāgaraka*. Fritz Blackwell’s\(^{58}\) article too focuses on the two basic roles or types in the literary tradition, the mother and the courtesan (*gaṇikā*) and discusses on their *svadharma* and the ambivalent attitude towards the *gaṇikās*.

Apart from examining the tradition in the extant literature, there has been an attempt to review the tradition in the context of Indian art. Amongst the earliest works in the art of early India are the works of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Introduction to Indian Art* and *History of Indian and Indonesian Art*, where the author discusses the changes in form of Indian art in different periods from Indo-Sumerian, Mauryan, Gupta, medieval sculpture to Rajput paintings.\(^{59}\) In his thought there were two paradigms of the work of art in early India, viz. the religious icon and the useful object. He has often sniped, on one hand, works of “fine” arts that are merely pleasurable to look at, but lack higher meaning, and, on the other, useful objects that are merely functional, without qualities that touch one as one puts the objects to use.\(^{60}\) Susan Huntington is another scholar who has done an extensive survey of the Indian art encompassing pre-historic times to the medieval times, though concentrating more


\(^{57}\) *Idem*, ‘Pleasure and Culture: Reading Urban Behaviour through Kāvya Archetypes’, in Upinder Singh and Nayanjot Lahiri (eds.), *op. cit*.


on the ancient and covering an exhaustive area of northern and southern India in her work, *The Art of Ancient India: Hindu, Buddhist, Jain*. Apart from such comprehensive study, are the works of scholars like Stella Kramrisch, who looks at the early Indian tradition of art by surveying the sculptures, paintings and architecture in the *Art of India*.

The other works that have examined the art of India are of scholars such as Niharrajan Ray\textsuperscript{61} and Swarajya Prakash Gupta\textsuperscript{62} who has focused on the study of Maurya and post-Maurya art; Buddhist art also has been the theme of several works such as that of Albert Grunwedel,\textsuperscript{63} Amita Ray,\textsuperscript{64} Niharrajan Ray,\textsuperscript{65} and Vidya Dehejia.\textsuperscript{66} Among the recent works is Partha Mitter’s *Indian Art* which covers the art of India from the Buddhist art to the contemporary scene after independence, highlights the new perspective on the art of India. M. L. Varadpande’s study, *Woman in Indian Sculpture*, is on the representation of women in the sculptures of India from the era of Indus to the medieval period and has stressed the image of the Indian women as icon of fertility, bounty and fruition.\textsuperscript{67} Vidya Dehejiya’s *Representing the Body: Gender Issues in Indian Art*, is a compilation of works dealing with the issues such as spectatorship and representation of the female figure and construction of

\textsuperscript{63} Jas Burgess, *Buddhist Art in India, Translated from the 'Handbuch' of Prof. Albert Grunwedel by A. C. Gibson*, Bernard Quaritch, London, 1901.
gender in Indian art.\textsuperscript{68} \textit{Indian Art History: Changing Perspective}, an edited volume by Parul Pandya Dhar, is another compilation of works that introduces new perspectives including gender into the early Indian art.\textsuperscript{69} Vinay Kumar Rao’s \textit{Women in Buddhist Art} have explored the various representations, from the perspective of divinity and nature, expressions of feminine desires, daily life, dress and ornaments, of women in Indian art.\textsuperscript{70}

The earliest reference to a \textit{gaṇikā} representation in Indian art is in the report of V. S. Agarwal in the \textit{Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art}\textsuperscript{71} of a bacchanalian scene which has been later interpreted as that of a drunken \textit{gaṇikā} by C. Sivaramamurti. In the work \textit{Indian Sculpture}, where the sculptors of early India is discussed with tracing of the Indian art from Harappan, Rāṣṭraṅga, Pāla and Sena to Vijayanagara, C. Sivaramamurti identifies the bacchanalian art as well as its obverse scene to be centred around a \textit{gaṇikā}. Yet the works give mere reference to or identifies with the \textit{gaṇikās} without any discussion on the scene or the tradition.

In this realm, Devangana Desai’s work, \textit{Erotic Sculpture of India: A Socio-Cultural Study}, makes a preliminary attempt to study the subject in detail. She pointed out the representations of \textit{gaṇikās} in the art of early India and on this basis she tries to understand the socio-cultural milieu in which the \textit{gaṇikā} tradition flourished.\textsuperscript{72}

\textsuperscript{69} Parul Pandya Dhar (ed.), \textit{Indian Art History: Changing Perspective}, D. K. Printworld Ltd., New Delhi, 2011.
\textsuperscript{70} Vinay Kumar Rao, \textit{Women in Buddhist Art}, Agam Kala Prakashan, Delhi, 2012.
Similarly, in a much later work, Doris M. Srinivasan\textsuperscript{73} survey the theme where inferences derived from ancient Indian art and architecture is used along with the literary sources. However, her conclusions were largely based on the case study of the female sculpture from Didarganj of the Mauryan period. Vidya Dehejia’s *The Body Adorned* has also referred to the topic of *gaṇikā*, while dealing with the idealised female body and ornaments in the Indian sculpture. Yet these works have provided very insufficient reference to the *gaṇikā* tradition in early India.

Seema Bawa has done the very recent study on gender and art and the work, *Gods, Men and Women: Gender and Sexuality in Early Indian Art*, also has been very systematically documented the sculptural evidence of the *gaṇikā* representations in early Indian art. Though the work deals with the *gaṇikā* representations in detail, it only takes two representations of two famous *gaṇikās* for the study; and falls short to give other plausible representations which have been suggested by other scholars.

The above review of literature has revealed that the works done on the institution of prostitution and the tradition of the *gaṇikās* have clubbed together both without any differentiation. Moreover the works concentrating on the *gaṇikās* have either restricted themselves to a very limited time frame or particular texts to examine the tradition. The sources which have been studied were either Pali or Sanskrit texts in an alternative manner but not in a comparative way. Art reports are also used in a very limited manner in the discussions on the *gaṇikās*. Thus none of the available works attempt to deal with the tradition of *gaṇikās* by comparing the sources available in different genres as well as the art reports. Reinterpretation of the sources to trace the tradition also remained a desired area. Therefore the present study tries to fill the gap.

by using the different genre of the available sources to trace the tradition and the changes therein.

**Objective of the study**

The main objective of the work is twofold with reference to the urban establishment in early India. First is to examine the changing views about the institution of the *gaṇikās* with the passage of time — placing it in a larger social and cultural framework in order to look at the various environments/conditions that facilitated the increasing contempt for the institution in early Indian society. The second aim is to analyse the household of the *gaṇikās* as compared to the common and the royal household in terms of the status of women, gender roles, socio-economic independence of the women members, etc.

**Methodology and Data**

The work uses the methodology of gender history to study the tradition of the *gaṇikās*. Literary and art sources relating to the subject has been identified and explored to look at the categories of perceptions relating to the tradition/institution. The work has been carried out extensively on the basis of the primary sources available in the form of Sanskrit and Pali texts divided into different genres like *natya*, *kathā* and *śāstra*. In addition to this, a wide range of secondary sources have also been utilized for reaching the conclusion. Reports on art remains have been looked into. Thus the work has made use of variety of sources to draw a broader perspective on the tradition of the *gaṇikās*.
Organisation of Chapters

The study has been organised into the following chapters:

Chapter 1: Introduction

The chapter introduces the theme and the background of the entire work. The subject matter has been introduced with a discussion on the scholarship that evolved on gender history and the institution of prostitution followed by the discussion on the gaṇikās. The chapter attempts to derive a historical definition of the term gaṇikā in order to delineate the boundary with the common sex workers. Apart from the gaṇikās, the chapter gives a brief discussion on the contemporaries of the gaṇikās – the “hetaira”, literally meaning ‘female companion’ in Greek, were one of a class of professional independent courtesan in ancient Greece; and the geisha of Japan who originated in the pleasure quarters and were defined as ‘entertainers’ or ‘artists’. There is also a discussion on other analogous female portrayals such as – the veṣyā or rupājīvā, who were sex workers with beauty but without any talents, the devadāsī, often defined as the temple dancer or the women dedicated to the temple or servants of god and the apśaras, who were the mythical nymphs or semi-celestial beings. Discussions on the socio-cultural history and the changes that occurred in early India during different historical periods have been carried out to develop the views and arguments. And this has been detailed through an in-depth review and critique of existing literature along with the primary sources.

Chapter 2: Gaṇikā Tradition as Reflected in Historical Literature

This chapter has made an endeavour to chronologically trace the tradition of the gaṇikās in the early Indian literature together with the institution of prostitution in
order to get a distinct perception of the gaṇikās. The expressions used to define the women who did not belong to the patriarchal set up and the promiscuous women were very vague. One of the earliest references to this gaṇikā culture is in the Buddhist literature of the appointment of gaṇikā Ambapālī, as a ganabhoga, who found fame for her beauty and grace in the city of Vaishālī. The tradition found reference to in several other texts such as the Arthaśāstra which gives reference to the gaṇikās as recognised and controlled by the state and the Kāmasūtra that provides the picture of an established institute of the gaṇikās in the urban society, mainly in the upper class of the society. The gaṇikās then find a very vivid reference in the kavya literature. The tradition which started with urbanisation in the mid- Ganga valley, had survived after the decline of the urban centres in the post-Gupta era probably with the help of the royal patronage received because instead of getting references for the institution in whole northern India, the sources revealed certain pockets like Kaśmīr, Pāṭaliputra, Vāranasi, and Ujjayinī where gaṇikā tradition was continuing and flourishing.

The chapter also gives a discussion on the clientele as well as on the dharma of the gaṇikā. The examination of the gaṇikā’s duties, practices and roles in many ways have portrayed that the world of the gaṇikās had regulations that were diverse from the usual patriarchal norms. The men mainly belonging to the wealthy and upper section of the society were their pleasure companions as well as the clientele who were the source of wealth. The gaṇikās accompanied them to the goṣṭhīs, pleasure gardens and picnics, theatrical spectacles and various sports. This relationship demonstrates a part of elite lifestyle in the urban society of the early historical period as well as in the early medieval cities, especially in case of the gaṇikās, who were not

74 The texts are- Mrcchkaṭika, Chaturbhāṇi, Daśakumārācarita, Kuṭṭanīmata, Samayamāṭrākā and Śrīgāramaṇjarīkathā, , Kathāsaritsāgara, Rājataranāṇī.
confined to the pleasure quarters. The presentations in the texts give an opportunity to explore the gendered identity and status involving the gaṇikās and the clientele in the urban society. While examining the gaṇikā-client relationship, the gaṇikā’s behaviour towards her client has always been of concern. Issues regarding the transactions and service by the gaṇikās with the clients were taken to court or assemblies; and in the Arthaśāstra there were prescriptions of fines and punishments. The chapter also discusses different phases through which the tradition survived till the late early medieval period and drew in diverse attitude towards the tradition developing in various historical period.

**Chapter 3: Gaṇikā Tradition as Reflected in Indian Art**

This chapter traces the gaṇikā tradition in the representations of the early Indian art. Beginning with the tracing of the evolvement of early Indian artistic tradition on the backdrop of the different socio-cultural as well as political phases, the chapter focuses on the visual representation of the body in sculptures. The sculptures are generally divided into two categories, viz. the free-standing sculpture in which the figure exists independently in three-dimensional volume and there is also relief sculpture in which figures are carved against a background. Concentrating on the depiction of the feminine beauty in sculpture, the semi-divine yakṣinī and the erotic motifs of the mithuna representations where woman as wives and female partners were depicted, has been looked into. The pillars and crossbars portray yakṣinīs dressed in most sumptuous costumes of the second century BCE. One of the earliest and most prominent stone sculptures in India is a life-size female image from

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Dīdārgaṇj, carved from sandstone and polished to a glossy tan finish which has been assigned to the second century BCE. It is fascinating to note that this female chowri-bearer has been identified by the scholars as a yakṣīni as well as a gaṇikā. The depiction of wives/female partners forming one half of divine couples with overtones of fertility; devotee couples; mithunas denoting propitious/apotropaic elements; or erotic mithunas connected with fertility and sexuality. The sculptural evidence of the gaṇikā representation has come through a series of reliefs identified with the gaṇikā Vasantasenā, the protagonist of the plays Daridra Cārudatta and Mrćchakaṭika and narrative friezes depicting the gaṇikā Āmrapālī, making donation of the mango grove to the Buddhist saṅgha. The most important of the gaṇikā Vasantasenā series of relief is the Maholi panel that receives interpretations from various scholars.

Chapter 4: Household and Socio-Economic Status of the Gaṇikās

This chapter examines the locality and the residence of the gaṇikās as well as the organisation of the establishment with certain comparisons with the elite patriarchal household and the royal household. The tradition of the gaṇikās had a separate form of establishment in the society which was in variance with the other two forms of patriarchal set up and though the functioning of the establishment evolved with time, its dissimilarity with the patriarchal household was continuous in all the phases of early Indian history. The residential division of the inner and outer quarters in the common and royal dwellings that the texts suggested expected the family

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77 Vidya Dehejia, The Body Adorned, pp. 25-26; G.S. Bhadouria, Women in Indian Art, Agam Kala Prakashan, Delhi, 1995, p. 32; Moti Chandra, op. cit., p. 12; Doris M. Srinivasan, op.cit., p. 351; Niharranjan Ray, Maurya and Post-Maurya Art, p. 40; it is seen that almost all the works on Indian art history has a description of this female image.

78 Seema Bawa, Gods, Men and Women: Gender and Sexuality in Early Indian Art, Perspective in Indian Art and Archaeology, No. 12, D.K. Printworld, New Delhi, 2013, p. v.
women to be confined to the inner apartments and the male members to be a part of
both the inner and the outer, whereas in the *ganikā* residence the women were the
ones that operated and entertained the men in the outer space of the quarters. The
residential location of the *ganikā* houses have been represented more explicitly in the
early medieval *kāvyas*, and the Sanskrit and the Pāli texts dating up to the Gupta
period did not give a very clear reference to it. With the decline of the urban centres
the *ganikā* and the *veśyā* residences were found clustered in a specific part of the city.
The establishment of the *ganikās* was a form where the authority and economic power
at all times rested on the female members; though the household had not altogether
been devoid of male members, who acted as helpers in the establishment and assisted
the *ganikās* in their professional requirements. There were also representations of the
idle male members such as the brother of the *ganikā* within the household. The
reference to the father figure has been negligible. Though an indication is made to the
existence of a relationship with the father, their responsibility towards the *ganikā* has
not been highlighted like that of the mother. The study has noticed that there was a
shift in the position of the *ganikās* from an individual authoritative figure in her
occupation to that of the one depending on the mother for counselling and
management of the profession. The crucial role of the mother has been emphasised in
the texts from the Gupta period onwards. Along with the assistance provided by the
mother, the male associates and female messengers, the *ganikās* were helped by
female attendants, who were a constant factor in the *ganikā* household from the
earliest reference. The depictions of the *ganikā* household had focused on the cultural,
economic and pleasure activities as well as the various customs which were related to
the professional life of the *ganikās*.  

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Chapter 5: Some Famous Gaṇikās

This chapter has taken up the study of some of the significant portrayal of the gaṇikās in the textual tradition of Pāli and Sanskrit. These gaṇikās were portrayed in the epitome of their professional, social and cultural life of the period. This examination of the various illustrations helps to look beyond one stereotyped image of the gaṇikās. Among the prominent illustrations that are discussed is Ambapālī, a renowned nagarvadhu of Vaiśāli. She represented the ideal figure of a gaṇikā and also provides the earliest reference of the flourishing gaṇikā tradition in early India. Another well-known model of the gaṇikā tradition was the character of Vasantasenā portrayed in the famous plays, Mrčchakaṭīka attributed to King Śūdraka and Daridra Cārudatta written by Bhasa. The character of Vasantasenā exemplifies the cultured gaṇikā of the city who was respected as a woman of dignity and fortitude. Other than these two figures the study discusses some more portrayals of gaṇikās as depicted in the other texts.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The concluding chapter assess the discussion done on the gaṇikās as reflected in the literary and the artistic traditions ranging from the mid-first millennium BCE to the twelfth century CE. The major findings of this research have been summed up as under:

1. A notable element is the use of the terminology. In the early texts terms like gaṇikā, veśyā, rupājīvā and puṁśchalī had been used to differentiate between their status and work but the gaṇikās were referred together with the common sex workers without much differentiation or hierarchy in their position in the early medieval texts and later on. The identity which the gaṇikās, like Ambapālī and Vasantasenā, had
carved out reflected the epitome of the tradition and even the reference to their profession as a curse did not demean their status. The tradition that began in the urban centres in the mid first millennium BCE later was integrated with the institution of prostitution/sex workers not only in terminology but also socially.

2. The dharma of the gaṇikā was usually diverse from the rest of the society. There were shifts as noticed during the analysis of the sources. Earlier there was significance given to the dedicated service of the gaṇikās without any deception. Later texts suggest that the dharma of gaṇikā was to make profit with every possible means including deception. And it was this importance given to profit which attracted contempt from the society or from the authors of the texts. To what extent this difference in the contempt of the dharma was overall applicable in the society is questionable as there is only the male perspective available.

3. The client/lover and gaṇikā relationship at all the time was not about the deception on the part of the gaṇikā and her mother as generally portrayed and prescribed as well as represented as counsel in the discussions on the gaṇikā or their dharma as discussed above. There are also references to the use of violence on the gaṇikās and the bawd by the paramours/clients as retaliation for their rejection. And the act of violence was not represented as an act of disdain and rather received clarification that such an act was an aftermath of the behaviour of the gaṇikā or her mother and valorised in most of the representations. The anxiousness towards the institution is not only visible in the use of degrading words while referring to the public woman as well as the mother, but also in the representation of the use of violence against the women involved in the tradition.
4. Among the clientele of the gaṇikās, the nāgarakas were the most elevated and cultured of them belonging to the urban centres. However it is important to note that there was a change in the socio-economic pattern towards the feudal-aristocratic way of life from the post-Gupta period and there was a gradual decline in the nāgaraka culture. The feudal tendencies that were encouraged by the political and administrative developments in the Gupta period gathered considerable momentum which led to the military and landed aristocracy of sāmantas, bhaṭṭaputras, and rājaputras assumed greater prominence than the nāgaraka class in the cultural life.79 The literature which reflects on this category of clientele portrays them as the cultured men, resembling the nāgaraka stature and it was to equate the client and the gaṇikā on the economic level and largely on the cultural achievements.

5. In the art of early India the ornamented and decorated representations of the female figurines are mostly inspired by the living style of the gaṇikās. The representations of the female figures required some models/replicas which, in the urban and royal culture, were present in the form of gaṇikās who were the public women and could be reproduced in the sculptures. The voluptuous female figurines with sensuous body, splendid ornaments, draperies and posture that were represented in the early Indian art had to be of the gaṇikās, as patriarchal norms could not have favoured the representation of queens or wives in such a sensuous way.

6. While reviewing the gaṇikā residence and its location, it is seen that there is the separation of the gaṇikā and veśyā residences in a particular part of the city mainly from the post-Gupta period. Such demarcation or separation of the gaṇikā

quarters has not been referred to in either the Buddhist texts or the other text from the early Christian era.

7. An assessment of the textual references of the gaṇikā household along with the elite household and the royal household illustrate the prominence given to pleasure in all the forms of dwellings. The common features of the settings of the households were the urban space, to which pleasure was integrally related. It should be also noted that almost all the residential structures that figure prominently in the literature were the palatial buildings of the wealthiest section of the city and always consisted of pleasure quarters in some form. In the gaṇikā residence, these pleasure quarters were their professional domain where the clients were entertained.

7. The patākā- veśya or flag-prostitute referred to in the Pādatāḍitaka, who resided in creeper cottages in the forest at the outskirts of the city and charged minimal fees, were the women workers that presented the socio-economic gradation among the class of prostitutes. The representation of the flag-prostitutes gives an idea of a certain division in the residential location of a category of the sex workers meant for lower groups like the mlecchas and the caṇḍālās. However this is a solitary reference of the location of this category of sex workers encountered only in the Chaturbhāṇi.

8. The authority figure that is portrayed in the gaṇikā tradition or more specifically in the gaṇikā household has been in variance in the different phases of early India. The gaṇikā who is portrayed as the independent and authoritative figure in her professional life and even of the household, is later represented as the one who is under the supervision of the mother figure. Evidences beginning from the Gupta era have placed the mother as the supervisor of the household. The role of the gaṇikā in
the household is important as the acquirer and disburser of resources but the mother of
the house was responsible for providing the environment and counselling for a smooth
functioning of the profession. The indispensable role played by the mother has been
highlighted in various texts of the early medieval period such as the Mrccchakaṭika,
Chaturbhāni, Daśakumāracarita, Kuṭṭanīmata, Samayamāṭrkā and Śṛṅgāramañjarīkathā.

9. The functions of the mother figure variegated in the representations. The
mātā / kuṭṭanī acted as a supervisor of the household and the gaṇikā in a few
representations. The mother was responsible for the grooming and training of the
gaṇikās since childhood. As Shalini Shah has observed the mother was either a
biological mother or an adopted one but necessary to run the business. In the case of
the adopted mother, she either served as the supervisor and trainer of a beginner
gaṇikā in the household or only as a counsellor when the gaṇikā needed advice on
work. It used to be an experienced gaṇikā of her time who later resorted to become
the mātā / kuṭṭanī of a gaṇikā. Though in the Buddhist texts the mother of the gaṇikā
is merely mentioned and not shown as supervising or counselling the gaṇikā. The
mother becoming a requisite part of the gaṇikā tradition came gradually with their
portrayal in the Kāmasūtra and the Mrccchakaṭika in a minor role compared to the
position of the manager, counsellor and maintainer of peace in the gaṇikā household.
It is interesting to note that in the Samayamāṭrkā the gaṇikā adopts a new mother after
the demise of her old mother as she was without a counsellor and supervisor for her
establishment which led to disorder in her house and turned into a common prostitute
house becoming an abode of vagabonds.
10. For the functioning of the household of the gaṇikā, the female attendants as a part of household were constant in all phases. But from the early Christian era, the gaṇikā had been represented as being assisted by the mother, viṭa and female go-betweens (dūṭī).

Thus, the perception of the gaṇikās, their role in the social ethos and cultural achievements, has been demonstrated in various metaphors and statements. As represented in the textual tradition, in terms of social and cultural identity, the gaṇikās claimed an identity that was independent. The role and position of the gaṇikās were under constant evolution with the socio-cultural evolvement during the different phases between the beginning of the early historical and the end of the early medieval as represented in the literature. The tradition evolved, transformed and adjusted with the changing socio-cultural as well as the political and economic process.