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For being the ‘jewel’ of the women–*Gaṇikās* in the ancient Indian society

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Abstract

For a long time it is believed that though brahmanical society's attitude towards public women was not praiseworthy but surprisingly, *Gaṇikās*, who were the finest among the public women, acquired a respected place in ancient Indian society. Numerous textual references of *Gaṇikās*, their glories, state's concern for their well-being help to create this illusion.

But if we read between the lines we can notice that though *Gaṇikās* got political security from the king, she lost the right over her own body to him. They were considered as *Strī-Ratna* but were prescribed to denounce all human emotions. Contemporary texts, which show concern for them, do not hesitate to testify that she is a commodity so whoever can afford her, can have her. She could not build a relationship which was more than economical and physical. True love had no place in her life. According to *Kāmasūtra*, *Kuṭṭanīmata* after making her lover impoverished, she should abandon him. State allowed her to lead a life in luxury (only for their life time) but prescribed her to live outside the boundary of the town or to the extreme south of the town as it represented the presence of *Yam*, the God of death. Brahmanical social norms did not allow 'decent' people to accept food from a *Gaṇikā*. Thus in return of the pride for being praised by learned men, *Gaṇikās* had to trade their soul and were reduced to some beautiful, rare, costly but inanimate 'jewels' from human beings.

Key Words: Ancient, Indian, *Gaṇikā*, Women, Prostitution, Patriarchy, Literature, Discrimination.

'*Gaṇikās* of ancient India' is one of those exotic subjects which keep attracting the attention of poets, chroniclers, historians of all time. *Gaṇikās* or Courtesans were the mistress of youth, were the connoisseur of refined pleasure and culture for the *nāgarakas* of flourishing towns of ancient India. Their beauty, their talents, their lifestyles and life-stories became the subject of many literatures, of much historical research but still it seems that there are many aspects of their existence which remain hidden and unspoken. A story described in the *Vinayavastu* of the *Mūlasarvāstivāda* tries to focus on the life of *Āmrāpālī* or *Ambāpālīkā*, a famous *Gaṇikā* of *Vaisālī* who was considered an epitome of beauty and talents. *Āmrāpālī* was the adopted daughter of *Mahānāma*, a rich citizen of *Vaisālī*. *Āmrāpālī*'s beauty and her incredible personality attracted many men including princes towards her. Her father brought the matter to the assembly of the *Lichchavi Gaṇa* and according to the order of the assembly *Āmrāpālī* appeared before them. Being awestruck by her beauty and talents assembly decided that she is a '*Strī-Ratna*' (a jewel of a woman) so she must not get married with anyone but to be enjoyed by the *Gaṇa*. Thus, besides telling the event of how *Āmrāpālī* became

the '*Nagarbadhū*' of *Vaisālī*, the story also tries to trace the reason behind the name '*Ganikā*'. So according to the above mentioned text, which certainly is reflecting the viewpoint of the contemporary society, *Gaṇikā* is a female, associated with, or, acting for a governing group (*Gaṇa*), or, enjoyed by the *Gaṇa* (Srinivasan, 2005: 347).

Firstly, one should remember that a *Gaṇikā* was not a mere prostitute. She was “proficient in the arts, winsome in her ways, and endowed with exceptional beauty and tastes” (ibid: 345). May be that’s why despite being a believer of patriarchy ancient India gave *Gaṇikās* a respectable place in the society. Historians like Moti Chandra stated that “a *Gaṇikā*’s position was respected by the king to such an extent that she was considered a jewel of his capital”(Chandra, 1973: 33). Monica Saxena in her article named “*Ganikas* in Early India : It’s genesis and dimension” says “Clearly *Apsaras*, *Ganikas*, *Veshyas* and *Devadasis*...have a place and time in which their function is required, highly appreciated and in its context highly respected.”(Saxena, 2006: 13-14). Society gave her epithets like '*Nagar-Sobhānī*' or '*Nagar-Maṇḍanā*' which means, someone who makes the city look beautiful. According to a Jain literature *Gaṇikās* were the pride of a kingdom so much so that the presence of *Āmrāpālī* in *Vaisālī* made *Samrāt Bimbisāra*, the king of Magadha jealous. He wished to have someone superior to her in his capital. Later *Sālavatī* took that place. In those days, every big city had a chief Courtesan like – *Āmrāpālī* of *Vaisālī*, *Sālavatī* of *Rājagṛha*, *Vāsavaduttā* of *Mathurā* etc. A Jaina text *Nāyādhammakahāo* mentions the name of *Devaduttā* who was a well-known Courtesan of *Ujjainī*. *Dhammapāda Commentary* mentions the name of *Sirimā* as a beautiful *Gaṇikā* of *Rājagṛha*. These Courtesans had huge wealth in their possession. *Vinayapīṭaka* states that *Āmrāpālī* charged five hundred gold coins for one day. *Vāsavadattā* of *Mathurā* demanded five hundred *purāṇasāta* coins (probably made of gold) per nights. *Sālavatī* of *Rājagṛha* received thousand *kārṣāpaṇas* or *Paṇas* (coins made of silver) for one night. The city of *Kāshī* had a Courtesan whose charge per night amounted to the half of the revenue of *Kāshī*. Very few clients could afford her. At last she had to cut down her price in half and became known as the name of *Ardha-Kāshī* (Chandra, 1973: 28). *Gyāta-Dharmakathā*, a Jaina text prescribes that a courtesan with faultless body and complete attainment could demand thousand *kārṣāpaṇas* per night (Bhattacharji, 1987: 38). *Mṛcchakaṭīka*, a drama by *Sūdraka*, written possibly between 300-600 C.E, shows that the king’s brother-in-law (*Sakāra*) send ten thousand gold coins and ornaments in advance to lure *Vasantasenā*, the chief Courtesan of *Ujjainī*. *Arthasāstra*, a text on Indian polity, composed perhaps in the first or second century A.D but contains information that could be traced to third century B.C, says that royal treasury paid Courtesans a monthly salary of thousand *kārṣāpaṇas*. Thus *Gaṇikās* of ancient India used to amass a huge fortune and led a luxurious life. *Vasantasenā*, the heroine of the *Mṛcchakaṭīka*, lived in a mansion preceded by eight courts. *Sāmā*, a *Gaṇikā* of *Kāshī* had five hundred *dāsīs*. Another mark of their immeasurable wealth was the number of donations they made. “Besides giving alms of cooked meals to beggars and religious mendicants, *Ganikas* constructed temples, gardens and provided for the worship of deities”(Upadhyaya, 1974: 224). They even paid tax to the state. *Vinayapīṭaka* says by charging five hundred gold coins per night *Āmrāpālī* made her city *Vaisālī* very rich. *Nammayāsundarīkathā*, a text of twelfth century, opines that state received 25% to 30% of their income.

Now it can be asked that what attracted so many men, most importantly, rich and highly accomplished men including kings to those *Gaṇikās*? Was it their timeless beauty only? No. *Kāmasūtra*, most informative text on Courtesans and prostitutes, written between early Christian era and 4th-5th century B.C, advises the *Gaṇikās* to learn sixty four arts. A Jaina text of sixth century A.D named *Bṛhatkalpa* presents a daunting list of seventy two arts for Courtesans. Some of the

important accomplishments mentioned in these lists are singing, dancing, playing musical instruments, drawing, decorating, writing, trimming, along with ways to show respect and to give compliments to others, rules of society, architecture, mineralogy, chemistry, carpentry, magic etc. According to *Arthasāstra*, state bears the cost of the education of the *Gaṇikās*. Among all public women who successfully attained mastery over all those arts and met all other requirements was conferred the title of 'Gaṇikā' by *Gaṇikādhyakṣa*, a government official. All these accomplishments of a *Gaṇikā* attracted clients with refined taste and of high ranks. *Kāmasūtra* states that *Gaṇikā* received a seat of honor in the assembly of men. She was always respected by the king and was praised by learned men. In short, she became an object of universal regard. According to *Arthasāstra* her main duty was to serve the king directly. In return she got political security and financial freedom. Not only that, *Milindapañha* describes a story which demonstrates that society was ready to give a Courtesan the place, only the most virtuous person of the society could demand, if she was dutiful and honest in playing her intended role in society. The story goes like this, once, king *Asōka* asked his subjects to perform an act of truth. No one dared to perform, as it required someone who did all his/her duties of life with utmost care and honesty, except *Bindumatī*, a Courtesan. She made the tides of Ganges to flow back to upstream. *Asōka* was surprised and asked the *Gaṇikā* that how she made that miracle happen. She replied that she served all her clients with an unbiased mentality and never made herself feel any emotional attachment with anyone of them. Thus, the king, who is the representative of the state, accepted a Courtesan as the most virtuous person in his kingdom. Historian Doris Meth Srinivasan in his article 'The Mauryan *Gaṇikā* from *Dīdārgaṅj*(*Pāṭaliputra*)' analyses a female statue found from *Dīdārgaṅj*, which was believed to be the earliest known life size female figure, and comes into the decision that the statue represents a royal *Gaṇikā* (Srinivasan, 2005: 351) and concludes that this statue indicates the importance of *Gaṇikās* in the ancient society.

Though after looking at all those textual evidences, at first it seems that there should not be any doubt regarding the fact that society look up to *Gaṇikās* as an ideal woman with the perfect combination of beauty and brain but, in reality, large rooms of doubts are left open in this notion. It is true that society gave them glorious epithets like *Nagara-Sōvānī*, *Puramandanā* (means ornaments of the city). But the type of treatment meted out to her, the type of behavior society expected from her demands more thinking in this matter. It can be seemed that society treated *Gaṇikās* as a celebrity. But if *Gaṇikās* acquired a respectable place in the society then they should have the freedom to make their own decisions as it is true, irrespective of time and place, that society always obeys the decisions of respected persons by remembering their accomplishments. But in this case that did not happen. If a king ordered a *Gaṇikā* to provide someone sexual and aesthetic pleasure then she had to obey that order notwithstanding her wish. If she refused the royal order then she could be whipped with thousand lashes or could be fined five thousand *paṇas*. So *Gaṇikās* had no freedom to make their own decisions and had no right on their own body.

There are many other evidences which prove that they were neither respected nor treated as a real person by society. Surprisingly, the texts which show concerns for the well-being of the *Gaṇikās* are the same texts which showcase the evidences of discriminatory attitude of society towards them. *Kāmasūtra* states clearly that a *Gaṇikā* should not devote much time for one client when she is getting offers from many.

'She should go to the person who can offer the gift she covets. Since money can buy everything she should oblige the person who can afford the highest sum..... She should leave the impoverished lover and never invest in one from whom there is no hope of return' (Bhattacharji, 1987: 40).

Thus society ordered her to be hard-hearted and money minded. The story of *Milindapañha* where king *Asōka* was surprised to see a Courtesan to perform an act of truth also confirms the same view of society that Courtesan would give her body to many but mind to none. Sukumari Bhattacharji in her article “prostitution in Ancient India” refers to a story described in the text called ‘*Kālavilasha*’ which strengthens the evidence of discrimination of society towards Ganika. According to the story king *Vikramāditya* took shelter to a courtesan *Bilāsavatī* in his bad days. She helped him with her wealth. She even baited her own life to save the king’s life. With her assistance *Vikramāditya* regained his kingdom, his power and made *Bilāsavatī* his chief queen. But she confessed to the king that she loved another man who at that time was caught for theft. Though the king helped in the unison of those two lovers, he learnt a lesson that no one should trust a Courtesan. Bhattacharjee states that ignoring her contribution the text gives stress on the assumed deceitfulness of *Bilāsavatī* (ibid: 47). Actually society did not get the logic behind *Bilāsavatī*’s decision to leave the king and go back to her true lover as they never accepted the necessity of ‘true love’ in the life of a *Ganikā*. Now if one revisits the story of *Āmrāpālī* then he/she can find out that with loosing the right to determine her future, her choice of work, her aim of life, which were some general side-effects for being a woman, she lost the right to get married which, according to the society, was the ultimate gain of women life. The patriarchy, which ordered an old nun to get married for at least one night unless she could not attain the ‘*svarga*’ after death (*Mahābhārata* mentions this story), decided to left *Āmrāpālī* unmarried because of her matchless beauty. This self contradicting attitude of society indicates that either society did not want to give a *Ganikā* the opportunity to attain ‘*svarga*’ after death or her ‘*svarga*’ is different from the one where all other people wish to go in their afterlife. So the title of ‘*Strī-Ratna*’ is not indicating *Āmrāpālī*’s promotion. She was reduced to a jewel from a human being and just like the ownership of a jewel do not depends on the wish of the jewel, the lover of her would not be determined by her wish. Anyone in the governing group could enjoy her. Thus, she had to trade her soul to gain that ‘respect’ (which was definitely illusive and limited in nature). She had to abandon her wish to be loved by one but loved for life.

Ancient Indian patriarchal society always denied accepting the basic rights of women folk. Wives or ‘*Kūlabadhūs*’ suffered from the burden of the perpetual relationship they shared with their husbands. The marriage tie was unbreakable to such an extent that even death can’t tear that. Women could not get remarried after their husbands’ death and had to live a tough life of celibacy for the rest of their life. They could not break their marriage by showing reasons like physical or mental abuse by husbands etc. Moreover they never were praised for their contributions in the family. Prostitutes including *Ganikās* were standing at just the opposite juncture of the same road the housewives stood on. *Ganikās* received some admiration from their male clients for their beauty and their mastery in art forms. Altekar says, “Though despised in one sense, courtesans began to be respected for their achievements in fine arts” (Altekar, 1938: 181-82). But they could not have a perpetual relationship with their lovers or clients. They were loved for a night or were praised for an evening. There was no one to share her pain or glory, there was no one to guide her if she fell in trouble, and there was no recognition of her child as the child lacked the recognition from his or her father. In short, society never allowed her (even if the male partner was ready to take the vows) to build a relationship with her lover which was more than economical and physical because then she won’t be dedicated enough to her client who was paying her to love him and would be failed to satisfy the virtue of her profession drawn out by society. It is not possible to estimate that how much companionship or guidance or love was available for housewives but at least they were entitled to (as the marriage vows suggest).

It can be noticed that with time the attitude of society towards Courtesans got worse. One of the reasons behind it was the upheaval of Brahmanism from 300 C.E (Singh, 2009: 509). It is very apparent that Buddhist texts were less critical to the prostitutes in general which includes *Gaṇikās*. Though terms like '*Janapada-kalyāṇī*', which found in only Buddhist texts, does not mean someone who brings good in the *Janapada* but means one who can be enjoyed by the whole *Janapada* notwithstanding her wish. But Brahmanism seemed to hate the public women as a homogenous group and considered prostitution an evil. Interestingly it also forbade educating daughters and tried to make them intellectually impaired, thereby making the profession of prostitution necessary for society as 'intellectually superior' male would need someone who could give them the aesthetic pleasure with the physical one. That is the reason Sukumari Bhattacharjee uses the term necessary evil (Bhattachāryaya, 2006: 73) to depict the position of prostitutes in the Brahmanical society. Most of the *Smṛtis* forbid decent people from having food cooked by a *Gaṇikā* and *Gaṇa*. *Manu* orders *Brahmans* to not take food from *Gaṇikās* and *Gaṇas*. (These statements are also reflecting a bitter attitude of Brahmanical society to the republics or *Gaṇa*) Not only *Smṛtis* but most of the *Purāṇas* condemn them. *Viṣṇu Samhitā* says that he who associates himself with a Courtesan should perform the *Prajapatya* penance. *Mahābhārata* prescribes that the quarters of *Gaṇikās* should be to the south of the city because that is the direction where *Yam*, the God of death is believed to reside. Thus, the long held notion that *Gaṇikās* were 'respected' beings becomes more doubtful when one goes through the pages of literatures, authored by the heads of the society (i.e. wise *Brahmans*) like *Smṛtis*, *Purāṇas*, Epics etc.

Now it seems that wealth was the only thing they had abundantly. It is true that they could lead a luxurious life style and could spend money according to their wish. *Kautilya* advises state to give pension to the *Gaṇikās* and other prostitutes. As the profession of Prostitutes is totally depended on their beauty and youth, it can be assumed that they have to shelve their business when their age will force them to. So pension in this time of distress must be hugely beneficial to them. But Sukumari Bhattacharjee doubts the existence and validity of this practice in ancient time. She states that only *Arthasātra* mentions this practice. All other texts overlook it which can't be wholly coincidental. Another thing is, she thinks, as women and their labor was vulnerable to the exploitation of patriarchal society so it might be possible that despite having the rule of giving Prostitutes pension, State or some officials chose to skip it and if they did that, those old ladies had no power to sue the state or the offender (Bhattacharji, 1987: 45). May be that is the reason that this practice was not prevalent in the society and remained overlooked by other writers. With the kind advice of giving Courtesans pensions, *Kautilya* also advises state to charge fines from a *Gaṇikā* if she sold or mortgaged her property. After the death of a *Gaṇikā* only her daughter could use the property of her mother but could not sale or exchange or mortgaged the property. So it can be assumed that *Gaṇikās* lacked the ownership rights and those riches including mansions, gardens were 'state property with life interest' (Chandra, 1973: 48). *Mahabharata*, a brahmanical text, seems stricter in this case as it announces the rule of no property right for slave, child and *Gaṇikās* more than once in its *Ādi-Parva*.

Most texts, while passing moral judgments and imposing several kinds of restraints on Courtesans, chose to forget the fact that the profession of *Gaṇikā* was constructed and survived to fulfill some needs of patriarchal, commercial and urban society. What are those needs? Firstly, at that age of flourishing commercialism prostitution was a necessary part of the urbanity. According to the rule of hierarchy, ordinary prostitutes were there to meet the demands of common citizens while *Gaṇikās*, the best among public women, were to provide pleasure for rich and powerful

people. *Gaṇikās* were like a symbol of the prosperity for urban civilization. The *Rāmāyaṇa* includes *Gaṇikās* in the lists of luxuries and comforts. Secondly, *Gaṇikās* paid taxes which were not little in amount if one remembers that *Vinayapiṭaka* says that by charging five hundred gold coins per night *Āmrpālī* made her city *Vaisālī* very rich. Besides if a foreigner went to a *Gaṇikā* then he had to pay five *paṇas* extra as tariff duty to the state excluding the charge of the *Gaṇikā*. Though might be of less importance but one should not ignore the fact that some of those *Gaṇikās* donated generously for the cause of building public establishments like wells, temples etc. which was beneficial to the state. Thirdly, sometimes *Gaṇikās* enacted an important role of spy for the state. In that case according to the plan, they seduced the person suspected and extracted the information needed then passed the information to the state through *Gaṇikādhyakṣa*. Last but not the least, the beautiful *Gaṇikās* helped to strengthened the imagery of the divine kingship, which was a constant feature of monarchy in ancient Indian society. Texts like *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Mahābhārata*, *Lalitavistāra* etc. mentions beautiful *Gaṇikās* who are carrying the garlands, ornaments, the fan etc. Sometimes they were part of the royal hunting or boat trips. *Gaṇikās* were representing the celestial nymphs (*Apsarās*) who serve the *Devatās* in the heaven and thus promoted the image of king as God and the court of the king as the 'sabhā' of heaven. So out of these pressing needs state showed concern for the *Gaṇikās* by sponsoring their education, by devising laws to protect them from physical abuse or theft or by conferring the glorious epithets like *Nagara-Kalyānī*, *Nagara-Mandanā* etc. on them. A reference of a story described in the Jain text '*Vāsudeva Hindī*' will be apt here as it describes how society used womanhood to fulfill its own needs. In the story it is said that there was a powerful person called *Bharata* who was the leader of his clan. He enjoyed another woman along with his queen. Knowing that, all feudatories under him sent their own daughters to *Bharata* to please him. All those daughters reached the court of *Bharata* at the same time which angered the queen. So it was decided that the king would enjoy those ladies outside the court. Later *Gaṇa* or tribe would get the right to enjoy those women. This story actually tries to trace the origin of *Gaṇikās*. Nonetheless this story is also showing that how women were forced to take the profession of *Gaṇikā* and how their femininity was commoditized even by their fathers, members of the patriarchal society. Thus ancient Indian society reduced the women as 'property of men'.

Though now it seems certain that *Gaṇikās* were not entitled to have respect in society but still one can argue that a *Gaṇikā*'s position was slightly better than a housewife to whom marriage was '*Mokṣa*'. *Manusamhitā* says, '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' (Bhattacharji, 1987: 38). Society considered wives as a commodity which served the purpose of giving birth of a son and of keeping the lineage of her husband intact. If one can ignore the superficial extravagance of the life of a *Gaṇikā* (like- Palaces, ornaments, epithets etc.) then it can be clearly seen that condition of *Gaṇikās* was not better than *Kūla-Badhūs*. They were also considered as commodity as the author of *Kāmasūtra* opines that a Courtesan have to decorate herself when going to seduce clients because she is a commodity. Femininity as a whole was largely insulted and disparaged in the patriarchal ancient Indian society.

Conclusion

Society always tried its best to conceal the conscience of a *Gaṇikā* under the heavy words of praise and behind the hard and rough cover of costly ornaments. On the one hand, state ordered *Gaṇikās* to educate themselves and learn various art forms, which as its natural effect softens human mind and makes a person sensitive and virtuous, on the other hand, it told her not to make an

relationship which is based on emotion rather than money and taught her that money can buy everything so she should go to the person who can offer her the highest sum. Thus, state, which acts like a wish-fulfilling machine in the hand of the patriarchal society, was cruel to those *Gaṇikās*. But it seems that they were not always successful. In *Mṛcchakaṭika* Courtesan *Vasantasenā* was ready to sacrifice her own life but did not sacrifice her love. In the text named *Kālavilāsa* Courtesan *Vilāsabatī* denounced her new found glory of a queen with vast wealth and went back to her true lover, a poor man who was arrested for theft. *Gaṇikā Vāsavadattā* of *Mathurā* fell in love with *Upagupta*, a Buddhist monk and did not ask for money from him (Srinivasan, 2005: 349). Many courtesans donated huge wealth for social welfare or to help religious mendicants. Buddhist texts like *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Majjhima Nikāya* mentions many *Gaṇikās* who fed the followers of Buddha and generously made donations to the order. *Āmrapālī* arranged a huge feast for the Lord Buddha and her thousands followers and gifted her mango grove to the order. *Gaṇika Ardha-Kāśī* donated a huge portion of her property to Lord Buddha and did many other philanthropic works. These instances not only prove their wealth but equally prove their generosity. Thus it is seen that many times a sensitive and soft hearted woman came out of a *Gaṇikā* who was supposed to abandon the impoverished lover and never show interest in one from whom there is no hope of return. And by accepting the donations from *Gaṇikās* society proved that they were unsuccessful in their attempt to make those beautiful bodies with more beautiful mind into a machine. But they were successful in causing some serious losses in their life. *Vasantasenā* was lucky to be an imaginative character and got the chance to live her life with her love. Though it is not possible to know that how many Courtesans got that opportunity, it can be said for sure that the number would not be big as there are always very few persons who have the guts to challenge a deep seated social rule and also get all favorable conditions acting in his/her side which can make the person winner against the society. Author of *Mṛcchakaṭika*, who lets *Vasantasenā* to emerge as a winner in her drama, did not forget to make a touching comment on the true condition of the *Gaṇikās* of ancient India. In this comment *Bit*, a well-wisher of *Vasantasenā*, is comparing her with a tree of Jasmine flower and says that though the beautiful flowers have all qualities required to be used in auspicious activities, they were not used in any work as it grows up on the soil of a crematorium. Just like the ill fated flowers you also have all qualities to get things you like but cannot have anything of your wish as you are a *Gaṇikā*, a public woman, you should not have the right to like or dislike. You are a commodity. Now it seems certain that society took these epithets like *Nagarmandanā* very seriously and started treating *Gaṇikās* as 'jewels' which are rare, costly and nothing but inanimate objects.

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