

## The Gaṇikā in Buddhist and Jaina Literature

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**I**n ancient India, social thinkers and law-givers had paid full attention to human needs for the development of the individual as well as a sane social order. The material and moral universe in which the individual has to live is classified by the ancient law-givers—Manu and others—into four *puruṣārthas* or ends of human life: *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma* and *mokṣa*. *Dharma* stands for duty, moral and ideal needs; *artha* for material needs; *kāma* represents the psycho-biological needs of mankind for various enjoyments. *Mokṣa* is the ultimate end of human life—release from the mortal world in order to enjoy eternal bliss. In short, in modern terminology, it may be said that *dharma*, *artha* and *kāma* are the principal motivating urges of an individual around which his whole life and conduct are centred. Manu has rightly said that the entire conduct of life should be formulated in terms of harmonious coordination of these urges. Since *kāma* is directly connected with the term *gaṇikā*, this article also stresses *kāma* as one of the powerful urges or needs of a man.

Sexual desire is a primary physical need of mankind for which marriage as an institution came into existence. In the Indian ethos *kāma* and sex are never condemned; the *Gītā* speaks of *kandarpa* as one of the *vibhūtis* of God. Along with the institution of marriage as a means of gratifying sexual desire, there came into existence the profession of prostitutes and *gaṇikās* through which extramarital sexual satisfaction could be attained.

The *gaṇikā* is an ancient institution in India and its origin can be traced to the vedic period. Let us take into account the etymology and meanings of the word *gaṇikā*. Etymologically, the word is derived from *gaṇa*—group or corporation—of which a *gaṇikā* was a member and was the common property of the whole body or *gaṇa* held together by a common economic and political bond. The Vinayavastu of the *Mulasarvastivāda* states that Āmrapālī (who belonged to c. 500 BC) was a common property of the corporation of Vaiśālī (i.e. *gaṇabhogyā*). The *Amarakoṣa* equates *gaṇikā* with *vārastrī* or *veśyā*. The term *gaṇikā* is treated as a feminine form of *gaṇaka* which means one bought for a large sum. The *Nāṭyasāstra* of Bharata (c. 300 BC) says that a *gaṇikā* is always respected by the king due to her virtues; but she has to be available whenever asked for. Bharata says:

*priyavādi priyakathā sphutā dakṣā jitāśritā, ebhirguṇaistu samyuktā gaṇikā parikīrtitā.* According to Bharata, the *gaṇikā* is a gifted and a beautiful woman. A word parallel to *gaṇikā* is not found in the English language; harlot or prostitute do not adequately describe her. In ancient times polygamy had social sanction. Epics like the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Mahābhārata*, the Purāṇic literature, narrative literature, Buddhist and Jaina literature speak of kings having many wives. It seems to have been common for wealthy men to have many wives, *upapātnis* and slave girls. Regarding education of women, it appears that the 64 arts were taught to them. Vātsyāyana (who belonged to probably 100 AD) in his *Kāmasūtra* (at I-III-15) speaks of the 64 arts in which dance and music, languages, etc. were included. *Gaṇikās* were trained in fine arts like dance and music in order to entertain kings, princes and wealthy patrons on religious and social occasions. Thus the institution of *gaṇikā* appears to have played an important role in preserving the cultural heritage of India, especially the heritage of our performing arts. This description of *gaṇikā* is also applicable to the *gaṇikā* in Buddhist and Jaina literature.

There is a great deal of material on *gaṇikās* in both the canonical and non-canonical Buddhist and Jaina literature. It is not possible to touch all the material on the subject but a few samples will be studied to illustrate the position and status of the *gaṇikā* in ancient India.

In Buddhist literature, a king's harem is described as being well constructed, suffused with fragrance (*Jātaka* VI), housing 16000 dancing girls (*Jātaka* I, III, etc.). The king was free to introduce any new girl in the harem without distinction of class or caste: a milkmaid, a country girl, a flower girl, or any girl found and picked up from the wayside (*Jātaka* III). This indicates that women of the lower classes or castes did belong to the category of *gaṇikās*, practising music and dance; though royal ladies were taught these arts, they did not belong to the category of *gaṇikā*. People sought the company of gifted *gaṇikās* because of their accomplishments, physical and intellectual, and their mastery over music and dance. They played an important part in the public and private life of the country.

*Gaṇikās* have been named as follows: *veśī* or *veśyā nārīyo*, *gāmaniyo*, *gaṇikā*, *nagaraśobhānī*, *vannadāsī*, *kumbhadāsī*. The famous poet of the 4th century AD, Kālidāsa, refers to three classes of such women—*panyastrī*, *abhisārikā* and *veśyā*—in his *Meghadūtam*. These names indicate their status in society. However, it appears that the *gaṇikās*, though respected and desired because of their beauty and artistic accomplishments, were also scoffed at and insulted by people in general.

In *Buddhalilā Sārasaṅgraha*, we are told that King Śuddhodana had added to the number of dancing girls in the palace of Siddhartha to distract

him from his speculations. In the same book, we are told that beautiful dancing girls danced to the strains of musical instruments to attract Prince Siddhartha but there was no effect on him. Buddhist literature refers to *gaṇikās* of high character. As mentioned in the *Milindapanha* (200 BC) the *gaṇikā* Bindumati reversed the flow of the Ganga by her act of truth. When she was asked about this incident by King Aśoka she stated that she regarded all her customers alike. The *Kurudhamma Jātaka* (II no. 2767) narrates the story of the righteous courtesan who received a thousand coins from a man who never came back for three years. The courtesan did not accept any money from a patron during this period for the sake of honour. When she lost her fortune, she went to the court and asked for permission to earn her livelihood by her old profession of courtesan. The story of the beautiful *gaṇikā* Āmrāpālī — who was a contemporary of Bimbisāra—is famous. She helped to make the city of Vaishali prosperous. Yet she was not denied the opportunity of embracing religious life. She presented her mango grove to the Buddhist *sangha*, the last gift during the life of the Buddha—recorded by Yuan Chwang in his account of Varanasi. These examples show the high status and honour enjoyed by courtesans due to their character, fidelity, charity and other virtues.

There are numerous references to the *gaṇikās'* life style, and their joys and tribulations, which also illustrate the noble aspect of their nature. The *Dhammapāda* commentary on *Gāthā* 147 refers to a beautiful *gaṇikā*, Sirimā of Rājagṛha, who provided alms to monks, one of whom was eventually attracted by her beauty. *Jātaka III* relates the story of a *gaṇikā* by the name of Sulasā who, by her wisdom, taught a lesson to a robber who wanted to kill her. Buddhist literature shows the *gaṇikās* living a life of luxury under the patronage of kings. In general wealthy citizens appear to be their patrons.

It is interesting to note that they maintained close relations with the musicians of the court. Their attainments in the arts of dance and music were legendary. Though it was their socially allotted task to entertain the higher strata of society, it does not appear that they were treated quite like outcasts. The society at large certainly looked upon them with distaste, yet, at the same time, there was open admiration for their achievements.

There are numerous tales in the *Jātakas* that extol the *gaṇikās'* high social standards. Amrapālī, though a *gaṇikā*, has become a highly revered figure and so has Vāsavadattā. The ten edicts of the Buddha definitely include the prohibition of even watching a performance of dance and music, yet the redemption of a *gaṇikā* by embracing the 'high path' is an oft-repeated theme. Vāsavadattā was attracted to Upagupta, a Buddhist monk, who instead of shunning her because of her calling, promised to accept her at the

right moment. When at a later stage in life she contracted leprosy and was abandoned by society to die on the streets, Upagupta cured her and took her on the path of Buddhism.

Jaina literature is also rich in material providing glimpses of courtesans' lives. A *ganikā* was highly respected by the people in general. *Ganikās* are mentioned as proficient in many arts and other lore. The *Nāyādhammakahao* (300-400 BC)—one of the Jain canonical texts—describes Devadattā who was a rich courtesan of Campa city in detail: "She was well-versed in the sixty-four arts; possessed the sixty-four accomplishments of a courtesan; was proficient in entertaining males in thirty-two ways, was possessed of twenty-one qualities of dalliance, and was well-versed in the science of erotics. She knew eighteen dialects (*deśī*) languages, had beautiful, rich dresses, was an accomplished singer and dancer, and had the royal sanction to carry an umbrella, *chowries* and fans. She always moved in a palanquin (*karnīratha*) as a mark of royal favour, was the chief and head of many thousand courtesans, her fees were a thousand coins." This is a graphic picture of the rich life and accomplishments a courtesan possessed in that age. It also speaks of the high status enjoyed by the courtesans of the age.

The *Vivāgasūya* of the Jaina canonical literature describes the courtesan Kamajjhaya of Vaniyagāma in the same manner as the *Nāyādhammakahao*. It provides an even more detailed description of courtesans than is to be found in Buddhist literature, which refers to the luxurious life of courtesans who were virtuous as well as wicked. The *Bṛhatkalpa Bhāṣya* (200 AD) mentions a courtesan who had a picture gallery where she had painted representations of different castes and the phases of love. When she received a patron, she took him to the gallery and could tell his caste, artistic taste, etc. from the picture he liked. The *Kuṭṭanimata* of Damodara refers to various cunning arts, wiles and devices resorted to by the courtesans to attract and ruin weak-minded persons. It is to be noted here that Jaina literature mentions various courtesans of fame and character who did not like to flirt with many but longed for a person of their choice with whom they could live happily. It is stated in *Kumarapālāpratibodha* of Samaprabhisūri (c.1184 AD) that Koṣā was a courtesan and she loved Sthūlabhadra and lived with him for 12 years. She did not like the company of any man after Sthūlabhadra left her. Later on he became a monk and Koṣā listened to his sermon and became a follower of Jainism. Devadattā was a *ganikā* of Ujjayini and was devoted to prince Mūladeva, though he was penniless. She was fond of his virtues, not of his wealth, as Vasantasenā loved Cārudatta for his virtues though he was poor. These examples speak of their fidelity and love even when they were generally despised for their greed and love of money. When a courtesan became a king's mistress, she

had to live with him like a faithful wife and any man visiting her could be charged with adultery. In *Vivagisuya* we have the story of a merchant's son who secretly visited Kāmajjhayā who was the king's mistress, and was punished by the king. There is a similar story of a merchant's son, Sagaḍa, who lived with a courtesan named Sūdarisanā who was the mistress of Susena, minister of the king of Sāhamjañī. When Sagaḍa's visits to the courtesan became known, he was arrested and brought before the king. The king ordered his execution by making him embrace a red hot image of a woman. We may also mention the story where king Kunika brought the courtesan Māgadhiyā and an ascetic together which brought about the fall of the city of Veśālī. Somadeva's *Yaśastilaka* tells the story of a courtesan named Anangasenā who saved the life of Dhanakīrti. The *Paumacariya* of Vimalasūri (c.4th century AD) refers to *gaṇikās*, *veśyās* and *vilāsinīs* who were called upon to dance on festive occasions. The *Kuvalayamālā* of Udyotanasūri of 8th century AD mentions the king's assembly crowded with courtesans. Music and dance were widely cultivated at the time.

Thus the study of random examples from Buddhist and Jaina literature shows that courtesans were not only tolerated but held in high esteem. It is to be noted that they not only entertained people by dancing and singing but also catered to connoisseurs.

It would not be out of place to mention here that both Jainism and Buddhism did not have a very liberal attitude towards women; a woman's wickedness is the subject of many Jaina and Buddhist stories and courtesans are no exception in this respect. Even so, the religious texts refer to their virtues and accomplishments as well. A distinction is made between a *gaṇikā* and a prostitute.

It is a well-known fact that though Indian music and dance are closely connected with religion and philosophy, the practitioners have not always been treated with respect. The institution of the *gaṇikā* became degraded in the course of time and ultimately lost its importance. However, the overall attitude towards the *gaṇikā* reflected in Buddhist and Jaina literature is one of respect for her accomplishments tinged with compassion for the misfortune that must eventually visit her in later life.

Looking back, we must recognize the *gaṇikā* for her role in the preservation and propagation of the arts of dance and music. □