

**WOMEN AND ECONOMIC SPHERE: A STUDY OF
CANONICAL AND POPULAR LITERATURE
[THE MANUSMRITI, THE ARTHAŚĀSTRA, AND THE JĀTAKAS]**

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DECLARATION

I, UPASANA DHANKHAR, declare that the dissertation entitled “WOMEN AND ECONOMIC SPHERE: A STUDY OF CANONICAL AND POPULAR LITERATURE [THE MANUSMRITI, THE ARTHAŚĀSTRA, AND THE JĀTAKAS]” is my bona fide work and may be placed before the examiners for evaluation.



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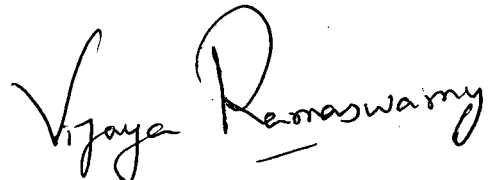
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Dedicated to
My brothers, Captain Bharat Dhankhar
and Captain Harsh Dhankhar

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Upasana

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List of Abbreviations

KA..... *Kautilīya's Arthaśāstra*

MS..... *Manusmṛiti*

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION TO THE THEME

Women in all societies are seen primarily as the homemakers rather than breadwinners. Their dependence on men is not only accepted but also seen as only 'natural'. This is largely so because they are essentially envisaged in the roles of the wife and the mother. But their life definitely had more aspects apart from being the procreators and subordinate life partners. Though most societies look upon them as carrying out the function of 'social reproduction', we do find them engaged and employed in different productive activities apart from the very important function of reproduction and child care.

This research work seeks to understand the productive and reproductive functions of the women in ancient India. The linkages between their social and economic status shall be delved upon to determine how their roles and activities linked to the economic infrastructure and what credit or value was assigned to them in the economic sphere.

In order to get a holistic and lucid picture, this research work makes a perusal of three different sources namely the *Manusmriti*, the *Arthaśāstra* and the *Jātakas*. The sources are selected on the understanding that any single genre of source will give us a limited picture and though caution can be exercised in drawing inferences from the same, yet a comparative study with other texts shall be much more beneficial. The sources under perusal do not only belong to different traditions but also have a different perspective.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

While the status and position of women in ancient India has been a subject of considerable interest, the studies are largely confined to the social roles. Their presence in the economic sphere is either limited to a few professions or are given passing reference with little analysis being made of the factors that determined their roles and the value assigned to their work.

The nationalist historians begun by researching the ancient brahmanical texts to make a case for the honorable position of women in ancient India, and were rather concerned with the position of women in the roles of wife, mother, daughter etc. Both the sources and the purposes of these studies were largely restricted to the domestic lives of women and a few aspects concerning the devolution of property and *streedhana*. Some of the studies made an attempt to link the customs and traditions like early marriages, widow remarriage and *sati* to the larger social structure.

Altekar in his all encompassing study of women in ancient India Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilisation*¹, was pre-occupied with exhibiting a high status for women in the ancient time. Interestingly, while he explains a number of customs, practices, and social institutions and attitudes relating to women on the basis of the material culture, he fails to offer a similar insight into the economic roles of women. His pre-occupation with the domestic and reproductive roles of the women resulted in his total neglect of their productive functions. Rare insight that has been offered into the women and economic sphere are limited to the development of the right to property and inheritance laws. Though he makes references to social hierarchy and the implications it had for the women across *varna*, yet largely the linkages between the social status and economic opportunities of the women have not been given due attention.

While Altekar's study is based on the *vedic* and brahmanical literature, I B Horner has made a detailed study of women from the Buddhist sources. Horner's, *Women under Primitive Buddhism*² was first published in 1930, and still remains the only holistic study of women within Buddhist tradition. The book makes a breakthrough in as much as different categories of lay women and almswomen are studied at length, and a separate chapter has been devoted to the women workers. Unfortunately, like most historians Horner also fails to recognize and valorize the household work as well as

¹A S Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilisation*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1959 Reprint.

²I.B. Horner, *Women under Primitive Buddhism*, Cosmos Publication, 2005.

reproductive function of women as important part of economic sphere. Her study of working women gets limited to the slave labor and courtesans.

Nonetheless Horner's work stands as the solitary lighthouse wherein Buddhist sources have been studied with reference to roles of women in general and of working women in particular. So much so that Uma Chakravarti remarked that 'another feature of the traditional writing on the position of women is that they were based entirely on brahmanical sources.'³ Identifying the problems with the sources Chakravarti comments that 'at best the existing work can be termed as a partial view from above.'⁴

Chakravarti's criticism of the existing scholarship is just the starting point of her insightful works on socio-economic history. In *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens*⁵, she neatly uncovers the 'brahmanical patriarchy' and puts forward strong arguments to show how the entire socio-political structure had a nexus with the ritual status and manifested itself in economic sphere. She summarizes the reasons for subordinate status of women have concisely and precisely stating that 'economic oppression and exploitation are based as much on the commodification of female sexuality and the appropriation by men of women's labor power and her reproductive power as on the direct economic acquisition of resources and persons.'⁶ She cites references both from the brahmanical and heterodox sources to supplement her arguments and draws some important parallels.

In her other works namely *Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism* and *Everyday Lives and Everyday Histories: beyond the Kings and the Brahmanas of Ancient India*. Chakravarti sheds light on socio-economic history and brings forth some very important aspects. The alternative social stratification explained in terms of High and Low can be a useful heuristic tool for developing an understanding of social history in

³ Uma Chakravarti, *Beyond the Altekarian Paradigm: Towards a New Understanding of Gender, Relations in Early Indian History*, *Social Scientist*, Vol. 16, No. 8. (Aug., 1988). Pg.45.

⁴ *Ibid*

⁵ Uma Chakravarti, *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens*, Popular Prakashan Pvt Ltd., 2005.

⁶ *Ibid*

the early centuries. The economic analysis of the development of the different meanings of the term *Gahapati* over a period of time provides us useful insight into both social organization and economic developments. Chakravarti rightly infers that utilization of Buddhist or Jaina sources can actually help discern the early history which so far has been limited to Brahmanical sources.⁷

The shift in the study and understanding of the socio-economic history has been crucial for development of the gender history as well. However, there still is a lack of any serious attempt to research and reevaluate the productive and reproductive functions that women in ancient times were engaged in. We do have a number of articles that make a survey of the particular profession or industry like prostitution or weaving, but a holistic study awaits scholarly attention.

OBJECTIVES

Though, particular occupations and roles that women played in ancient India have been studied by different scholars, but little research has gone into reconstruction of their overall economic participation. Even today a lot of work that women do is not taken into consideration in the macroeconomics. In the course of this study an attempt will be made to discover various productive activities which women carried out. Their contribution in the household activities as well as the important function of reproduction shall be considered to understand their contribution to the socio-economic sphere. We shall try and understand how the social and economic status of women determined their economic opportunities. Further, the variations in their occupations shall be looked at and the approval and disapproval associated with their economic activities shall be studied. It is for this purpose that the primary texts selected are such as will shed light on lives of women from different angles.

THE PRIMARY SOURCES

For the purposes of this research work a variety of sources have been selected. We shall be making a thorough study of the canonical texts from brahmanical tradition.

⁷ *Ibid*

These texts are prescriptive in nature and seek to lay down the social, legal and political norms. Individuals and groups are assigned certain roles in a society. These roles are reflected in the laws, norms, customs, practices, stories and stereotypes which find place in the textual sources. However, such accepted and expected roles differ with the perception of the writers who define them or the compilers who compile them. Different kinds of texts may either contradict or supplement the notions held as regards what individuals do or abstain from doing, and can or cannot do in a particular society. A critical and comparative study of such texts with due care can help us understand and to an extent reconstruct the particular aspects of individuals' lives as well as roles they play in society.

The *Manusmriti* is a normative text coming from Brahmanical tradition, and is largely concerned with the establishment of a social order in the interest of social elites. Since it is a *dharmashastric* text, therefore it can be expected to contain an ideological or rhetorical framework for various social entities. On the other hand, the *Arthaśāstra* has the establishment and management of the state as the primary concern. Thus, all rules and regulations are made with the interest of the state being the over-riding concern. However, since a state even when propagating a certain ideological framework cannot overlook the social and economic realities, we can hope to find certain important mentions which other sources may choose to be oblivious too.

This research work is an effort to discern the economic participation of women in early India. For the purposes of a holistic picture different genres of texts are selected, so as to provide a bigger canvas to the overall picture. 'One cannot look only at official law to determine the position of women; it is necessary to distinguish between "folk" and "formal" culture, between the ambiguous position of women in the official culture, as expressed in Vedic literature, and the unequivocal honor and esteem in which women are held in popular religion, myth, folklore, and daily life.'⁸

⁸ Hannah Fane, *The Female Element in Indian Culture*, Asian Folklore Studies, Vol. 34, No. 1 (1975), Asian Folklore Studies, Nanzan University. pg52

While both the *Arthaśāstra* and the *Manusmṛiti* belong to the Brahmanical tradition, we have the *Jātakas* or the Buddhist birth stories as our primary source for providing us an insight into the status and position of women in an alternative tradition. Besides being a textual source from heterodox tradition, these stories being part of folklore can be expected to contain myriad depictions of everyday life of women. Furthermore, they have representations of women in roles that extend beyond the ideals set out in the canonical literature. Although debates regarding the time period of a source is always subject to controversies, yet these sources can roughly be accepted to represent the society and social changes from a few centuries before and after Christian era.

METHODOLOGY

Each of the texts will be thoroughly studied and the biases inherent in them will be duly identified. The critical study of the texts will involve understanding of the context and the contents of these texts. The texts shall be read with due caution so as to understand and identify the author/compiler, intended addressee, stated and subtle objectives etc. Once these nuances are worked out, specific references to women will be focused upon.

Though the research centers on economic roles of women, but due attention will be paid to the varied roles they are seen to play in these texts, for certain roles have a connected economic aspect to it. Furthermore, their overall status and position will be duly taken into consideration before drawing any inferences. The sections of the texts which do not conform with the overall concerns of the texts shall be specially analyzed to check whether they are particular exceptions or instances of alternatives.

We shall take a look at the roles and functions of the women within and outside the household as provided by the canonical texts. An attempt shall be made to mark and critically analyze all the provisions that might help us to discern important details relating to the position of women. Thereafter, we shall take a look at the mention of women in the Buddhist birth stories. Since these stories form a part of the ancient folk tales, therefore we can hope to find more representations of women. An attempt shall

be made to see how far these representations matched the canonical standards and what other facets have been overlooked by the brahmanical codes.

Once we have the sketches of the status and position of women from these sources, we shall try and collate the three to get a more complete picture of the linkages between women and economic sphere.

ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY

In the light of the research subject and the stated objectives and methodology, this research work has been organized into the following chapters:

1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter will define the research subject and provide the historiography. We have a brief introduction to the theme and the sources alongside the frame, sources, objectives and the premises of the study. The chapter will also try and define the economic sphere outside the narrow definitions concerning occupations and property rights.

2. *STREE-DHARMA* IN THE BRAHMANIC CODES: ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR WOMEN'S ECONOMIC ROLE (INCLUSION OF THE *MANUSMRITI*)

This chapter will make a detailed study of the *Manusmriti* with the focus on the social role of women. Since the *Manusmriti* is a *dharmasastric* text, it tries to define the role of women in the *varna* system and largely within the household. We shall take a look at the ideals set for women, the restrictions imposed on them, and the rhetoric that helped bind them to such rules. Thereafter, we shall try and determine how their productive and reproductive potential is utilized and yet devalued in the brahmanical patriarchy.

3. WOMEN AND WORK IN THE *KAUTILĪYA'S ARTHAŚĀSTRA*

This chapter explores the way state regulated the women engaged in the different occupations. It also takes note of their economic rights and various legal provisions related to them. The chapter also takes note of the nexus

between the social status of women and the economic opportunities they have. Most importantly, we shall determine how the state managed the human resources and how the negotiation between the state and the social elites affected the socio-economic roles of the women.

4. WOMEN'S ECONOMIC ROLE AS DEFINED IN THE *JĀTAKAS*

Since the first two sources are normative in nature, therefore it is advisable to take a source that can give us glimpses of women in the actual society. Folktales and popular stories can come in handy for this purpose. However, since these stories have long been appropriated into the Buddhist traditions therefore, we need to identify the rhetoric and the predisposition inherent in them. Thereafter, we shall make a detailed study of the representations of women in these stories and see how far the roles contained here match the norms laid down in the brahmanical canons.

5. CONCLUSION

Herein, an attempt shall be made to spell out the understanding of the nuances of the roles of women in the socio-economic sphere. Both productive and reproductive roles of women shall form a part of this analysis.

Chapter 2

Canonical *Streedharma* and its Implications for Women's Economic Roles (A study of the *Manusmriti*)

INTRODUCTION

The individual members of complex societies are unequally placed and some of these inequalities constitute the basic features of the society. These inequalities may be based on gender, class, caste, profession, region, age, marital status etc. Such differences lead to broad categorization of the individuals or groups of individuals. The different groups in the society are accorded rights and obligations, which reflect their status and role in society. These rights and restrictions are often sought to be given a moral or legal sanction.

A sum total of the rights and obligations for different sections of the society formed the overall social order that either existed or was sought to be established. This social order could only be established and maintained by making people follow certain norms. There is an emphasis on duty in the entire corpus of *dharmasastric* literature. Every individual was given a certain specific social identity and everyone was asked upon to follow the roles assigned to them. Overall social structure was given precedence over individual life/existence. A careful study of brahmanical codes can help us to understand that social order and the implications it had for women.

Even a cursory look at the *smriti* literature compiled in ancient time shows that women's roles were gendered right from the time of birth. Their life at every stage was different from that of their male counterparts. Canonical texts had certain specific roles accorded to women and these roles were made subservient to the interests of others. These roles and the overall discourse that emphasized upon dutiful acceptance of the norms lay down for a woman is termed as '*Streedharma*'. 'Throughout the entire matrix of this hierarchic but non-static society, the normative codes of *streedharma* (female propriety) exercise powerful pressures, the object being either to upgrade social status with economic betterment or to resist status decline with economic deterioration.'⁹

⁹ Kalpana Bardhan, *Women's Work, Welfare and Status: Forces of Tradition and Change in India*. Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 20, No. 50 (Dec. 14, 1985).,pg2207

It is important to note that the obligations and restrictions laid down for women in canonical tradition could have had different covert and overt purposes. For example, a widow could be sent to funeral pyre with her dead husband not for the reasons of religious merits but for simply denying her property rights. It is difficult to determine both the origin of customs or the continuities and changes in them. However, a look at the *smriti* literature and later commentaries on them can provide us with valuable insights into the socio-economic conditions of the society.

The *Manusmriti* is given the place of precedence amongst all the *smritis*. It is prescribed in the *Rig Veda* that '*Manah pathah pitrayan dooram naishta*'¹⁰ i.e. do not take us far away from the path prescribed by Manu and come down to us from forefathers. The identity of Manu is shrouded in mystery but his authority is undisputed. Thus the provisions of *Manusmriti* are an important source for understanding the society, its institutions, laws, morals etc.

Manusmriti was intended to be an all encompassing code for society and sought to be an exhaustive treatise [MS I.107]. It made elaborate rules regarding the *varna* society [MS I.2]. What was the status accorded to women in this society? Why do we find the contradictory statements regard their role and position in this text? What rules governed their lives and what bound them to such rules? Did they have any power in deciding these rules and interpreting them? All these questions and many more can find answers at least in parts if we make a detailed perusal of *Manusmriti*, with caution that needs to be exercised while using a textual source for reconstructing history.

Having discussed the history and nature of the text in preceding chapter, in the following pages an attempt has been made to interpret and understand the provisions of *Manusmriti*, to resolve the superficial contradictions within the text, and to understand the socio-economic implications of *streedharma* enshrined in the text for women. In the following pages an attempt shall be made to gain an insight into the

¹⁰ Rig Veda VIII 40:3

ideas and institutions that determined economic status of women and the nexus they had with the social order.

The *Manusmriti* intended to 'declare to us precisely and in due order the sacred laws of each of the four chief *varna* and of the intermediate ones' [MS 1.2]. We can begin by observing that the *Manusmriti* mentions 'law as concerning women' [MS I.114] as a distinct head. Other provisions concerning women can be found in the chapters on the law concerning husband and wife and the law of inheritance and division. Besides these there are stray references which largely concern their behavior or behavior towards them. [E.g. MS XI.33, 129, 131, 132, 133, 138]. A few references can also be found in the other subjects like provisions dealing with crimes or contracts. Each of these references provides us with a little glimpse of the life of women.

However, we need to remember that the *Manusmriti* is not a factual description, but a normative text. It talks about how a society "ought to be" and not "how it is". The ideals and norms set for women are referred to as *streedharma*. In order to understand the economic implications of these set norms we need to analyze the nature, content, and implications that *streedharma* had for women. The means and mechanisms through which the productive and reproductive potential of women was guarded and regulated determined their economic status and position. The nuances of the nexus between the roles that were ascribed to women and the economic implications such roles carried, shall be looked at in the following pages.

The central focus in this chapter is to analyze the provisions of the *Manusmriti* vis-à-vis women to determine what the economic implications of *streedharma* for women were.

NATURE OF DHARMA AND STREEDHARMA IN THE MANUSMRITI

Shrutis i.e. what was heard and *Smritis* i.e. what is remembered, together form the corpus of the brahmanical law. 'By *shruti* is meant the *Veda*. By *smriti* is meant the body of law. From these two proceeds the whole systems of duties' [MS II.10]. But *shrutis* or *Vedas* do not expressly contain many legal provisions. The legal codes are

thus mostly comprised of *smritis*. ‘Where there is a conflict between the *Vedas* and the *smriti* – the *Veda* should prevail’ [MS II.13-14]. However, as there was not much of positive law in the *Vedas* an equation was established whereby the *smritis* were understood as having been based on lost or forgotten *shrutis*. For all practical purposes, therefore, the *smritis* were accepted as the effective sources of Hindu law (sic).¹¹

The *Manusmriti* is the most celebrated treatise on brahmanical social order. It begins by giving a mystical/mythical explanation for the nature and origin of the universe and thereafter declares the rules and responsibilities for members of the human society. To provide sanctity and authority to the ordained social order, it claims divine origin for the provisions enshrined in this text. *Manusmriti* states that ‘the *Vedas*, the *Smriti*, the approved usage, and what is agreeable to good conscience are highest authority on law, the quadruple direct evidence of *Dharma*’ [MS II.12]. Thus, law is juxtaposed with *Dharma* i.e. ‘what is followed by those learned in the *Vedas* and what is approved by the conscience of the virtuous who are exempt from hatred and inordinate affection’ [MS II.1]. Theoretically, this *dharma* seems to an impartial body of rules, but vested interests find a voice in the legal tenets. Notably, the privileges for the Brahmins find explicit mention [MS I.103, MS II.16.]¹²

The *Manusmriti* is regarded as the foremost amongst the *smritis* both for its antiquity and authority. The extant Code of Manu was compiled in about 200 BC. ‘Sometime toward the middle of the first millennium, Brhaspati, one of Manu’s successors and himself a composer of a *Dharmasastra*, pays Manu the ultimate compliment: Manu is the authority, and any text contradicting Manu has no validity.’¹³ The rules thereafter have been restated, reinterpreted and replenished by the commentators. In the post *Smriti* period various commentaries came to be written on *Manusmriti* like *Manvarthamuktavali* of Kulluka, *Manubhasya* by Medhatithi, *Manutika* by Govindraj, etc. The changes on a particular aspect of law from *Manusmriti* to any of

¹¹ Mulla, *Hindu Law*, Introduction pg.4.

¹² *Infra*

¹³ Patrick Olivelle, *Manu’s Code of Law*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2005, pg3.

the commentaries can be expected to showcase the changing status and position of the individuals or groups concerned.

The changes in rules and their interpretations overtime prove that neither the law nor the society has been static. These changes also prove that the *dharmā* was neither the sacrosanct divine order nor was it impartial. For example, Roy points out that ‘it appears as if Medhatithi was trying to introduce or reinforce the norms enunciated in the *Manusmṛiti* in a situation where the text or traditions associated with it were not recognized as authoritative or self-evident.’¹⁴

Only a section of the society was allowed to learn and propagate *dharmā*, and their vested interests can be gauged by a thorough perusal. Therefore, we need to remember these biases inherent in the provisions in any exercise to discover the socio-economic history of the period. The exclusive transmission of the *dharmā* through sages, monopoly of brahmins over the memorization and exposition of the same, and the declaration of the excellence of the Brahmin at the very outset [MS II.16] etc showcases the privileged position of the Brahmins and is hint enough to know the interests that are being propagated and protected by the text.

Like the privileged position of the Brahmins as a *varna* is more than obvious, the disadvantaged status of women in *Manusmṛiti* also exposes itself in the very first reading. Though there are verses that call upon to endow them with respect and material wealth, yet the denial of any individuality to them is more than clear. The secondary status accorded to women in this text becomes apparent from the fact that they were denied sacraments with recitation of sacred texts [MS II.66] and were sought to be controlled by men throughout their lives.¹⁵

It is prescribed that ‘even in their own homes, a female-whether she is a child, a young woman, or an old lady-should never carry out any task independently. As a

¹⁴ Kumkum Roy, *Defining the Household: Some Aspects of Prescription and Practice in Early India*, *Social Scientist*, Vol. 22, No. 1/2 (Jan. - Feb., 1994), pg14

¹⁵ *Supra*

child, she must remain under her father's control; as a young woman, under her husband's; and when her husband is dead, under her sons. She must never seek to live independently. She must never want to separate herself from her father, husband, or sons; for by separating herself from them, a woman brings disgrace on both families' [MS V.147-149]. Thus, ritual subordination and socio-economic dependence upon men were to be the basic and distinguishing features of life prescribed for women in *Manusmriti*.

Furthermore, marriage and family were made the twin-axis for the entire life of women. Elaborate rules were made as regards the conduct of the married ladies [MS V.151-166]. For example, *Manusmriti* declares that 'for females, tradition tells us, the marriage ceremony equals the rite of *Vedic* consecration; serving the husband equals living with the teacher; and care of the house equals the tending of the sacred fires'[MS II.67]. With these provisions, the ritual subordination of women ensured social subordination as well. This subordination did not only start from childhood, but also continued throughout their life. To make sure that a woman did not seek an independent existence it was commanded that 'the man to whom her father or, with her father's consent, her brother gives her away, she should obey him when he is alive and not be unfaithful to him when he is dead'[MS V.151].

In order to justify the extraordinary and discriminatory rules made for women, a whole discourse was propagated. Accordingly, 'the *strisvabhava* of women, their innate nature as sexual beings was in conflict with their *stridharma* of fidelity to the husband. In sum, their *strisvabhava* was constantly, enticing them away from their *stridharma*. Significantly, some myths explicitly suggest that a 'demonic' *strisvabhava* was the maternal heritage of women whereas the *stridharma* or the duty of women was their paternal heritage, given to them by the *brahmana* priests.¹⁶ Thus, a patriarchal control over women was established and justified by alleging a natural moral weakness to them [refer MS IX. 14-17].

¹⁶ Uma Chakravarti, *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens*, Popular Prakashan Pvt Ltd., 2005,pg72

Expectedly, most provisions regards women relate to governing their sexuality (both in and outside marriage). This was important because the *varna* system formed a social hierarchy that was to be sustained through hereditary [refer MS III.14-19, also MS II.64]. Since *varnasmakara* was to be avoided in every possible way, therefore extraordinary care was taken to govern the female sexuality. So much so that they were attributed extraordinary and almost vulgar desire for sex and it was made incumbent upon men to govern them. It is proclaimed that 'it is the very nature of women here to corrupt men. On that account, prudent men are never off guard in the presence of alluring young women. For the alluring young woman is capable of leading astray not only the ignorant but even learned men under the sway of anger and lust'[MS II.213-214]. Similarly, it is alleged that 'they pay no attention to beauty, they pay no heed to age; whether he is handsome or ugly, they make love to him with the single thought, "he's a man!". Lechery, fickleness of mind and hard-heartedness are innate in them; even when they are carefully guarded in this world, therefore, they become hostile to their husbands' [MS IX.14-15].

Hence, we can infer that *dharma* and *streedharma* in *Manusmriti* were the discourses and norms that sought to establish a 'brahmanical patriarchy' and were far from any theoretical impartial divine order. A *varnasrama* social order that served the interests of ritually and socially powerful Brahmin men was sought to be established and every other individual and class was to be exploited for the purpose. Subordination of women was essential to maintain such an order. 'The mechanism of controls operated on women through three devices and at three levels: the first was ideology; the second was the right to discipline and keep women under control granted to their kinsmen; and the third was the power of the king to discipline and punish them for their errant behavior.'¹⁷

ROLES ASCRIBED TO WOMEN IN THE *MANUSMRITI*

Like most other ancient texts, the *Manusmriti* also concerns itself more with the temporal world and emphasizes upon protection and propagation of human society.

¹⁷, Uma Chakravarti, *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens*, Popular Prakashan Pvt Ltd., 2005.pg73

Material welfare is given importance and generations are linked through rights and responsibilities to maintain the desired social order. Thus, the vested interests are guarded in perpetuity.

Rules relating to inheritance and *pinda dana*, pious obligation of son to repay the debts of the father, duty of a man to beget a son to repay the debt of the *pitrs* and many other such provisions were woven to strengthen the *varnasrama* system. To illustrate, we can take example of the provision whereby a son was seen as taking over all the debts (both temporal and spiritual) of his father and thus liberating him from the cycle of births and deaths. And so also to beget a son to take over the debts he incurs in the process. Thus, a chain of duties provided the strength to social web that extended far and wide, even beyond life and death. However, it was regarded that only a son born out of the approved wed-locks could liberate his father. Thus, the *varna* system had nexus with the family life, which in turn depended upon regulating female sexuality.

Family life has been explained in terms of household. Household was made central to the social order. The *Manusmriti* states that 'as all living beings exist dependent on air, so people in other orders of life exist dependent on householder. Because it is householders who sustain people in all three orders of life every day by giving them knowledge and food, the householder represents the most senior order of life. Seers, ancestors, gods, beings, and guests seek favors from the householder, which a wise man should grant them. He should duly honor the seers by private Vedic recitation, Gods with burnt oblations, ancestors with an ancestral offering, humans with food, and beings with a Bali offering' [MS III.77-81].

According to the *Manusmriti*, 'women were created to bear children and men to extend the line' [MS IX.96]. It is declared that, 'good fortune smiles incessantly on a family where the husband always finds delight in his wife, and the wife in her husband. For, if the wife does not sparkle, she does not arouse her husband. And if the husband is not aroused, there will be no offspring. When the wife sparkles, so does the entire household; but when she ceases to sparkle, so does the entire household'

[MS III.60-62]. Thus, procreation is held to be the highest responsibility of all mankind. Somewhere in these provisions we find that a women's primary duty was to provide a glow to the household, and without any corresponding rights they became the fulcrum around which the entire society came to seek balance.

While women were condemned for their 'inherent lust', we find that mothers were object of highest reverence. Their relationship with children was one of utmost affection and they were to be honored and taken care of. For example it is stated that 'the teacher is ten times greater than the tutor; the father is a hundred times greater than the teacher; but the mother is a thousand times greater than the father [MS II.145.]. Similarly, various female relatives are given respect but it is enunciated that 'towards a sister of his father and mother and towards his own older sister, he should behave as towards his own older sister, he should behave as towards his own mother; but the mother is more venerable than they' [MS II.133].

Mother is said to be the embodiment of the Earth [MS II.224], and has to be revered by a householder along with the teacher and father. It is stated that 'a householder who does not neglect these three will win the worlds; and, shining with his own body, he will rejoice in heaven like a god' [MS II.232]. Further, it is said that 'he obtains this world by devotion to his mother' [MS II.233]. To subordinate women and 'to make the transition from wife to legitimate motherhood, female sexuality had to be 'managed' to secure the goals of social reproduction.'¹⁸

However, it is not as if male sexuality was not circumscribed. In fact the text abounds in rules made out to keep in check the acts that may lead to physical desires. E.g. it is laid down that 'anyone who is over twenty and able to distinguish between the attractive and the unattractive should not greet here a young wife of his teacher by clasping her feet' [MS II.212]. Similarly, it is commanded that one 'must not apply oil on his teacher's wife, assist her at her bath, massage her limbs, or do her hair' [MS II.211]. Not only was adultery defined in very strict and narrow terms, but also it was stated for a man that 'he must not sit alone with his mother, sister, or daughter; the

¹⁸ *Ibid*, pg 69.

array of sensory organs is powerful and overpowers even a learned man' [MS II.215]. Furthermore, it was stated that 'he must not sit alone with his mother, sister, or daughter; the array of sensory organs is powerful and overpowers even a learned man.' Sexual liaisons outside marriage were strictly prohibited.

Adultery was looked upon as a heinous crime, and it invited punishment for the culprit as well as disregard to the children born out of adulterous relationships [MS III. 174, VIII.356-359, VIII.371-86, XI.60, and XI. 177-178]. The reason for severe provisions regards adultery can be explained in terms of anxiety to prevent or control *varnasamkara* [MS X.24].

However, there is a crucial difference between the control of female sexuality and that of their male counterparts. This difference is the control given to men over the women, i.e. patriarchy. As an ideal it is expected that 'a husband and wife, after they have completed the marriage rite, should always work hard so as to prevent them from being unfaithful to each other and thus being split apart'- [MS IX.102]. But to maintain the *varna* system it was laid down that 'seeing that this is the clearly the highest Law of all social classes, even weak husbands strive to guard their wives' [MS IX.6]. For the maintenance of the *varna* order, marriages of twice-born outside *varna* were campaigned against, especially the marriages with *shudra* women [MS III.14-19, III.63-64, also MS III.155]. Furthermore, unequal treatment was meted out to the wives from different *varnas* [MS II.210, MS III.12-19, MS IX.85-87] as well children born out of them [MS IX.149-157]. Even the rituals or procedures for marriage across *varna* hierarchy display the disapproval associated with them. E.g. it is stated that 'the consecratory rite of taking the hand in marriages prescribed only for brides of equal class. The following should be recognized as the procedure for the rite of marriage when brides are of unequal class. When marrying an upper-class man, a *Ksatriya* bride should take hold of an arrow, a *Vaisya* bride a goad, and a *Sudra* bride the hem of his garment'[MSIII.43-44]. In the light of these provisions and similar others, we can infer that *varna* and gender hierarchy provided the basic structure of the households and the society.

Social sanction was an important mechanism through which these norms were expected to be enforced. A person who transgressed the rules might not get fines or corporeal punishments, but he could be segregated from the society. Thus, anyone who wanted to maintain his ritual status and social reputation would be obliged to follow the norms.

From the foregoing discussion we can infer that female sexuality and reproductive potential was meticulously regulated in order to further the ends of the 'brahmanical patriarchy'. A set of rules, rituals, sanctions etc were laid down to ensure that women were economically, socially and ritually subjugated, and men too were deterred to deviate from the *varnasrama* order. With regards to the implications of this system, we can agree with Kumkum Roy who rightfully points out that 'excluding such men and women from the ritual implied a condemnation of the activities of women who attempted to assert control over procreation, thus contesting their prescribed role of functioning as inert instruments of procreation within the context of the *grha*.'¹⁹

Thus, we see that women were employed in the important function of social reproduction. This function of producing and nurturing the generations was essential for the social order but little recognition was given to economic value of reproductive function. 'Certain areas of domestic activity are passed by with relatively little discussion. These include the organization of child-rearing, and of production. Clearly, even the prescriptive literature, despite its claim to be all-pervasive, had its limits.'²⁰ Thus, within the family and household women's productive and reproductive potential was channelized in order to serve the social order but little recognition was assigned to it.

BEYOND THE IDEAL ROLES: THE REGULATIONS FOR WOMEN

The submissive and ever sacrificing wife was the role model that the brahmanical canons defined for women, but they could not overlook the actual social conditions.

¹⁹ Kumkum Roy, *Defining the Household: Some Aspects of Prescription and Practice in Early India*, *Social Scientist*, Vol. 22, No. 1/2 (Jan. - Feb., 1994), pg12.

²⁰ *Ibid*, pg 9.

The repeated emphasis on subordination of women and prevention of *varnasamkara* hints towards the fears of the lawgivers. Similarly, there are compromises, negotiations, silences etc that showcase the difference between the actual social conditions and the one brahmanical texts sought to establish. As Roy remarks 'the attempt to enforce a specific definition of the *grha*, and the problems inherent in the process, point to the existence of alternative forms of household organization'²¹, we can similarly seek to find the alternative socio-economic structures of gender roles and relations in the society that was sought to be aligned to a particular order by the *Manusmriti*.

In this section we shall analyze the various provisions that can provide us with an insight into the everyday lives of women and also their differing status and position at different stages of life. Their lives in the natal home, the nature and process of matrimony, matrimonial life, property rights, widowhood, everyday duties etc all shall be looked into to understand their lives and their socio-economic status.

The secondary status ascribed and advocated for women needs no more elucidation, and the absence of provisions that show the desire for a girl child shows that they were not valued. The birth of a daughter even if celebrated by way of sacraments was to be different from that of their brothers, in as much as that all such rituals were to be performed without the recitation of *Vedic* formulas [MS II.66]. Such provisions ensured that women were made to internalize their ritual inferiority right from childhood. Unmarried daughters were to be provided for by the father. In fact, daughter is stated to be the object of utmost affection [MS IV.185]. Should a girl lose her parents, her economic interests were well looked after. It was provided that from their shares, 'the brothers shall give individually to the unmarried girls, one-quarter from the share of each. Those unwilling to give will become outcastes' [MS IX.118].

Thus, their life in natal home, though not same as their brothers yet was far from one of total dependence. But the emphasis on getting a daughter married in time, made sure that the days of singlehood were numbered. There was a whole lot of emphasis

²¹ *Ibid*, pg16.

on the early marriages, as early as pre-puberty. It is provided that 'for three years shall a girl wait after the onset of her puberty; after that time, she may find for herself a husband of equal status. If a woman who has not been given in marriage finds a husband on her own, she does not incur any sin, and neither does the man she finds' [MS IX.90-91]. This is a rare example of freedom given to women but not without purpose. It is submitted that in order to realize the reproductive potential it was necessary to get the girls married. This is also hinted at by the statement that 'the father has lost his ownership of her by frustrating her menses' [MS IX.93]. This provision hints at the importance attached to the procreative function of the women.

However, neither the girl herself nor the father was given the power to transgress the *varna* order. It was provided that 'when there is a suitor who is eminent, handsome, and of equal status, one should give the girl to him according to rule, even if she has not attained the proper age. Even if she has reached puberty, a girl should rather remain at home until death; one should never give her to a man bereft of good qualities' [MS IX.88-89]. It must be noted that once the equal status clause was fulfilled, the tender age of the girl was immaterial. The reason behind these provisions for early marriage and emphasis on father's duty to get his daughter married can be gauged from the observation made by Hannah Fane. Accordingly, 'child marriage ensured subordination of the bride to the bridegroom's family, prevented promiscuity, and insured marriage according to the rules of hyper-gamy.'²²

We can now analyze the oft quoted verse from *Manusmriti* viz. 'where women are revered there the gods rejoice; but where they are not, no rite bears any fruit. Where females relatives grieve, that family soon comes to ruin; but where they do not grieve, it always prospers' [MS III.56-57]. Is it actually that they were given high regard? It is provided that 'if they desire an abundance of good fortune, fathers, brothers, husbands, and brother-in law should revere their women and provide them with

²² Hannah Fane, *The Female Element in Indian Culture*, Asian Folklore Studies, Vol. 34, No. 1 (1975), Asian Folklore Studies, Nanzan University, pg 62.

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adornments' [MS III.55]. With such an explicit declaration it is obvious that concern for women is primarily targeted towards the comfort or welfare of men.

Perhaps the general subordination and lack of equal human status to women had some bitter fall outs and a threat to the aspired order from the subjugated group might have been perceived. This is suggested by the mention that 'when female relatives, not receiving due reverence, curse any house, it comes to total ruin, as if struck down by witchcraft' [MS III.58]. Thus, it is clear that the *streedharma* as an ideal might not have been acceptable to all, and in order to quell the rebellious voices, a policy of appeasement was to be followed by men for maintaining the patriarchal set up. The text thus explicitly states that, 'if men want to become prosperous, therefore, they should always honor the women on joyful occasions and festive days with gifts of adornments, clothes, and food' [MS III.59].

From the discussion so far we can infer that matrimonial relations were structured in such a manner that women's dependence was made absolute within the household. The subordinate and dependent status accorded to women required that they had to be provided for by the men. Thus, maintenance provisions were elaborately laid down in the *Manusmriti*. It is stated that 'the husband receives his wife from the gods, (he does not wed her) according to his own will; doing what is agreeable to the gods, he must always support her (while she is) faithful' [MS IX.95]. This was particularly necessary for two reasons. Firstly, as noted in the foregoing discussion there might have been women who defied the subordination and dependence. In order to guard against these tendencies it was imperative to make sure that they were not put in such circumstances that they decide to fend for and stand up for themselves. Secondly, a sense of security is essential to contain a dependent. Thirdly, these provisions would perhaps check abuse of control that man could exercise over women.

A man while entering into the third *asrama* had a choice to either go accompanied by his wife or entrusting her to his sons' [MS VI.3]. Thus in case where a husband was to leave his wife behind, the sons were duty bound to provide for the mother. It is declared that 'reprehensible is the son who does not protect his mother after her

husband has died' [MS IX.4]. Hence, apart from husband, sons were charged with similar duties.

Even during the marital life whenever a husband had to depart to other place for any reason, he was asked upon to provide for the maintenance of the wife. For example, it was stipulated that 'A man should provide for his wife before he goes away on business, for even a steadfast woman will go astray when starved for a livelihood'[MS IX.74]. Further it was laid down that 'if he provides for her before going away, she should live a life of restraint; but if he leaves without providing for her, she may maintain herself by engaging in respectable crafts'[MS IX.75]. Thus it was incumbent upon husband to provide for the wife. In fact it is stipulated that 'if a man does anything for the sake of his happiness in another world, to the detriment of those whom he is bound to maintain, that produces evil results for him, both while he lives and when he is dead'[MS XI.10]. Thus, maintenance of wife and other dependants was to be ensured before indulging in other pursuits.

Furthermore, even in case of bitterness between husband and wife, the better half could not be deprived of the protection and care all of a sudden. The text prescribes that 'for one year let a husband tolerate a wife who loathes him; after one year, he should confiscate her inheritance and stop cohabiting with her' [MS IX.77]. Under certain conditions, a wife could be temporarily cast away, superseded or chastised in other manner but she was not deprived of maintenance. E.g. it has been provided 'if a wife commits a transgression against her husband who is deranged, drunk, or sick, deprived of her ornaments and belongings, she should be cast out for three months' [MS IX.78]. This is a temporary repudiation. On the other hand, it was laid down that 'if a wife loathes a husband who has become insane, fallen from caste, or impotent, who is without semen, or who has contracted an evil disease, she must neither be abandoned nor deprived of her inheritance'[MS IX.79]. For the extreme case where there is a wife who 'drinks liquor or is dishonest, cantankerous, sick, vicious, or wasteful she may be superseded at any time by marriage to another wife' [MS IX.80]. But superseded wife was also to be provided for. Perhaps it was necessary to keep these wives dependent in order to protect the *varna* order. This can be gauged from

the provision that 'if a wife who has been superseded storms out of the house incensed, however, she should be locked up immediately or repudiated in the presence of the family' [MS IX.83].

So far we have seen the provisions specific to women in the household. However, this household was a unit of larger society, and thus larger social structure has a bearing upon the social status and economic position of women and vice-versa. We have noticed that as long as the women conformed to the rules (i.e. they married men of same *varna* to beget their children especially sons) they were given an honorable status but any act outside these rules invited sanction as well as punitive measures. Was an independent individual existence possible for women? This question shall be analyzed from two different perspectives in the following section. Firstly, a study of the property rights of the women shall be made to see if they had economic security apart from the matrimonial home and maintenance. Secondly, we shall take a look at various mentions of women that shed light on their existence apart from in the role of a wife or mother. However on account of the very nature of the text, such mentions are rare and we get little information about them from the *Manusmriti*.

'Tradition presents six types of women's property: what a woman receives at the nuptial fire, what she receives when she is taken away, what she is given as a token of love, and what she receives from her brothers, mother, and father'[MS IX.194]. It seems that this property was more in nature of gift than inheritance. But there is mention of inheritance for women in certain exceptional cases. A daughter is not prescribed any share per se. It is in the case of an unmarried sister (*Kanya*) that brothers are asked to give a quarter parts of each²³.

However an interesting point to note is the institution of "female-son". The daughters could be appointed as heirs in case there was no male heir, though the property in such cases would pass on to the daughter's son who might perform the rite for the maternal grandfather. But Manu does not favor this practice and lays down that 'a

²³ *Supra*

wise man must not marry a girl who has no brother or whose father is unknown, for fear that the Law of “female-son” may be in force’ [MS III.11].

From the foregoing provisions it can be judged that the property rights for women represent an amalgamation of social realities. Shares to unmarried sisters were essential to see that they are not left destitute while yet to find their roles as wives. The six-fold property could come to them only at the time of marriage or thereafter. The institution of female son was more a mechanism of keeping the property within closed group of cognates and agnates rather than letting it go into the strange hands.

Strangely, we do not find mention of self-earned property amongst the components of property of women. But that is not to suggest that they did not engage in economic activities. Women were employed in royal service though the king was advised to remove them during the consultations [MS VII.149-150]. Further it has been stated that in case the husband has not made provisions for a wife while going away for one or the other reason, the wife could subsist by manual labor. Thus we see that women did work and were employed by the state as well. The lack of provisions on self earned property can perhaps be explained if we recall that women themselves are ‘gifted’ to men and are thus not capable of holding property.

Though we find many provisions regarding the property and maintenance rights for women, yet it remains to be analyzed whether they were free to spend it or dispose it off independently. There are mentions in the *Manusmṛiti* wherein the women are expected to be economical in their spending [MS V.150]. Also, it is said that a student when in need may approach his mother for alms for she won’t insult him by refusing to oblige. Thus, perhaps women were somewhat independent in the matters of normal daily spending. However, we do not find any mention of women acquiring assets or disposing off property. Thus, perhaps women’s property was either static with additions and depletion occurring only in case of social/ritual give and take.

Women’s property is regarded as belonging to them alone. Not only was there a moral sanction against relatives who lived on a women’s property but also legal provisions

to safeguard the same. It was proclaimed that 'when relatives foolishly live off a woman's wealth- slave women, vehicles, or clothes- those evil men will descend along the downward course' [MS III.52]. Such problems were not left with the threat of suffering in hell but formed an integral part of the duties of the king. The king was obliged to take care of women's property. Like a minor's or student's property was to be guarded by the king till he could attain the age to inherit it [MS III.27], similarly it was commanded that 'the same protection must be extended to barren women, women without sons or bereft of family, women devoted to their husbands, widows, and women in distress. If their in-laws usurp the property while they are alive, a righteous king should discipline them with the punishment laid down for thieves' [MS IX.28-29]. We can infer that largely women were independent in matters of managing their property and state provided protection for the same.

However, men and wife were not equals. The women were 'owned' by their husbands and very act of betrothal gave the husband property rights over the wife. Accordingly, men have marital property in women. Women are compared to field that can be owned. A wife, a son and a slave, these three are declared to have no property; the wealth which they earn is (acquired) for him to whom they belong. This contradiction can be resolved on a combined reading of the provisions in the light of overall concerns of the text. It is suggested that women's property was safe as long as they conformed with social norms of the patriarchal society they lived in. Thus, under normal circumstances women held their property but men could obviously take away such property in case of bitter relations

Even the devolution of their property depended upon the nature of their marriage. 'In a "Brahma," "Divine" "Seer's" "*Gandharva*," or "*Prajapatya*" marriage, the property of a woman is awarded to her husband alone, if she dies childless. In a "Demonic" or a subsequent form of marriage, on the other hand, any property given to a woman is awarded to her mother and father, if she dies childless' [MS IX.196-197]. In the approved forms of marriages therefore the inheritance laws are similar to general inheritance laws. On the other hand the disapproval against the marriages which were regarded blamable invited different inheritance rules.

As has been discussed earlier the property rights including inheritance law governing the disposal or distribution of separate property of woman reflects their conditions or the approval or disapproval they invited. The property rights, inheritance and management of women's property were to confirm to the rules of *varna* order. As we have seen the *varna* hierarchy had close nexus with gender hierarchy, therefore expectedly it has been laid down that 'women must never alienate common property of the family or even her own private property without the consent of her husband' [MS IX.199].

CONCLUSION

On the basis of the observations made and the inferences drawn on the holistic study of the *Manusmriti*, an outline sketch of lives of women and their economic roles can be drawn. It needs no more elaboration that women were primarily looked upon as procreators and the text concerns itself with regulating and controlling the reproductive potential of women.

In order to achieve this objective, all the social process and institutions like marriage, inheritance laws, roles and rituals were so designed as to leave little or no options for women, but to follow the set ideals of the virtuous wife and the selfless mother. While analyzing this designed social structure, Uma Chakravarti rightly opines that 'patriarchies in the sub-continent were contained within a larger system which was graded according to caste. The differences were arranged according to conceptual grid that of Brahmanical Patriarchy.'²⁴

The social order of Brahmanical patriarchy could stand strong only by way of weakening the power of women. *Stree-dharma* enshrined in the *Manusmriti* worked as a double-edged weapon to achieve this purpose. Firstly, by way of defining the ideal roles and code of conduct for women, it made them subservient to social order.

²⁴ Uma Chakravarti, *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens*, Popular Prakashan Pvt Ltd., 2005, pg 84.

Secondly, by putting restrictions on their employment opportunities, women's dependence was ensured.

Hence, women were dehumanized and commoditized. The entire system made them a resource to be heavily utilized but assigned low-value. Even at the risk of exaggeration it can be said that their position was similar to that of milch cattle. Sukumari Bhattacharji remarks that 'women's sole worth lay in their reproductive role and even there she was seen as the field, the 'harvest' belonging to the seed owner.'²⁵

Entire happiness (both worldly and spiritual) of a woman was declared to be in the acceptance of *Stree-dharma*. This code of female propriety required that 'though he may be bereft of virtue, given to lust, and totally devoid of good qualities, a good woman should always worship her husband like a god' [MS V.154]. Obedience to the husband was the sole way of attaining heaven for a woman [MS V.155]. This duty of subordinate service required that 'a good woman, desiring to go to the same world as her husband, should never do anything displeasing to the man who took her hand, whether he is alive or dead. After her husband is dead, she may voluntarily emaciate her body by eating pure flowers, roots, and fruits; but she must never mention even the name of another man' [MS V.156-57]. Thus, a woman's life was meant for selfless service both during matrimony and widowhood.

Many a provisions contained in the *Manusmriti* emphasize upon procreation as a duty incumbent upon women, however, in order to discourage women from making motherhood to be their primary concern, the text keeps emphasizing upon *varna* considerations. Even within the *varna* considerations, with the motive of checking customs or practices like *niyoga* or widow-re-marriage, the *Manusmriti* declares that 'if the line is about to die out, a wife who is duly appointed may obtain the desired progeny through a brother-in-law or a relative belonging to the same ancestry' [MS

²⁵ S. Bhattacharya, *Paradigms Lost: Notes on Social History in India*. Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 17, No. 14/16, Annual Number (Apr., 1982), Published by: Economic and Political Weekly, pg 41.

IX.57]. Thus, it is only in the extreme case of possibility of total annihilation of a lineage that such an exception is made. To express the strong disapproval with this practice, the *Manusmriti* declares that 'this Law of beasts, despised by learned twice-born men, was extended to humans also during the reign of Vena. He was a preeminent royal sage, who once ruled the entire earth and, his mind overcome by lust, created the intermixing of classes. Since that time good people denounce anyone who is senseless enough to appoint a woman to have children after her husband dies' [MS IX.66-68].

Moreover it is provided that 'When a woman is unfaithful to her husband because of her strong desire for children, she is disgraced in this world and excluded from the husband's world. No recognition is given here to offspring fathered by another man or begotten on another's wife; nor is it taught anywhere that a good woman should take a second husband. When a woman abandons her own husband of lower rank and unites with a man of higher rank, she only brings disgrace upon herself in the world and is called "a woman who has had a man before"' [MS V.161-163].

Thus, highlighting and glorifying the role of a 'good woman' all women were required to live a life of restraint and obedience. Their productive activities at home were assigned no value and are rather looked upon as essential mechanism to control them. The code lays down that 'no man is able to thoroughly guard women by force; but by using the following strategies, he will be able to guard them thoroughly. He should employ her in the collection and the disbursement of his wealth, in cleaning, in meritorious activity, in cooking food, and in looking after household goods. When they are kept confined within the house by trusted men, they are not truly guarded; only when they guard themselves by themselves are they truly well guarded' [MS IX.10-12].

That *Stree-dharma* implied that women formed economic resources greatly exploited in the interest of brahmanical patriarchy and could always be replaced by the next consignment can be gathered from the impudent statement in the text itself that declares- 'when a wife who has conducted herself in this manner and who belongs to

the same class as her husband dies before him, a twice-born man who knows the Law should cremate her with his sacred fires to his predeceased wife as her funeral, he should marry a wife again and establish anew his sacred fires'[MS V.167].

Chapter 3

Women and Work in the *Kautilīya's* *Arthaśāstra*

INTRODUCTION

The role of women in a patriarchal social system is defined and confined to serve the purposes of the established social order. The emphasis is not only on their subjugation to remove the threat to the male dominance but also on their deployment for the propagation of such an order. The normative literature does so by prescribing roles and integrating them with a discourse which prohibits any thoughts of an alternative to the establishment. All institutions in such a society further the cause of the established order.

State as an institution reflects the social order. The principles and the principal structure on which the state organization is based are same as present in the society at large. Thus, it is no coincidence that men occupy all the seats of power in a state which has a patriarchal social base. Similarly, the maintenance of *varna* hierarchy is one of the important concerns present in the *Kautilīya's Arthaśāstra*.

Each social institution for the purposes of fulfilling its own function may assign different status and roles to women. For example, the *dharmasastric* literature aiming to establish a brahmanical patriarchy in the domestic and social sphere confines women to the household and define them with reference to men. On the other hand, the *Arthaśāstra* tradition concerned primarily with governance and economics, looks upon women as an economic resource and mentions about women engaged in various kind of economic activities as well as state services.

Interestingly, ancient Indian political scientists exhibit a deep understanding of the relationship between the polity and the economy, so much so that the celebrated treatise guiding the real or aspiring rulers in the matters of policy, polity and governance is titled as the '*Arthaśāstra*'. Both politics and economics being matters of practical importance and dealing with the matters of the real world can be expected to give us a glimpse of the actual socio-economic conditions, though caution is required in drawing any inference from the available sources. One has to be aware of the fact that the *Arthaśāstra* was a prescriptive text.

The *Arthasāstra* claims to be a codification of the ‘many treatises on the science of politics as have been composed by ancient teachers for the acquisition and protection of earth’ [KA, I.1.1]. Evidently, the treatise is concerned with gaining and maintaining the territorial authority. However, maintenance of this authority is referred to in terms of *palana* i.e. sustenance and management. For the said purposes, the *Arthasāstra* gives not only a detailed administrative structure but also elaborate instructions for formulation of various policies and utilization of various resources. Everyone and everything that falls within the domain of the ruler is looked upon as a resource for the cause of the state.

Women in this text are no different from other animate or inanimate resources that can be utilized for the purposes of the state. They are yet another asset that can help in maintenance of the state authority and ensuring its smooth functioning. They have both productive and reproductive potential which can be subordinated to the interests of the state. Since the political power is the overriding motive, the *Arthasāstra* often overlooks the questions of morality in the face of material interests. ‘Material well being alone is supreme.’ says Kautiliya [KA I.7.6]. Further, it insists that ‘spiritual good and sensual pleasures depend on material well being’ [KA I.7.7]. Thus, it is important to remember that the roles assigned to women in this text were those which the state wanted them to play for its very own needs. To what extent were they actually prevalent are a matter of conjecture. A thorough look at the text can help us to draw tenable inferences in this regard.

Since the provisions of the *Arthasāstra* are largely concerned with the matter of the functioning of the state, it is perhaps important to have a look at the kind of state this text seeks to establish. It is important to note that the state besides being a power structure is also a facilitator of the activities. Its authority can help promote or demote various possible activities. Evidently, just the way a society determines the features of the polity, likewise the influence of the state has determining impact on certain social institutions.

ARTHAŚĀSTRA AS THE SOURCE

Before we make a survey of the women as mentioned in the *Arthaśāstra*, it is advisable to mark /highlight a few overriding concerns of the text that can shed light on the nature of state and society envisaged in the text, for these concerns have a bearing on the depiction of women as well.

Firstly, as stated earlier the motive of the *Arthaśāstra* is to channelize all resources towards the ends of the state. Maximum utilization of the resources for the said purpose, being the primary objective of the text, necessitates the various kinds of guarantees and promises which can help in attaining this objective. Unmistakably, the roles and functions mentioned for women in the text were those that were regulated in the interest of the state, and in order to make these so called jobs for women more acceptable, the state promised that it would ensure that these roles were given sanction as well as a sense of security. Thus, the mentioned provisions cannot be taken at face value. The gap between the theory and the practice needs to be carefully examined by corroboration of provisions of the text with other sources.

Secondly, it is important to remember that the text is meant for the knowledge of a limited few. The princes, their advisors and a few other people of importance were possibly the people who had access to this knowledge apart from the teachers/political scientists. The motive of all these people was to safeguard the state and their own interests therein. The functions they envisaged for women were meant to fulfill their own interests, therefore the protective provisions or privileges (if any) given to women need to be interpreted in the light of these concerns. The roles assigned to them are very well deliberated and we need to understand the different aspects with due caution.

Thirdly, though the text deals largely with political and economic matters, yet it is by no means silent on the domestic life and social order. The negotiation between polity and society for the purposes of economy and protection of vested interests needs to be carefully scrutinized.

Further it is important to note that both the *dharmasastras* and the *Arthasāstra*, primarily voice the concerns and opinions of the men in power and authority. This power and authority might be derived from political, economic, social or ritual status. There is little hope of tracing the ideas and opinions of women in these texts. Thus, wherever possible we need to discover their voices through astute observation of commissions and omissions.

Assessing the economic roles of women in the *Arthasāstra* requires a thorough study of the various roles in which women are mentioned in the text, as well as the roles and matters on which the text is silent. Further, individual mentions need to be grouped and regrouped to understand the economic role and position of women in general. Enlisting the references to various activities they are mentioned in and provisions relating to them is only half the work done, for we need to understand the deliberation that has allowed the provisions enshrined in this text.

Women are by no means a homogeneous class/category. The differential social position of women that we have come across in the *dharmasastric* literature provides us with the glimpse of variations, and we can hope to find other variations in the other sources. Likewise, the *Arthasāstra* gives us information on women who are engaged in economic activities of various kinds. They formed a part of both the skilled and the unskilled workforce. They were into professional as well as non-professional employment. Some of their vocations were related to their gender, while the others were not. There were female state employees as well as independent working women. Similarly, some of them were engaged in activities which though not dependent on their biological constitution are nonetheless categorized as women's domain, e.g. domestic services etc. Some of them were actual state employees, while some others were in contractual relations with the state.

REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN IN THE ARTHASĀSTRA

We can perhaps begin by mentioning a few roles that women performed and thereafter start putting them into various categories to understand the implications. However, it is important to state beforehand that even within these categories there

were variations, many of which are mentioned within the text under perusal. We find women employed in the weaving industry, prostitution, and as bodyguards of the king, palace guards, spies and various attendants and slaves. Various terms mentioned for women in the *Arthaśāstra* give us the idea of their possible economic roles and status.

Some of the important mentions are *Silpavati, Aniskasini, Dasi, Vidhava, Kanyaka, Nyangah, Prositās, Vrddha-rajadasibhi, Devadasi, Matrka, Rupajiva, Ardhasitikas, Ganika, Pratiganika, Pumsali, Bandhaki, Vesya, Svairini, Pravarjita, Dandapratikarini, Dhatri, Paricarika, Upacarika* etc. Some of the women are not mentioned in direct terms and are rather stated as wives of men engaged in particular vocations e.g. wives of *caranas, talavacaras, matsya, lubdhakas, gopalakas, prastrta, natas, nartakas, gayana-vadaka, vakjivana, kustlavas, plavaka, saubhikta* etc.

A survey of the aspects like what categories of women were engaged in different kind of economic activities can be helpful in understanding their economic status. Interestingly, we find that it is the women with little or no hopes of a regular married or domestic life that are engaged in various kinds of activities, though this is not to suggest that there were no working householders. Herein, we can take a look at three important state employments viz. Courtesans, Spies and women employed in weaving industry.

Courtesans/*Ganikas* by very nature of their profession cannot be expected to be in a normal marital or family relationship as have been canonized by the brahmanical codes. The provisions concerned with their sons, daughters and mothers show that their family system was not the one that was prevalent in the society at large [KA II.27.2, 29]. Further, they were deployed as spies as well.

Women spies were of varied kinds and it is tough to infer anything regards their personal life. Some of them might have had to live in households of internal or external enemies for years on end, keeping their own identities under cover. Some of them were expected to enter into carnal relationships with strangers, enemies or suspects for the purposes of digging out information. The morality prescribed by the

brahmanical codes did not work for them. Some of the spies were expected to work as murderers as well. How the professional life of these women affected their personal life is tough to judge, but we sure can expect something different from the ordinary.

Looking at the women employed in the weaving industry we find that there were different kinds of employment which this industry offered. Interestingly, different categories of destitute women seem to have benefited from employment in this sector. The examples mentioned in the text include 'crippled women, maidens, women who have left their home, women who are paying their fine through personal labor, through mothers of courtesans, through old female slaves of the king and through female slaves of temples whose service of the gods has ceased' [KA II.23.2, 11].

These destitute women are given extraordinary protection from the possible hunting eyes of men. Perhaps they were women whose honor was separated from their economic conditions, such as destitute women of the higher *varna*, and also women whose existence was required for the smooth functioning of the state like the women who were employed as palace servants, spies, female attendants and the guards. The political and social hierarchy are interlinked and two re-enforced each other. Apart from old female servants of the king, the list does not seem to contain any category that could be into family life, and even here the very fact they had to earn a living for themselves in old age hints at their economic plight. The very fact that these women were left to fend for themselves in a patriarchal society wherein women are generally economically dependent on men in family, show that their family life was either long over or was not possible at all.

Other important sectors of state employment for women were female attendants, palace servants and 'female guards bearing bows' [KA I.21.1]. Amongst these the first two can be expected to lead a family life, but no certain statements can be made as regards female guards. This mention of female guards is perhaps the only one that we find with regard to ancient Indian history. Jaiswal suggests that these women

perhaps came from *Bhila* or *Kirata* tribe.²⁶ What were the possible reasons for these women to join in the service of the king and what impact it had on their domestic and social life needs to be explored in greater detail.

Courtesans (*Ganikas*) were important category of state employees. The provisions relating to their training in skills [KA II.27.28-30], management of their establishment, safeguards provided to them [KA II.27.11-18], and the duties entrusted to them shows that they were not mere prostitutes [KA Book II Chapter 27]. We find that they were highly paid, particularly if we notice that the perks their work got them were also considerably high [KA II.27.1, 28]. Their beauty and youth was a valued asset which was both an object of display and valuable commodity. This is evident from the fact that most beautiful and ornamented courtesans were to get maximum turns for attendance with various status symbols like parasol, water jug, fan etc [KA II.27.4]. Their ransom price was also very high [KA II.27.6]. Furthermore, the state earned revenue through them. For example, it was commanded that 'actors and prostitutes shall pay half their wage' [KA 5.2.23].

It is however to be noted despite all the protective provisions, courtesans had little say in choosing their clients for it is expressly laid down that 'a courtesan, not approaching a man at the command of the king, shall receive one thousand strokes with the whip, or a fine of five thousand *panas*' [KA II.27.19].

A perusal of the employment provided by the state can help us understand two very important aspects of women and work. Firstly, this exercise will help us locate the ways in which state made use of the productive potential of women. Secondly, it will help us understand the negotiation between the state and the society vis-à-vis regulating the roles of women in a patriarchal society.

According to Kautilīya, 'those women who do not stir out, those living separately, widows, crippled women or maidens, who wish to earn their living, should be given

²⁶ Suvira Jaiswal, *Female Images in the Arthasāstra of Kautilīya*, Social Scientist, Volume 29, No. ¾. (March-April 2002), p.55-56.

work by sending his own female slaves to them with (a view to) support (them). Or, if they come themselves to the yarn-house he should cause an interchange of goods and wages to be made early at dawn. The lamp (should be there) only for the inspection of the yarn. For looking at the face of the woman or conversing with her on another matter, the lowest fine for violence (shall be imposed) for delay in the payment of wages, the middle fine, also for payment of wages for work not done' [KA II.23.11-14]. We need to identify all these women.

'Those who did not stir out' of their home must have been those who were bound to their homes and hearth. The cue to their identity lies in the social system which can be gathered from the *dharmasastras* and relevant provisions of the *Arthaśāstra*. Jaiswal's suggestion that these women (*aniskasini*) belonged to the higher to upper castes²⁷ is fairly tenable in the light of the various textual sources as well commonly held view that once a women steps into her marital home, she does not step out but for cremation. However, the term caste needs to be used with qualification.

'Those living separately' (*prositās*) is an interesting category to look at especially because it has direct nexus with the possibilities that women had for moving out of marital homes and matrimonial alliances. Marriage in the *Arthaśāstra* echoes the *dharmasastric* views and mentions the same eight form of marriages [KA III.2.2-11]. It is interesting to note that the *Arthaśāstra* states that 'maintenance and ornaments constitute woman's property' [KA.III.2.14]. The inclusion of maintenance in the women's property is an important aspect. In a way it accords economic value to their role and gives them economic security. This is further evidenced by the fact that Kautilīya fixes the upper limit to this value when he stipulates that 'maintenance is an endowment of a maximum of two thousand (*panas*); as to ornaments, there is no limit' [KA.III.2.15].

However the crucial question is whether this maintenance was paid (or was meant to be paid) to the wife in marital home or to wife who lived separately? According to the *Arthaśāstra*, women's property could be used for maintenance of sons and daughters-

²⁷ *Ibid*, pg 51.

in-law [KA.III.2.16]. Why would a women living in a marital home need to maintain such dependents? Or were there women who were the breadwinners? If yes, did these women belong to particular social categories?

It is difficult to find the complete answers to these questions, but we do find a cue in the provisions mentioned in the text itself. It is stated that 'if it (woman's property) has been used for three years, the (wife) shall not question, in the case of a pious marriages. If used in the *Gandharava* and *Asura* marriages, the (husband) shall be made to return both with interest, if used in the *Raksasa* and *Paisaca* marriages, he shall pay (the penalty for) theft' [KA.III.2.17-18]. Thus, we see that use of a woman's property is linked with the kind of matrimonial relationship she entered into, which in turn is related to her social status.

The relative importance assigned to the father and mother in case of approval for different forms of marriages needs to be mentioned here. Mothers have a voice in the unapproved form of marriages [KA III.2.11-12]. Since these marriages could be practiced only by the lower *varnas* thus it can be said that women of lower *varnas* could have been living separately and bringing up their families. This can be substantiated by the fact that barring 'pious marriages' [KA III.2.18], Kautiliya permits divorce by mutual consent to disaffected husband and wife [KA III.3.16].

Jaiswal's suggestion that '*prostitas* were apparently not divorced but deserted or disaffected wives of upper caste men living on their own' seems to overlook the above-mentioned independent women who worked and raised not only their little children but also sons and their spouses. Jaiswal's suggestion as regards the deserted or disaffected wives is also corroded by the fact that such wives were not only to get maintenance but also compensation. According to the *Arthaśāstra* the husband was required to wait for eight years if the wife did not bear children or did not bear a son or was barren, for ten if she gave birth to dead progeny, for twelve years if she only daughters were born to her [KA III.2.38]. Thereafter he could marry a second wife with the object of getting a son [KA III.2.39]. In case of transgression of these rules, the husband was to hand over the dowry, the woman's property and half that as

compensation for supersession, and pay a fine of twenty-four *panas* maximum [KA III.2.40].

With these many protective provisions for disaffected and deserted wives, it is difficult to agree that they were left destitute and had to live on their own. The sanction against renunciation and leaving family without making provisions necessary economic provisions [KA II.1.29-31], also suggests that maintenance of wife was a responsibility to be duly carried out even in case of desertion.

Further, we may notice that besides the provision for divorce, Kautilya provided that 'A husband, who has become degraded or gone to a foreign land or has committed an offence against the king or is dangerous to her life or has become an outcast or even an impotent one may be abandoned' [KA III.2.48]. The women married to such men can also be categorized as *prositās*.

Besides *Aniskasini* and *Prositās*, widows formed another important category employed or supported by the weaving industry. A study of rich widows in this context can shed more light on the issues of working women. The rules regarding the remarriage of widows and the devolution of their women's property in such circumstances sheds light on the nexus between control of productive and reproductive resources of the women.

According to the *Arthaśāstra*, 'when the husband is dead, the (widow), if desirous of leading a life of piety, shall forthwith receive the endowment and ornaments and the remainder of the dowry' [KA III.2.19]. But 'if, after receiving (these), she marries again, she shall be made to return both with interest' [KA III.2.20]. Thus we see that largely, if a widow was to remarry she could do so only if she was ready to part with her property/assets.

However, under such conditions reproductive resources of a woman would have been wasted. The provisions that Kautilya provides to resolve this predicament is a clear example of the negotiated position between the state and the society. Accordingly, if

the widow wished to have a family, she was to receive at the time of her remarriage 'what was given to her by her father-in-law and her (late) husband' [KA III.2.21]. However, if she remarried against the wishes of her father in law, she was required to forfeit what was given to her by her father-in-law and her (late) husband' [KA III.2.23].

In this way, the productive and reproductive resources of women were subordinated to a patriarchal state and society. 'The *Arthasāstra* state is of course concerned to control family and sexual relations but it does so in the interest of the state for maximizing population and production.'²⁸The importance that these provisions carried can be gathered from the fact that these are repeated and reasserted. For example, it is stated that 'a (widow remarrying) shall forfeit what was given by her (late) husband' [KA III.2.26]. Similarly, if a widow who had sons were to marry again, she was required to forfeit her woman's property' [KA III.2.29].

Other women employed in the weaving industry were crippled women, maidens, women who are paying their fine through personal labor, mothers of courtesans, old female slaves of the king and female slaves of temples whose service of the gods has ceased' [KA II.23.2]. Even these women had little scope of being accepted in the larger social milieu that was biased against the women in general. A huge bias is evident against the crippled people in the ancient texts, e.g. the characters like Manthara in the *Ramayana* and Shakuni in the *Mahabharata* are presented in bad light. Even in *dharamsastra* literature we come across graphic descriptions of women who were eligible brides. With all the demands regarding the physical beauty and health, crippled women had little scope of getting married in such a social order.

Mothers of courtesans were generally entrusted with duty of looking after their establishments and their household cannot be expected to have supported usual patriarchal family set up. The mention of the 'female slaves of the temple/ *devadasis*'

²⁸Gail Omvedt, *God as Political Philosopher: Buddhism's Challenge to Brahmanism*, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 36, No. 21 (May 26 - Jun. 1, 2001), Economic and Political Weekly, pg 88.

has rightly been described as ‘euphemism for temple prostitution’²⁹ by Jaiswal. The way this institution developed and spread in later times makes it obvious that *devadasis* were denied a marital life.

‘Women who are paying their fine through personal labor’ present an interesting category. Firstly, it shows that these women were not convicted for grave offences, for in that case they would have been awarded more than monetary punishment. They might have been kept in jail for the *Arthaśāstra* mentions separate apartments for women in prison houses [KA II.5.5]. Secondly, it shows that these women perhaps had little other economic resources and were obliged to work for state in case they committed some offence.

Interestingly, the offences for which women were required to pay fine under the provisions of the *Arthaśāstra* were largely those activities wherein they chose to move out of the restrictions imposed on their movements outside home. For example, it was provided that ‘on occasion of her enjoying herself outside the home out of jealousy, the penalty shall be laid down’ [KA III.3.11]. Similarly, for a woman who left the house of her husband, the fine was six *panas*, except in case of ill-treatment [KA III.4.1]. In case a wife left the house of her husband and went to another village she was to pay a fine of twelve *panas* [KA III.4.16]. In case she went in the company of a man with whom sexual-intercourse was permissible, the fine was twenty-four *panas* and the loss of all rights, except the giving of maintenance and approaching during the period [KA III.4.17]. Thus, we see that state regulated the productive energies of the women who tried to move out of the authority of the patriarchal set up.

It is important to note that the *Arthaśāstra* explicitly states that these women were to be given work with a view to support them. Thus, only needy women could find employment in such work. In order to make sure that these women did not fall prey to any men, strict rules were provided as regards the dealings with them. The state officials were not only to mind their behavior with these ladies, but also were warned

²⁹ Suvira Jaiswal, *Female Images in the Arthaśāstra of Kautilīya*, *Social Scientist*, Volume 29, No. ¾, (March-April 2002), p.55.

by penal provisions of various kinds that were supposed to guard the economic and social interest of these women. However, it is important to note that while state was required to take care of these women, it was equally strict with these women and severe punishment were spelled out for misappropriation, stealing or breach of contract by these women workers [KA II.23.15].

Women spies were an important tool available for guarding and furthering the interests of the state. They could be deployed for keeping a watch over both internal and external enemies, as well as for the purposes of checking the integrity of the ministers etc. The *Arthaśāstra* mentions a number of conspiracies that could be hatched with female spies being instrumental in achieving the goal. They were instrumental in collection of information and were integral part of communication networks of spies. It is stipulated that amongst others 'women should by own end ascertain the indoor activity' and 'nuns should communicate that information to the spy establishments' [KA I.12.9]. Only 'in case of prohibition of entry into the house for nuns, secret agents appearing at the door one after another or appearing as the mother or father of servants in the house, or posing as female artists, singers or female slaves' were entrusted with the task of making information that is spied out conveyed outside by means of songs, recitations, writings concealed in musical instruments or signs [KA I.12.13].

Women worked both as stationed agents as well as roving spies [KA I.10.4, 5, 7]. A woman could be a wandering nun who has won the confidence of the ministers [KA I.10.7], the begging nun [KA I.11.1], a wandering nun seeking a secure livelihood [KA I.12.4-5] etc. Prostitutes could also be employed as spies and the *Arthaśāstra* envisages their deployment for the purposes of foreign policy. For example, it is provided that 'keepers of prostitutes should make the enemy's army chiefs infatuated with women possessed of great beauty and youth. When many or two of the chiefs feel passion for one woman, assassins should create quarrels among them' [KA XII.2.11-12].

Sometimes the stratagems required male and female spies to work in sync, e.g., an agent appearing as an astrologer was required to declare to a high officer, whose confidence had been gradually won, that he is possessed of the marks of a king. In turn, a female mendicant was to declare to his wife that she would be the wife of a king or the mother of a king [KA XII.2.18-19]. Female spies were employed for the purposes like ascertainment of the integrity or the absence of integrity of ministers by means of secret test as mentioned in Book I Chapter 10 Section 6 or for drawing out the enemy by means of stratagems as mentioned in Book XI, XII and XIII.

Female spies were not only to gather information and relay it to proper source, but also to carry out assassinations. However, a closer look at the text shows that there were different classes of female spies engaged for different purposes. Amongst others 'women skilled in arts were to be employed as spies living inside their houses' [KA I.12.21]. Others were required to work as assassins [KA V.1.19, XII.5.48]. Some were to play the roles of young and beautiful widows to tempt the lust of greedy enemy [KA XIII.2.42].

Some were to win confidence of the target and then to test their integrity and character. For example, the *Arthasāstra* provides that a wandering nun, who had won the confidence of the ministers and was treated with honor in the palace, was to secretly suggest to each minister individually that the chief queen being in love with him has made arrangements for a meeting and there were possibilities of gaining wealth through such a liaison. This was the test of lust [KA I.10.7]. Apart from professional spies, prostitutes and other women could be employed for the purposes of ploy. For example, a woman of bad character, appearing as the queen was to be caught in the quarters of the enemy at night and so on [KA V.1.28]. Similarly, courtesans and other women appearing as wives were an important part of the espionage system [KA.VII.17.38].

Prostitutes and women of acrobats, actors, dancers or showmen employed as agents could be used for various conspiracies. These women were used to infatuate chiefs of the ruling council. Kautiliya suggests that these could be 'infatuated with women

possessed of great beauty and youth' [KA XI.1.34]. 'When passion was roused in them, they were to start quarrels by creating belief about their love in one and by going to another, or by staging a forcible abduction by the other' [KA XI.1.35]. During these quarrels, the assassins were to do their work [KA XI.1.35]. Similar other conspiracies are mentioned in the text of the *Arthaśāstra* in chapters dealing with measures of foreign policy.

Besides, the female spies in the service of state (whether professionally employed or hired for particular projects), other women were also expected to work as informers. For example, traders of spirituous liquors were to employ female slaves of beautiful appearance to find out the intentions of strangers and natives [KA II.25.15]. Similarly, prostitutes were directed to give lodging only to one thoroughly known to them and they were required to report about the men who spent lavishly and those who did rash deeds [KA II.36.8-9].

While courtesans, prostitutes, 'women of bad character', 'women of actors, acrobats etc', *Aditikausika* women, dancers, and songstresses [KA XI.1.42] are expressly mentioned as a part of the espionage system, it is difficult to judge whether all spies came from these categories. Suvira Jaiswal's suggests that women from the lower sections of society could be easily pressed into these services for state³⁰ and possibly these women along with female slaves formed the largest part of the espionage system, but we cannot discount the possibility of women from higher *varnas* being actively engaged in the intelligence services.

While enlisting the roving spies the *Arthaśāstra* mentions 'a wandering nun, seeking a secure livelihood, poor, widowed, bold, Brahmin (by caste) and treated with honor in the palace' [KA I.12.4], and further states that 'by her office are explained similar offices for the shaven nuns of heretical sects' [KA I.12.4-5]. These provisions might refer to the spies playing these roles, but there is nothing that debars the possibility of Brahmin women or the Buddhist or Jaina nuns being employed in the intelligence department.

³⁰ *Ibid*, pg 52.

Female slaves formed an important part of the workforce both in the royal establishment and in the common households. In the royal establishment, 'female slaves of proved integrity' were to do the work of bath-attendants, shampooers, bed-preparers, laundresses and garland-makers; otherwise they were required to supervise the artists doing these jobs [KA I.21.13]. Further they were to offer garments, flowers and other cosmetics after first putting them on their own eyes, bosoms and arms [KA XXI.14-15]. Thus, they were not only personal attendants but also a security check.

The *Arthaśāstra* has many important provisions on law concerning slaves and laborers in Book III Chapter 13 Section 65. Interestingly, while many protective and emancipating provisions were spelled out for the female slaves in the common households, there was nothing that guarded the interests of the slaves in royal service. It is provided that 'making a women (pledged) give bath to a naked person, giving corporal punishment to them and dishonoring them shall result in the loss of the capital, and shall result in freedom for a nurse, a female attendant, a woman tenant tilling for half the produce and a maid' but it is difficult to imagine a king being subjected to any of these provisions.

Safeguards provided to female slaves are important for understanding the general conditions of women. These women represent the lowest rung in terms of economic and social status. The *Arthaśāstra* contains various provisions which make it clear that female slaves might have been sexually exploited. This practice was however sought to be contained and various emancipating provisions were spelled out. For one approaching a pledged unwilling nurse, the punishment was the lowest fine for violence if she was under his control, the middle if she was under the control of another [KA III.13.11]. If one, himself or through another, defiled a maiden who was pledged, he was liable to lose the capital, and was required to pay her dowry in addition to a fine double the amount of dowry [KA III.13.12]. In case the master was to beget a child on his own female slave, both the mother and the child were to gain independent status [KA III.13.23]. If the mother was attached to the house and looked after the affairs of the family, her siblings were also given freedom [KA III.13.24].

The *Arthasāstra* required the master to provide nourishment for the fetus of an expecting female slave [KA III.13.20].

Amongst the employments mentioned for women in non-state sector, we find little mention of professionals. Mention can be made of midwives, prostitutes, women of people who lived on secret means of earning, 'women who tilled for half the produce' and 'female slaves of temple' and other female slaves. Unfortunately, apart from prostitutes and women of certain specified occupational groups, these women are mentioned only once in the text. This leaves us with a sketchy picture, which can be supplemented with information about the economy and society in general.

An important indicator of economic status of women is the juristic personality accorded to them. Juristic personality refers to the capacity of suing and being sued. In other words, it can be defined as the liability a person incurs that can be enforced through judicial mechanisms, or simply the acts and omissions for which a person can be held liable. A liability is always coupled with a capacity. Thus, if a woman is held responsible for economic transactions, it is evident that she has a right or capacity to indulge in these transactions.

The *Arthasāstra* provides that transactions concluded by a woman dependent on her husband or son were not to succeed, excepting the women to whom authority for transaction is given [KA III.1.12]. This provision makes it clear that women by themselves had no capacity to enter into a contract of any kind. It may be on the basis that women were considered as the one who did not possess any logical reasoning and that they should not be included in any such activity. We find similar references in the brahmanical codes as well. However, they could be vested with this capacity by getting authorization of the men in family. The women got this capacity not only by express permission but also by omissions of their husbands for Kautiliya provides stipulates that the husband was liable for the debt incurred by the wife, if he went abroad without providing for her [KA III.11.24].

Thus, women in family had a subordinate economic status and their dependence on men was related to the lack of economic as well as social independence. But, as we have noticed earlier, most of the working women seem to be those who were either destitute or were not into regular matrimonial or family system. Thus, we can hardly be surprised that transactions concluded by the women who did not stir out of their homes were held to enforceable [KA III.1.7]. Similarly, we find an exception stating that 'the wife shall not be held liable for the debt incurred by her husband, if she has not assented to it, except in the case of cowherds and farmers tilling for the half the produce' [KA III.11.23].

Women of these occupation/social groups were engaged in economically productive activities and hence cannot be regarded as dependent on their husbands. Similarly, we find that courtesans as well women indulging in prostitution of different kinds had greater authority over the disposal of their property, which is related to their capacity to contract.

While most of the mentioned occupations were time bound and will leave the women jobless in the later years of life, other are regular work that can be carried on till the age permits. For example, courtesans are required to be young and beautiful, while an opportunity in weaving sector was available to the old palace servants. The elaborate instructions for employing destitute women in the weaving industry show that indeed there were a large number of women who fell on hard days. On the other hand men in the *Arthasāstra* are engaged into professional work and we find mentions of washer men [KA IV.1.14-23], tailors [KA IV.1.25], goldsmiths [KA IV.1.26-43], physician [KA IV.1.56], and others [KA IV.1.65, IV.4.3].

The differences in opportunities available to men and women are evident from these options. The statements concerning the women of certain occupational/social groups bring out the basic texture of society. Almost everywhere we find a presumption that the women of dancers, wandering minstrels, fishermen, fowlers, cowherds, vintners and others who give freedom to their women etc are engaged in prostitution. This might have been true, but this provision also points to an important aspect of women

and work, which is the fact, that only asset these women were thought to have was their sexuality. The prolific mention of different kinds of prostitutes and women of men engaged in various low status works who were thought to earn by accompanying strangers, shows that women in economic sphere were generally sex workers, exceptions being those specifically mentioned. As we have already noted those specifically mentioned are either those who are being deployed by state for its own purposes or those rural women who were engaged in agricultural sector. Both these categories were economically and politically essential for state.

In the preceding pages we have made a detailed survey of the women and work as portrayed in the *Arthasāstra*. However, before making concluding remarks regards the subject, a very important category that has not found mention as yet needs to be looked at i.e. the queens. Their importance in economic and political set up is hinted at by the mention that 'the king's mother and the crowned queen should receive forty-eight thousand (*panas*)' [KA 5.3.3]. Considering the anxious effort at maximum utilization of resources, we can be sure that such a huge amount would not have been allocated without reason. The concern for their security re-emphasizes their importance. It is provided that 'under no circumstances must the king make himself or the queen the target for the sake of ascertaining the probity of ministers' [KA 1.10.17]. Their functions are not elaborated upon but the mentions of the ways in which a number of conspiracies could be hatched successfully with someone impersonating the queen shows that they must have been very active and involved in important matters.

CONCLUSION

From the detailed analytical study of the *Arthasāstra* made in the preceding pages, the prime concern for the security and maintenance of the state is more than clear. The elaborate layout of socio-political structures and economic organization is directed towards furthering the vested interest of social and political elites. We have already referred to the inherent biases of the text. As has been mentioned in the introduction, everything and everyone within the territory of the state is a resource to gain the politico-economic power and to maintain the same.

Women figure in the *Arthaśāstra* primarily as objects and instruments for furthering the ends of the state. The *Arthaśāstra* gives us a better idea of the visibility of the women in the public spheres as compared to the canonical literature like the *Manusmriti*. It mentions women in a variety of roles in the economic sphere and also demonstrates the status hierarchy related to these. For example, the difference in the position of the royal ladies and the women belonging to certain professional classes is made conspicuous by provisions relating to them.

The most important point to be noted is the presence of women in productive activities in almost all the classes. On one hand, we have mention of queens with a salary of 48,000 *panas* and on the other we have poor women employed in the weaving industry. Women did not only earn for themselves and family but also contributed a good share in the state revenue and constituted significant part of the workforce.

The social status of the women is linked with their economic status and opportunities. The same is true of the social institutions which echo the *varna* and gender hierarchy envisaged in the brahmanical law codes. As has been pointed out by Gail Omvedt, 'Marriage and the family are very much concerns of the state, but the state is more interested in seeing that young women marry and produce children than that they be testaments to their family's purity. Thus bans on widow remarriage are a privilege of the upper caste, and the opposite line is taken with lower caste women who are expected to be available to men.'³¹ Further, 'the 'right' of women to remarry is linked both to their caste status and to the time their husbands have been away from home as measured in menstrual periods.'³² Such provisions highlight the concern of the state for managing the reproductive resources of the women.

³¹Gail Omvedt, *God as Political Philosopher: Buddhism's Challenge to Brahmanism*, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 36, No. 21 (May 26 - Jun. 1, 2001), Economic and Political Weekly, pg 188

³² *Ibid*

A few important remarks can be made as regards the composition of working women. Firstly, they came from all rungs of the society, though their occupations differed with their social and economic status. Secondly, a number of women worked only when they fell on hard times or had no economic support. Thirdly, courtesans and spies had access to both men in power and rich property. The varied disguises that were taken by the spies hints at the mobility of women.

Last but not the least, we find a number of provisions regarding the protection of women's property and their ability to enter into the contracts etc. On a careful analysis of these it can be inferred that certain women were the economic support not only, for themselves, but also for their families.

Chapter 4

Economic Roles of Women in the *Jātakas*

INTRODUCTION

The *Jātakas* or the Buddhist birth stories are a collection of folklore that has been appropriated for the propagation of the Buddhist ideas and thought amongst the laity. Like most genres of ancient literature, the *Jātakas* too have an ambivalent attitude towards women, though mostly on the negative side. Nonetheless, we come across quite a few stories that appreciate their social and economic roles. Interestingly, we find the women in a variety of roles, some of which are missing from the canonical texts. There are depictions of female characters that can sometimes corroborate the picture presented by the canonical texts and at others give contrasting pictures. These representations of women in these Buddhist birth stories offer us varied insights into the life of women in the early centuries.

The *Jātakas* are perhaps the most ancient folk literature around the world. Unlike the Brahmanical works they were originally composed in Pali, which was one of the languages of the commoners. There are 547 stories³³ each containing a 'gatha' of the past and a tale of the present. These are arranged in 22 books on the basis of increasing number of verses. 'The *gathas* are clearly survivors of an oral tradition, and one supposes that the Buddhist preachers were left to narrate the context and provide the ethical or religious dimension.'³⁴

The *Jātakas* are a part of the *Khuddaka Nikaya*, the last section of the *Sutta Pitaka*. This collection of poems and stories purports to be the Buddha's recollections of his previous existences as a *bodhisattva*. However, like other ancient literary works they were originally included in a form different from the original Pali Canon. Therefore, they form a genre of literature which evolves overtime and subtly imbibes the social changes. A critical study can mark these changes and also the possible trajectory of these changes.

³³ The number of stories is not fully settled yet and there are certain birth stories that are not contained in the *Khuddika Nikaya* but can be found in earlier canonical corpus or later medieval literature.

³⁴ E. B. Cowell (ed.), *The Jātaka* (reprint London: Luzac and Co., 1957), preface, p. x.

The *Jātakas* offer interesting insights into the social life, and being popular stories we can expect them to be closer to reality than other sources. But a few inherent biases need to be identified while drawing inferences from them. Furthermore, we need to be mindful of the contradictions that this collection of literature abounds in.

Firstly, we can gather that while most stories depict women in bad light, yet there are close to a dozen stories wherein a lady is either a faithful wife or a guiding mother.³⁵ Such women are showered with praise. These contradictions show that women were accepted only in the roles which served the social order or patriarchal interests.

Secondly, even when they are depicted as lustful, there is no attempt at controlling their sexual liberty. Even the queens have been offered for sexual satisfaction of the sages for as long as they might like. But it must not escape our notice that the queens never expressed any desire for such intimacy. The rhetoric of natural lustfulness of women is so heavily propagated by the *Jātakas* that the women are presumed to be always at ease with the sexual liaisons with just about anyone. In a way this discourse denies them the right to choose and/or refuse.

Thirdly, the *Jātakas* can help us in developing an understanding of the provisions laid out in the Brahmanical canons and how far these formed the actual social code. The stories abound in the representations of individuals in everyday social life, and thus offer the spectrum beyond the roles outlined in the texts like the *Arthaśāstra* and the *Manusmriti*.

Fourthly, express mention of working women who provide for their families can help us make a comparative analysis with the provisions regarding the working women in canonical literature. Furthermore, the *Jātakas* provide us with an understanding of the life of the common people, thus the glimpses of society that we get out of them can help us corroborate the extent to which the normative literature held authority in the everyday life.

³⁵ *Supra*

The *Jātakas* contain vivid descriptions of life in the ancient times. They contain stories with all kind of backdrops from villages and small town to big cities and market towns. Furthermore, the leading characters of the stories also come from various social groups like poor communities, fishermen, trading merchants, *gahapatis*, royalty etc. There are various aspects of social life that we get to have a look at and a number of lessons on questions of rationality and morality. In the course of these lessons (most of which centre around moral living and faith in the glory and authority of the Buddha), the *Jātakas* propagate and encourage almsgiving and frugal lifestyle. The way social ideals enshrined in these stories affect the economic life remains to be analyzed.

In the preface to his work on the *Jātakas*, E B Cowell remarks that ‘Many are the pieces of folklore which have floated about the world for ages as stray waifs of literature, and are liable everywhere to be appropriated by any casual claimant.’³⁶ Joseph Jacobs rightly criticizes Cowell on this and argues that ‘[this] is a rather casual remark in more than one sense of the word. Folklore cannot float in the air; it must live in men’s minds, and be passed from mind to mind by oral tradition. One of the problems of folklore is to trace the origin and diffusion of these “stray waifs,” and the importance of the *Jātaka*, for folklore consists in the help it gives towards the solution of this problem.’³⁷

We shall try and trace this origin for the *Jātakas* for the limited purposes of our work, i.e. an attempt shall be made to check and mark the social milieu of the time when these stories developed and slowly got compiled upon. The content and nature of stories give us a number of cues to roughly mark out the time period they represent. We find a number of similarities between these stories and those of the epics, and also certain stories which have historical contexts³⁸.

³⁶ E. B. Cowell (ed.), *The Jātaka* (reprint London: Luzac and Co., 1957), preface. p. xxiii.

³⁷ Joseph Jacobs, *Folklore*, Vol. 7, No.1 (Mar., 1896), pp. 68-70.

³⁸ See. *Vessantara- Jātaka*

The very first story in the collection hints at the increasingly complex society wherein many different schools of thoughts or social movements were present and were in the process of establishing themselves and finding more adherents. Herein the socio-religious leaders took the lead and commoners kept trying to choose for themselves or at least brush against in these movements out of curiosity. No particular socio-religious system had a powerful position is made clear by the mention that as soon as the Buddha had gone, they asunder their new faith, and returning to the other doctrines as their refuge, reverted to their original state.”³⁹

The backdrop has a society in the flux and no religion seems to have taken firm following. People kept shifting their loyalties to different sects, and their spiritual leaders struggle to maintain their following. For example, glorifying the Buddhist teachings, it is stated that “No disciples, male or female, who seek refuge in the Three Gems that endowed with such peerless excellences, are ever reborn into hell and the like states; but, released from all rebirth into states of suffering, they pass to the Realm of Devas and there receive great glory. Therefore, in forsaking such a refuge for that offered by other doctrines, you have gone astray.”⁴⁰

There are stories that remind us of narrative from the celebrated epics viz. the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The story regards the questions on chastity of a woman who was discovered to be pregnant in the monastery, contained in *Nigrodhamiga-Jātaka* is similar to the legend of *Sita*. Herein, when there came about the news of nun being with a child, the Master himself says that, “Albeit the child was conceived while she was still of the laity, yet it will give the heretics an occasion to say that the ascetic Gotama has taken a Sister expelled by Devadatta. Therefore, to cut short such talk, the case must be heard in the presence of the king and his court.”⁴¹ And he commands Upali to ‘go and clear up this matter of the young Sister in the presence of the four classes of my disciples.’⁴² This story reminds us of the dictum of Rama in similar circumstances, though the descriptive and didactic portions in the two

³⁹ *Apannaka- Jātaka*

⁴⁰ *Ibid*

⁴¹ *Nigrodhamiga-Jātaka*

⁴² *Ibid*

sources are obviously different. Similarly, we have stories that remind us of the Savitri legend, instances from the *Mahabhartia* etc.

On the basis of these cues we can infer that these stories perhaps narrate and describe the social conditions from post-Vedic age onwards. On the basis of the time period of compilation we can expect them to describe the society and various spheres for a couple of centuries before and after Christ. The reference to different kinds of social institutions also gives cues to the time span of the stories before attaining the final form.

It is also to be remembered that tales and stories are not to be mistaken with the actualities or the realities of the time. Having traced the origin or at least the background of these stories, we need to refine our understanding of social history from them by taking off the layers of discourses that have come to wrap the original folk content.

JĀTAKAS AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC HISTORY

Before utilizing the *Jātakas* for the purposes of reconstructing the gender history, we need to understand the nature and context of the stories, specially the Buddhist conceptions on the roles of women in the society and otherwise. It is interesting to note that the *Jātakas* even while depicting women as vile, lustful, greedy, wicked, and unfaithful, do not condemn them. Unlike the *Manusmriti*, there is no attempt at binding them into a web of “*Stree-Dharma*”. This is perhaps because Buddhist doctrines generally advocate the adoption of ascetic life for the purposes of *Nirvana*, and the society is given a secondary importance.

There is a kind of dichotomy between the *Sangha* and the laity. Buddhism concerns itself mostly with the organization of the *Sangha* and leaves the general society with a few moral precepts and the tales which propagate either explicitly or subtly the philosophy and doctrines associated with it.

With the changes that came about in socio-economic structures and development of a

new material culture, a complex society came into existence. The quest of understanding and organizing the society or at least determining the basic principles for the human life in social environment lead to development of many schools of philosophy and various social movements. In these times of turbulence rather than concentrating upon organizing the society, Buddhism offered an alternative establishment to deal with the changes and increasing complexities.

But neither as a new social movement nor as a new sect, could Buddhism gain ground unless it made space for itself amidst the society at large. The interface between the society and the *Sangha* was provided by the laity, i.e. lay Buddhist followers. The *Sangha* did not only get the material support from the laity, but also fresh recruits who joined the order for varied reasons as can be gauged from the *Jātakas*. E.g. *Devadhamma-Jātakas* mentions that, 'on the death of his wife, a squire of Savatthi joined the brotherhood.' A number of stories have men joining the brotherhood on being made aware of the wicked nature of women.⁴³

The *Jātakas* also portray the struggle of these new recruits who are trying to adjust to the life of monks and struggling against the memories and desires relating to their worldly lives. E.g. *KanDina- Jātaka* mentions the 'temptation caused to the brethren by the wives of the mundane lives.' Similarly, *Kaka- Jātaka* narrates the story wherein despite the *Sangha*, a group of friends, 'as in their life as householders, so now too when they were Brethren they lived together, building themselves a cluster of neighboring huts on the skirts of the Monastery. Even when they went in quest of alms, they generally made for their wives' and children's houses and ate there.' Thus, severing the ties with the society was not a one cut process and the *Jātakas* help us understand the slow progress on the paths of monkhood.

'The aim of these tales of the Buddha's previous existence is to provide a theology for the Buddhist layman.'⁴⁴ Laity on the other hand found spiritual or at least

⁴³ *Supra*

⁴⁴ Allan J. Behm, *The Eschatology of the Jātakas*, Numen, Vol. 18, Fasc. 1 (Apr., 1971), pp. 30-44
Published by: BRILL. Pg.30.

psychological peace while serving the Master or the monks. The discourses and meeting must have served the human intellectual and emotional needs by providing philosophical percepts on myriad subjects. A number of Buddhist birth stories confirm this point. However, women perhaps posed the biggest challenge to the Buddhist doctrines. The existence of society was essential to the existence of the *Sangha*, and the former cannot be envisaged without women in different roles.

Though Buddhist society is also patriarchal, yet it neither tries to regulate the fairer sex nor condemns women. The *Jātakas* ascribe a natural evil character to women and envisage them as the hindrance to spiritual development. A number of birth stories with monks and even the Master himself being taken over by passion for women illustrate this point. Ironically, in all these stories we have “passion-toast brothers” while the ladies they are attracted to are passive characters, yet the blame is always ascribed to women.

We find variegated descriptions of women in the *Jātakas*. The female characters represented in the *Jātakas* come from diverse backgrounds and offer insights into the life of women at different stages. There are mentions of young girls, married women, widows and aged women etc. These characters are engaged in different activities and have graded individuality. While we find the roles and restrictions for women in the *Arthaśāstra* and the *Manusmṛiti*, it is an interesting exercise to study the descriptions of the everyday life of women contained in these tales.

The *Jātakas* provides us with glimpses of the life of women and a keen observer can mark out the amount of individuality or independence they have in social and economic spheres. The present chapter like the previous two [Chapter II and Chapter III] shall focus on the economic roles played by women. Both paid and unpaid work shall be taken into consideration and every activity that has an economic value will be duly considered.

The *Jātakas* do not only depict women in a different light, the light they shed on economic activities is also an important aspect to be analyzed. Trade and arts are

appreciated and thus we have a very different socio-economic environment. 'Entrepreneurship and money-making were positively endorsed, as long as these were done by righteous means and it is not accidental that Buddhism is associated with merchants, trade routes, seaports, urban centers in contrast to the rural and royal orientation of brahmanism.'⁴⁵

The *Jātakas* are full of stories in which the Buddha is an enterprising merchant, as a skilled worker and in some a worker who insists on proper pay for his labor. To illustrate, let us take example of the *Kanah-Jātaka*, wherein Buddha who was born as a bull and was lovingly called 'Granny's Blackie'. In order to repay the care and affection with which the old lady 'reared him like her own child, feeding him on rice-gruel and rice and other good cheer', he gets into pulling the load for a merchant but refuses to work when paid short.

With this developed an economic system we can expect a very high degree of specialization and participation by women as well. The *Jātakas* do offer glimpses of these. What kinds of economic roles did women get to play in this milieu and how does it differ from brahmanical texts needs to be analyzed in greater details to develop an understanding of the both the gender and economic history of the early centuries.

Besides the portrayal of economic activities, the *Jātakas* offer us useful insights on Master-servant relations as well as slaves. A comparative study of these insights with the canonical texts can be very useful. Another important aspect that has bearing on the subject is the intricacies of caste system and its effects on economic system. An understanding of these will also shed light on the economic roles of women belonging to different castes and classes. These can offer interesting comparison to the brahmanical texts, which are more elitist in conception.

In the following pages, an attempt has been made to collect the references to women in the Buddhist birth stories. Besides female characters (both human and animal)

⁴⁵ Balkrishna Govind Gokhale, *The Merchant in Ancient India*, Journal of the American Oriental Society, Vol. 97, No. 2 (Apr. - Jun., 1977), American Oriental Society.

from different stories, references to ideas on nature of women have also been collected and classified for developing an understanding of the roles that women played or were expected to play. Economic aspects of these roles have been delved upon to mark out the contribution of women to the economic sphere and the position they enjoyed therein.

GENERAL REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN IN THE *JĀTAKAS*

Although the *Jātakas* purport to be the stories narrating the previous births of Buddha, yet their content is not strictly religious. Being folk tales they contain references to daily life of people and the beliefs they held. But being aware that these tales have been appropriated by the Buddhist tradition, we need to remember that a discourse that supports the ideas of Buddhism forms an integral part of these tales. Thus, we need to sift the representations from the rhetorical references in order to understand the roles that women played.

First and foremost in this exercise we come across the fact that most of these stories ascribe an evil character to women. It is stated that 'women are naturally wicked, and she will be plotting the evil against you.'⁴⁶ Another story has a man declaring that 'women, Brother, are lustful, profligate, vile, and degraded.'⁴⁷ Their evil nature is said to be so boundless that it is remarked that 'women cannot be warded; in days gone by the wise who kept watch over a woman from the moment she was born, failed nevertheless to keep her safe.'⁴⁸

Thus, it is emphasized that women are evil and though men try to control them yet there is little chance of success in this pursuit. Though the attempt to control female sexuality is said to be fruitless, yet the idea of male dominance is considered essential. This can be gauged from the references like:

Yea give them opportunity and secrecy withal,

⁴⁶ *Devadhamma- Jātaka*

⁴⁷ *Asatamanta- Jātaka*

⁴⁸ *Andabhuta- Jātaka*

And every single woman will from paths of virtue fall.⁴⁹

A number of tales are spun around the themes like selfishness and treachery by women in close relationships. For example, a young doe is said to have sent the stag ahead for her, for the purpose of protecting herself from an ambush set up by a hunter.⁵⁰ On the other hand, male characters are depicted as innocent victims of the affection they develop for these treacherous women. For example, in another story when a male fish is captured in the net, he is seen to lament in following words:

‘Tis not the cold, the heat, or wounding net;
Tis but the fear my darling wife should think
Another’s love has lured her spouse away.’⁵¹

Even though, in this story the female fish had nothing to do with the male fish getting into the net, yet she is the one who incurs the blame for the attachment and suffering that befell the male fish. It is expressly stated in this story that ‘her amorous spouse, blinded by passion, sailed right into the meshes of the net.’

Though it can be argued that it is not the women but the passion for women that is being put into the negative light, yet the bias against women is more than obvious in a number of stories. We have many stories wherein a monk (generally newly recruited one) gets attracted to some woman he happens to see, with the consequence that he often turns into a ‘backsliding brother’. To illustrate, *Munika-Jātaka* is a story about a monk who is attracted to a plump young woman. This is one of the many stories wherein the monk would be ‘passion toast’ or infatuated but the Master would narrate a story wherein the woman brings about the doom of a man by acting mean. Herein, the story of the past concerned an ox that was fattened to serve as dainty for the wedding guests of a maiden. Though there is no real nexus between the maiden and wedding menu, yet the suffering of the ox is blamed on the maiden.

⁴⁹ *Kunala- Jātaka*

⁵⁰ *Kandina- Jātaka*

⁵¹ *Macca- Jātaka*

A number of stories mention instances when the Master himself failed to check his lust despite years of monkhood and meditation. However, it is interesting to note that the Master invariably was attracted to the queen and King always thought it fitting to gift the queen to the Master for as long as he liked.

That the stories have been purposely given an anti-women coloring is clear from the fact that most of these stories ask the men either to enter the order or follow the path suggested by the Master. E.g. it is provided that:

‘Wrathful are women, slanderous, ingrates,
The sowers of dissension and fell strife!
Then, Brother, tread the path of holiness,
And Bliss therein thou shalt not fail to find.’⁵²

It is interesting to note that the *Jātakas* contain a double-edged discourse against women. Firstly, they depict them as evil and insist that men avoid love and passion for them. Secondly, where an express evil nature is not ascribed, they are depicted as demanding and hence the cause for suffering. For example, in yet another story wherein a man is tempted by a fat girl, ‘finding that the young man was too much in love to be able to give her up, the *bodhisattva* bade him go, saying “But when she wants meat or fish or ghee or salt or rice or any such thing to eat, and sends you hurrying to and fro on her errands, then remember this hermitage and flee away back to me.”⁵³ There is hardly anything too out of place amongst the list, yet the man has an open invitation to run away for the responsibilities should he feel burdened.

There are a number of stories wherein women are actually seen to act wrongfully and without care or concern for what might befall the others. In order to have their way women are seen to ‘feign illness’⁵⁴, wickedly fool the husband for whims and fancies⁵⁵, attempt to murder the husband in order to live with the paramour⁵⁶, seduce

⁵² *Takka- Jātaka*

⁵³ *Udancani- Jātaka*

⁵⁴ *Kosiya- Jātaka*

⁵⁵ *Ruhaka- Jātaka*

youth and lead them astray⁵⁷, conspire against the husband for evil purposes even to the extent of putting his life in peril⁵⁸, incite the husband into committing unlawful activities⁵⁹, trick the unsuspecting spouse⁶⁰ etc.

It is important to note that women are given an evil aura mostly in their roles as wives or beloveds. Though we also have examples of their acting equally vicious in the role of mother, but such references are rare. In the same story we have different natures ascribed to women and thus it is clear that the *Jātakas* are particularly biased against the passionate or affectionate relationships between man and woman. For example, *Suvannahamsa- Jātaka* gives us an account of a gold-feathered bird who comes to visit his wife of previous birth so as to help their destitute situation. In this story, the wife out of greed is seen to act mean and cut the bird to pieces, while the daughters refuse to do so. While herein the fault is with the greed, we have a number of stories wherein adultery is the evil highlighted in the character of women. For example, in many stories we have a Brahmin wife committing adultery and her sin being reported by pets⁶¹ or being discovered by the husband himself.

That women cannot be trusted in love and relationships is perhaps best portrayed by *Bandhanamokkha- Jātaka*. Herein, the queen, who had committed adultery with sixty-four footmen and failed in her overtures to the chaplain, accuses the latter of rape. However, he manages to reveal her guilt and his own innocence. Interestingly, in this story the queen on an earlier occasion had been given the choice of a boon by the king. The Queen on this occasion said that 'the boon I ask is an easy one; henceforth you must not look on any other woman with eyes of love.' The King's initial refusal to grant this promise has been overlooked and the story chooses to emphasize the 'unceasing importunity' of the queen, which obliged the King to give way at last. The

⁵⁶ *Culla-Paduma-Jātakas*

⁵⁷ *Haliddiraga- Jātaka*

⁵⁸ *Sattubhasta- Jātaka*

⁵⁹ *Puppharatta- Jātaka*

⁶⁰ *Gahapati- Jātaka*

⁶¹ *Radha- Jātaka*

story states that ‘and from that day forwards he never cast a glance of love at any one of his sixteen thousand *nautch-girl*.⁶²

It can be argued that the contrast in the story may be to add emphasis to the wickedness of the women. The Queen is depicted as incorrigible, unfaithful, abuser of the power, wicked and scheming. However, the fault of the King cannot escape the close scrutiny.

The idea that women should not be trusted and need to be controlled was expressed in many a ways but the leading argument was that it is their very nature to cheat and play safe.⁶³ Their innate nature was held to be vicious and repeated emphasis was provided to their wickedness. For example, *Durjana-Jātaka* talks about how they change their behavior according to what suits them at a particular point of time. With respect to the leading lady in the story, it is stated that ‘on days when she did wrong, she was meek as a slave-girl bought for a hundred pieces; whilst on days when she did not do wrong, she played my lady passionate and tyrannical.’⁶⁴ Further it is said that:

‘Think’st thou a woman loves thee?-be not glad.

Think’st thou she loves thee not?-forbear to grieve.

Unknowable, uncertain as the path

Of fishes in the water, women prove.’⁶⁵

Thus, somewhere it is immaterial what women do or intend to do, for the discourse contained in the *Jātakas* repeatedly emphasize upon the possibility of their turning cheaters. Even the almswomen are depicted in greedy and vicious roles. For example, often a Sister is represented as warning other nuns to visit a particular part of city so as to secure all the donations for herself.⁶⁶

⁶² *Bandhanamokkha-Jātaka*

⁶³ *Infra*

⁶⁴ *Durjana- Jātaka*

⁶⁵ *Durjana- Jātaka*

⁶⁶ E.g. *Anusasika- Jātaka*

There is however a very interesting aspect of the *Jātakas* compared to the representations of women in the Brahmanical tradition. Despite blaming the women and according them a natural evil disposition, they are neither chastised nor given a set of rules or morals to follow. It is stated that 'all women alike are sinners.'⁶⁷ Further, it is stated in unequivocal terms that the offence of the lady in this story was forgiven by the King 'though it deserved death, imprisonment, mutilation, or cleaving asunder, but he deposed her from her high rank and made someone else his queen consort.'⁶⁸

But is the attitude of the *Jātakas* actually one that accepts women as free-willed? Or is it another way of attaching disapproval to them? Is the forgiveness mentioned in the foregoing story actually merciful? Substituting someone else in her position was certainly a cruel position for any wife, and perhaps more so for a queen. Similarly, there are stories that do preach morality to women by way of mentioning the fate that falls upon any one who commits a wrong.⁶⁹ *Culladhanuggaha-Jātaka* narrates one such story wherein a woman who betrayed her husband to death, and was afterwards deserted by her lover, has her folly brought home to her by witnessing the fate of a greedy jackal.

From the foregoing discussions and many a *Jātaka* stories we can infer that though in these tales, both affection and passion are seen as natural to both men and women, yet the blame is ascribed to women, while men get the option of joining the *Sangha*. As if to settle it for once and for all, *Samugga-Jātaka* mentions that, 'I have seen, friend *Punnamukha*, the case of a female ascetic named *Saccatapavi*, who dwelt in a cemetery and gave away even a fourth meal. She sinned with a goldsmith. I witnessed too, friend *Punnamukha*, the case of *Kakati*, the wife of *Venateyya*, who dwelt in midst of the sea and yet sinned with *Natakuvera*. I have seen, friend *Punnamukha*, the fair-haired *Kurangavi*, who though in love with *Elakamara* sinned with *Chalangakumara* and *Dhanantevasi*. This too was known to me, how the mother of

⁶⁷ *Kunala-Jātaka*

⁶⁸ *Kunala-Jātaka*

⁶⁹ *Culladhanuggaha-Jātaka*

Brahmadatta, forsaking the king of *Kosala*, sinned with *Panacalacanda*. These and other women sent wrong, and one should not put trust in women nor praise them. As the earth is impartially affected towards all the world, bearing wealth for all, a home for all sorts and conditions of men (good and bad alike), all-enduring, unshaken, immovable, so also is it with women (in a bad sense). A man should not trust them.'

Thus both virtuous and well-provided for women are seen to be no exception to the natural evil nature. And the extent of their sinfulness is explained in the following verses:

'Four things can never sated be-list well to these my words-
Ocean, kings, Brahmins, womenkind, these four, O king of birds.'⁷⁰

However, these mentions are an attempt to malign the fairer sex is very clear on two grounds. Firstly, the evil nature is ascribed with purposes which are very clear from the contexts of the statements made and also from the general fabric of the Buddhist thought that looks upon worldly ties as bondages and sources of unhappiness. Thus love or lust both were condemned with impartial indifference. Secondly, we have stories wherein these statements can be found out of context and without any relevance to the main narrative. E.g. *Tipallattha-Miga-Jātaka*, opens with the statement that 'once when the Master was dwelling in the Aggalava Temple hard by the town of Alavi, many female lay-disciples and Sisters used to flock thither to hear the Truth preached. The preaching was in the daytime, but as the time wore on, the women did not attend, and there were only Brethren and man disciples present.' The presence or absence of women has no nexus with the story thereafter.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC ROLES OF WOMEN

As has been discussed earlier, the *Jātakas* are folk-tales appropriated into a heterodox tradition. These stories preserve within them memories from the past of both individuals and institutions that defined the social organization. We have already

⁷⁰ *Kumala-Jātaka*

discussed the heavy bias that these stories have and the discourse they seek to propagate. However, even while advocating monkhood for men, the *Jātakas* have preserved the memories of women in various roles and their contribution in the socio-economic spheres.

A study of various mentions of women, sifted from the corpus of 550 odd tales is sure to help us mark the outlines of economic role that women played in the society of the times. We can perhaps begin by pointing to a repeated feature of the *Jātakas*. Almost invariably we find that women are given special mention in the context of birth of a child. We have numerous expressions repeated in story after story that acknowledge the agency of the mother in the birth of a child. E.g. it is often mentioned that '*Bodhisattavawas* conceived in the womb of ...' or 'was born of the chief queen' etc. It is submitted that these references show that motherhood was highly revered and women were duly credited for their reproductive function. However, the establishment of a patriarchal society was complete by the time of rise of Buddhism and the subordinate status of women is more than apparent from the attitudes towards women enshrined in both Buddhist and Brahmanical texts.

Within the household the man was the bread-winner while the woman was the mistress of the house. For example, in the *Guna-Jātaka* when the jackal takes the Lion home, the Lion refer to it as the 'the lady's house'. But on a holistic reading of the *Jātakas* it becomes obvious that woman were not equal partners in a matrimonial home. Their primary duty might have been managing the household and looking after the children, but they helped out men in their trade, profession and occupation E.g. In the *Sammōdamana-Jātaka*, when the husband returns empty-handed time and again the wife complains that 'day by day you return empty-handed; I suppose you've got a second establishment to keep up elsewhere.' And soon after 'whilst they were each inviting the other to lift the net, the fowler himself lifted the net from them in a heap into his basket and bore them off home, So that his wife's face wreathed with

smiles.’⁷¹ It must not escape our notice that the wife of this fisherman helped him in his work even though on the whole she expects that a man should support the family.

The role of wife in economic management of home was not limited to helping the man, but also to ensure that the profits should reach the family. For example, in *Ubhatobhattha- Jātaka* we find that the husband seeks active help of his wife in order to avoid outside claims on his prize. The man in this story decides to send his son off to home to ask her to raise uproar with neighbors in order to ensure that they do not have to have the feast with them. Interestingly, ‘his wife, to occupy the neighbors by a quarrel on purpose, had tricked herself out with a palm-leaf behind one ear, and had blacked one eye with soot from the saucepan. In the guise, nursing a dog, she came out to call on her neighbors. “Bless me, you’ve gone mad,” said one woman to her. “Not mad at all,” retorted the fisherman’s wife; “you abuse me without cause with your slanderous tongue. Come your ways with me to the zemindar and I’ll have you fined eight pieces for slander.’⁷²

Besides the role of woman in this case, we also need to take a note of her knowledge about the power structure and penalties. Another aspect that we get to see in this story is the presence of community living alongside the idea of private property. Both men and women were affected by these changes and assumed new roles in the changing circumstances.

But it is also to be noted that these stories refer to the fishing communities and the partnership between spouses might not have been same in the other communities. To have a look at the other extreme, a study of mentions of queens can be useful. Queens in the *Jātakas* have many more things to do than just give birth to the heir-apparent. Though mention of queen mother and chief queen etc show that they too had a hierarchy, yet their power is equally obvious from the fact that very often they were able to have their wishes fulfilled by the king and others. E.g. *Devadhamma- Jātaka*, mentions how the queen kept plaguing the king time to time to grant her request.

⁷¹ *Sammodamana- Jātaka*

⁷² *Ubhatobhattha- Jātaka*

Queens in the *Jātakas* provide us with a glimpse of lives of women in royal household. Interestingly, they are much more than just the female consorts of the King. They are given important administrative tasks and are also seen to tender advice to the king. For example, in *Mahasupina Jātaka*, when the King decides to blindly follow the advice of Brahmins to sacrifice a large number of animals to avoid the impact of ill omen, Queen Mallika counsels him in these words, “But has your majesty consulted the Chief Brahmin both of this world and the world of Devas.” Though the advice basically is a praise of the Master but the fact that the suggestion comes from the queen is worth noticing.

Even though queens are entrusted with important functions and have powerful positions, yet their subordination to the king is conspicuously stated. For instance the wives of the King of Kosala are stated to have once thought among themselves, as follows, ‘very rare is the coming of a Buddha; and very rare is birth in a human form with all one’s faculties in perfection. Yet, though we have happened on a human form in a Buddha’s lifetime, we cannot go at will to the Monastery to hear the truth from his own lips, to do obeisance, and to make offerings to him. We live here as in a box.’⁷³

This whole chain of thoughts actually brings out a network of restrictions on women which was so strict that even the harmless act of visiting the Master for a discourse was impermissible for them. That these queens had little security and authority of their own is clear from the words of a worried royal lady stating that, “the king has lost the jewel out of his turban; and by his orders the ministers are worrying everybody, women and all, out of their lives, in order to find it. We can’t say what may not happen to anyone of us; and that is why we are so sad.”⁷⁴

⁷³ *Mahasara- Jātaka*

⁷⁴ *Ibid*

We get the picture of an ideal queen from the repeated enquiry contained in many a *Jātaka* stories like the *Maha-Hamsa-Jātaka*, *Culla-Hamsa-Jātaka*, *Hamsa-Jātaka* etc viz.,

“And is your queen of equal birth, obedient, sweet if speech,
Fruitful, fair, famous, waiting on my wishes, doing each?”

Somewhere in these mentions we can spot of the instrumentality of the queens in the spread of Buddhism. They are very often depicted as being dedicated to the Master and his philosophy. In turn eminent Monks or Bodhisatta himself is seen to propagate and defend their interests. For example, *Succaja-Jātaka* narrates a story about how a prince requited his wife’s devotion with base ingratitude, until he was brought to a better mind by the admonition of his minister (one of the previous births). However, the subject of relationships between queens and Buddhist establishment can form a part of more detailed research work exclusively focusing on these connections.

Queens were not only life partners and advisers to the King but also trusted administrators. This can be judged from the various mentions made of their being the acting sovereigns when the King was to engage himself in war or other important activities. For example, in the *Sigala-Jātaka* the King before going for the city of Sigala seeks his mother’s permission and declares that, “Dear mother, I will go and fetch Pabhavati. You are to rule my kingdom.” Similarly, we have the mention stating that ‘a daughter of the god named Manimekkhala had been appointed guardian of the sea by the four guardians of the world.’⁷⁵

Even otherwise the queen was perhaps a channel of communication between the King and the subjects. We have an instance suggesting this in the *Hatthi-Pala-Jātaka*. In this story the people of the city gathered before the palace door and sent in word to the queen. ‘They entered, and saluting the queen, stood on one side, repeating a stanza:

⁷⁵ *Muga-Pakkha-Jātaka*

It is the pleasure of our noble king
To be a hermit, leaving everything.
So in the king's place now we pray thee stand;
Cherish the realm, protected by our hand.⁷⁶

Thus, we see that queen was not just a spouse to the king but also had important role in the realm of the state, even if one can argue that these roles and the trust vested in them came as a result of their relationship with the king as mother or wife. But, the very fact that they were to be of equal birth and possessed of certain qualities provides emphasis to the argument for their personal worth.

But no where we find the mention of a queen ruling in her own right. Furthermore, it is clearly opined that, "to cause another's death is accounted infamy in the world; infamous too is the land which own's a woman's sway and rule; and infamous are the men who yield themselves to the women's dominion."⁷⁷ Or as the verses declare:

Cursed be the dart of love that works men pain!
Cursed be the land where women rule supreme!
And cursed the fool that bows to woman's sway!⁷⁸

These repeated disapproval of the rule by women hints at the presence of women in power or the influence of powerful women. The conflict between the emerging patriarchal order and the high regard for women can most explicitly be understood from the occasion where a chaplain addressing the king says that, "if you anxious to see how immoral women are, I will show you their wickedness and deceitfulness. Come, let us disguise ourselves and go into the country" and "the king readily agreed and, handing over his kingdom to his mother, set out on his travels with his chaplain."⁷⁹

⁷⁶ *Hanhi-Pala- Jātaka*

⁷⁷ *Kana-Dina- Jātaka*

⁷⁸ *Ibid*

⁷⁹ *Kunala- Jātaka*

It can be gauged from the foregoing discussion that matrimony and role of women differed from class to class, but everywhere they entailed certain functions that had work related or economical aspects to them. The women contributed to the household by playing active partners in the work or duties of their men. But how far was their contribution acknowledged and what were the different avenues available to them to channelize their productive potentialities or to have an economic status independent of men remains to be analyzed.

A look at myriad mentions of women with reference to money, property, work and social security can shed light on presence and position of women in the economic sphere. We find numerous mentions of women in employment. These references help us fill up the gaps left by canonical literature by depicting women in active roles. Let us take a peek at the life of women and the socio-economic roles they are shown to play in the *Jātakas* in order to understand the worth and valuation of their contribution.

We can perhaps begin by pointing out that though Buddhism advocates the path of monkhood and meditation in the quest for *Nirvana*, yet it is partial towards men in as much as the admission of women into the *Sangha* was reluctant. The whole fabric of the *Jātaka* tales looks upon women as problematic for a disciplined life, for they are either an irresistible temptation for men or a threat in themselves.

Although we come across a number of stories wherein they are as dispassionate as the male counterparts, yet the necessity of matrimony for women has been expressly stated. It is opined that, 'a husband is a woman's real covering, and she that lacks a husband –even though she be clad in garments costing a thousand pieces-goes bare and naked indeed.'⁸⁰ To supply emphasis to this the story mentions the following verses:

'Like kingless kingdoms, like a stream run dry,
So bare and naked is a woman seen,

⁸⁰ *Ucchanga-Jātaka*

Who, having brothers ten, yet lacks a mate.’⁸¹

Before proceeding on to the finer aspects we need to understand the general social organization contained in the *Jātakas*. Although not given an elaborate theoretical structure, yet we do find that both social and economic hierarchies were present in the society and there were ideas about high/low and noble and low-born.⁸² To illustrate, we can recall the reference made in *Vessantara-Jātaka* viz. ‘then shall the great families be brought by very need to seek to live by dependence on the upstarts, and shall offer them their daughters in marriage. And the union of the noble maidens with the low-born shall be like unto the staling of the old jackal in the golden bowl.’

Family or household forms the unit that builds up the social structure. Though, a society is not composed of homogeneous units yet the most commonly depicted structure can be taken to be the most accepted one. We find that like the canonical literature, the *Jātakas* too assign the duty to support a family to the men. This can be inferred from the statement that ‘any decent young fellow with his wits about him has only to pick that mouse up, and he might start a business and keep a wife.’⁸³ Thus, we see that economic responsibility for the stability of the marriage was primarily assigned to the men. Even the different version of the famous Monkey-crocodile story, depict the Crocodile wife begging her lord to catch the monkey for her.⁸⁴

The dependence of wife on the husband is also clear from the instance contained in the *Mahavsilava-Jātaka*. In this story the minister dealt treacherously in the king’s harem and on being caught was so commanded by the king, “take your substance and your wife and family, and go hence.” Thus, it is clear that not only wife but the family had to stay or move with the husband.

Even the queen was no exception to the normal marital set up can be inferred from the following verses contained in the *Samkha-Pala-Jātaka* :

⁸¹ *Ibid*

⁸² *Infra* chapter 1

⁸³ *Cullaka-Setthi-Jātaka*

⁸⁴ *Vanarinda-Jātaka*

A second nymph then quick at his command
Came with a bowl of water in her hand,
And bathed my feet, kind service tendering
As did the queen for her dear lord the king. (88)

Presence of polygamy offers us yet another reason to believe the subordinate status of women. Presence of polygamy and the problems it caused to women are clear from the *Suruci-Jātaka*. In this story, the king of Benares while discussing the matter of their daughter's wedding asked his queen about the 'the worst misery for a woman?' The queen stated that to quarrel with her fellow-wives is the worst misery. On being so answered the King instantaneously declares that 'to save our only daughter the princess Sumedha from this misery, we will give her to none but him that will have her and no other.' While polygamy was found to be painful by women, we have many instances wherein men express their desire for more than one wife. E.g. a man prays in the following words:

'Give me five villages, all choice and fine,
A hundred slave-girls, seven hundred kine,
More than a thousand ornaments of gold,
And two wives give me, of like birth with mine.'⁸⁵

Whatever the nature of marriage or household, the *Jātakas* expressly state that 'true, it is strange to be without children unless one has renounced the world in quest of Arhantship.'⁸⁶ Thus, we can say that procreation is envisaged as one of the most important aspects of life. However, unlike brahmanical literature, the *Jātakas* make no exception to the vile nature of women even in their role as mothers. E.g. in *Nanda-Jātaka*, a man suspects his young wife and ponders that 'as soon as I am dead, this girl, being so young as she is, will marry heaven knows whom, and spend all my money, instead of handing it over to my son.' Though it can be argued that the female character is not one of natural mother but that of stepmom yet we can perhaps agree

⁸⁵ *Junha-Jātaka*

⁸⁶ *Cullaka-Setthi-Jātaka*

that the sole reason for this suspicion is not the relationship with the lady but her youthfulness. The man in question decided to bury his money and entrusted the slave to guide his son to it when he grows up.⁸⁷ However, in course of time when the son attains majority we find that his mother is the one who guides him to get his property and advises him to 'get it back and look after the property of the family.' It is important to note that the suspicion on the lady was without any reference to her conduct while due praise is absent on her exemplary conduct.

In *Asatamanta-Jātaka*, we have another example of a mother who sets an exceptional example. In this story, when a boy returns back home after completing his studentship, 'his parents grew to wish him to forsake the world and to worship the Fire-God in the forest. Accordingly his mother, in her desire to dispatch him to the forest by bringing home to him the wickedness of women, was confident that his wise and learned teacher would be able to lay bare the wickedness of the sex to her son, and so she asked whether he had *quite* finished his education.' The wickedness of women is demonstrated 'by the endeavor of a hag to kill her good son in order to facilitate an intrigue with a youth.'⁸⁸ The hag referred to is the mother of the teacher whom he had been dutifully serving for decades, and the youth is this student sent back by his mother. It is however interesting to note that while the mother of the teacher is reviled for her wickedness, no praise is showered on the mother of the student who guides him.

Similarly, though we have a number of stories showing contempt for wicked 'wives', little credit is given to the wives who are dutiful and epitome of good conduct. For instance, in the story about the miser who broke the family tradition of charity and chastises his wife to be likewise, we find that the wife while dutifully follows his command keeps advising him to be generous. Mistaking the miser's look-alike for her husband and being asked about some charity, she happily approves saying, 'be as bountiful as you please my husband.'⁸⁹ Besides bringing out the subordinate position

⁸⁷ *Nanda-Jātaka*

⁸⁸ *Asatamanta-Jātaka*

⁸⁹ *Ibid*

of wife vis-à-vis the husband, this story also highlights the lack of decision making power regards disposal of property even for charitable purposes.

Nonetheless, to proceed further let us take a look at other women in the *Jātakas* who are more than the shadow characters to be maligned for propagating a particular discourse. In the *Vatamiga-Jātaka*, a mother hired a slave girl to woo back her son from the path of monkhood. The slave girl in this story notices the lady of the house weeping and on discovering the reason confidently makes the offer the lady a deal viz. 'if you will give me authority in this house, I'll fetch your son back.' The *Jātakas* abound in the examples of such women who contrive and indulge in manipulations for material welfare. To illustrate, mention can be made of the *Asilakkhana-Jātaka*, wherein when the king commands to keep his daughter and nephew apart, the pair achieves their wish through a wise woman.

The birth stories mention many women engaged in various productive activities and economic roles. There are references to female slaves, housemaids, courtesans, dancing girls, women engaged in various food processing works at home, servants entrusted with different kind of activities etc. A brief look at these references can help us identify a few hues of the relationship between women and economic sphere.

Female slaves form an important category but were surely not a homogeneous class. They were assigned a variety of tasks from household work to personal attendance. They were entrusted with precious possessions like jewels and ornaments and thus can be expected to have inspired confidence in their masters or mistresses. E.g. *Mahasara-Jātaka* mentions that 'the women of the harem, removing the jewels from their heads and necks and so forth, laid them aside with their heads and necks and so forth, laid them aside with their upper garments in boxes under the charge of female slaves.' The female slave in the *Kaka-Jātaka* was in charge of a granary and performed the tasks like spreading the rice out in the sun at the granary door and keeping a watch over it. That female slaves were valued can be inferred from the following reference:

‘Give me five villages, all choice and fine,
A hundred slave-girls, seven hundred kine,
More than a thousand ornaments of gold,
And two wives give me, of like birth with mine.’⁹⁰

On the whole their conditions seem satisfactory in as much as we have only one instance of a slave being beaten up. The instance comes from *Namasiddhi-Jātaka*, wherein ‘a slave-girl had been thrown down at the door of a house, while her master and mistress beat her with rope-ends because she had not brought home her wages.’ Perhaps slave girls were used as commercial assets, besides being employed in personal service or household. However, as can be expected the status of a slave girl was far from satisfactory.

Perhaps, the work allocated to slaves and the treatment meted out to them depended upon both the needs and nature of the masters. On the other hand, we find most of them abusing their power and indulging in conspiracies and schemes.⁹¹ We also have the instances wherein the sons of these slaves grow up with the children of the Master and successfully marry the daughters of rich households by impersonation.⁹² A look at the provisions regards female slaves in the canonical literature can help us understand the relative positions of the slaves and the owners.⁹³

Another category of female workers visible in the *Jātakas* is that of handmaidens/female servants. Like slaves, they too were employed in various household activities and services. *Varana-Jātaka* refers to a maid who was to get the breakfast ready for the Master and his followers. *Ghata-Jātaka* mentions a serving-woman named Nandagopa in the employment of a queen. We find many mentions of maid-servants, but only one mention is the one regards the esteem and attitude towards this employment. In *Umma-Panti-Jātaka*, when a wife expressed her desire for a

⁹⁰ *Junha-Jātaka*

⁹¹ *Supra*

⁹² *Katahaka-Jātaka and Kalanduka-Jātaka*

⁹³ *Supra*

safflower robe, the husband asked, 'My dear, we are poor people: whence are we to get you such a robe? The wife answers thus, 'suffer me to earn wages in a wealthy household, and as soon as they recognize my merit, they will make me a present of a robe.'

Thus, we see that the conditions of work for both the female slaves and the maid servants were similar and perhaps the two categories differed only in their legal status. Since slaves are denied separate individual existence and are generally dealt in as chattels, they face the worse perspective. However, even the lives of the servants were no better can be gauged from the reference made as regards the reason for certain ladies to work as servants. It is stated that, 'once they had been rich merchants, but by the time of our story they had lost all the sons and brothers and all their wealth. The sole survivors were a girl and her grandmother, and they got their living by working for hire.'⁹⁴ It is also interesting to note here that wealth and riches are related here to the 'sons and brothers' and it is only the male relatives passed away that the ladies chose to work. We can possibly suggest that women did not work in prosperity for male relatives were to provide for them. We have already seen that the *Jātakas* ascribe the role of bread-winners to the husbands. Poverty and lack of a male relative to support them pushed the women to work.

Let us take a look at a set of other employments for women. We find a number of mentions of women who were to provide entertainment and sexual services to men. Since the references are of different nature, therefore any generic term is being avoided here to label them all. Let us take a look at a few depictions for the purposes of understanding the nature of these occupations. *Vattaka-Jātaka* refers to a *Kattika* festival and talks about a young girl sent to woo a young merchant. She is however taken by another nobleman. Then the girl's mother insisted on having her daughter restored to her, and brought the young man before the king, who proceeded to examine into the matter. This story perhaps talks about the women who worked as prostitutes. In *Kanavera-Jātaka* we come across a reference to a courtesan rescued a

⁹⁴ *Serivanija-Jātaka*

robber by betraying her lover to death. The women in these two stories are definitely given a dark hue.

On the other hand mention can be made of *Sarabhangā-Jātaka* wherein it is stated that 'king Dandaki deposed from her position a courtesan whom he had greatly honored.' Thus, there definitely existed a class of courtesans which was held in honor and had royal patronage.

Next we have a number of references to the dancing women. *Sonaka-Jātaka* refers to 'a company of minstrels and mine dancers' in the service of the king. There are references to the bands of dancing women. In the *Kusa-Jātaka*, a king is advised to 'first of all send out into the streets for a whole week a band of dancing women of low degree--giving the act a religious sanction--and if one of them shall give birth to a son, well and good.' This whole act or ritual shows that these dancing girls had close connections with the royal household, for this whole act was addressed to serve the desire of the king to have a son. Similarly, we have the following verses that portray the employment of dancing girls for the purposes of indulgence:

Fair women skilled in dance and song and trained for every mood
Shall lap thy soul in ease and joy,-why linger in this wood?⁹⁵

A number of stories mention the dancing girls and courtesans under the state patronage.⁹⁶ We have already noticed that they are part of festivals and ritual activities. The fact that the girl in the *Vattaka-Jātaka* chose to go with the nobleman on her own and without informing her mother, suggests that perhaps prostitution was an established industry. The mother's demand to have her that perhaps state ensured protection to the women engaged in this business. The overall picture, though not as elaborate as the one presented by the *Arthasāstra* shows that there were different classes of courtesans and dancing women, who were meant for both aesthetic and sexual pleasures.

⁹⁵ *Mugapakkha-Jātaka*

⁹⁶ *Infra*

So far we have discussed the women employed outside the household. However, we need to look at the work carried out by women within the household that was unpaid but was crucial to the sustenance of the family in as much as very often it was either in the nature of 'value-addition' to the basic productive activity or was essential to the management of the house. For example, *Mahasupina-Jātaka* refers to 'crops that women have spread in the sun to dry.' *Vessantara-Jātaka* directly refers to the errands carried on by women for the household. To illustrate,

'Jujaka said:

"You need not fetch the water home, you need not serve me so.
Do not be angry, lady mine for I myself will go"

The woman said:

"You fetch the water? No, indeed! That's not our usual way.
I tell you plainly, if you do, with you I will not stay.'⁹⁷

However, should the economic status permit a wife could always demand domestic help. As Jujaka's wife declared:

'Unless you buy a slave or maid this kind of work to do,
I tell you plainly I will go and will not live with you.'⁹⁸

Besides the role of wife, motherhood formed the most important aspect of a woman's life. We have already made a reference to the procreative function and the Buddhist position that it is strange not to have children if one is not into the ascetic life.⁹⁹ That a great value was attached to the motherhood and due care was showered upon them during the pregnancy is shown by repeated references wherein the lady demands one or the other wish to be granted because it is 'a longing of a pregnant woman.' This longing has often been mentioned to have been expressed to get a wish fulfilled. E.g.

⁹⁷ *Vessantara-Jātaka*

⁹⁸ *Ibid*

⁹⁹ *Cullaka-Setthi-Jātaka*

In the *Maha-Mora-Jātaka*, a queen ‘when she awoke, and perceived that it was a dream, she thought, “If I tell the king it was a dream, he will take no notice of it; but if I say it is the longing of a woman with child, then he will take notice.”

Although paternity is definitely the determining factor for the socio-economic status of the child, yet we come across specific mentions of their mothers. Though it might be hinting at polygamous relationships yet the very fact that mothers were identified shows that she commanded special respect. E.g., *Devadhamma-Jātaka* mentions that ‘once on a time Brahmadatta was reigning in Benares in Kasi. The Boddhisatta, having come to birth in those days as the king’s son by the queen, was duly named Mahimsasa.’

Mothers were to be honored and taken care of, and the *Jātakas* set the ideal similar to *Manusmṛiti* in this regard. E.g. *Cula-Nandīya-Jātaka* narrates the story of two monkeys who sacrificed their lives for saving that of their mother. Equally so mothers were personification of affection and care. For instance, *Kusanali-Jātaka* states that ‘the Tree-sprite knew that her home would be destroyed on the morrow, and burst into tears as she clasped her children to her breast, not knowing wither to fly with them.’ Similarly, we have *Kuntani-Jātaka* that narrates the story about a heron’s revenge for the loss of her young ones. Similarly, the *Latukika-Jātaka* mentions about a quail’s revenge for young ones.

CONCLUSION

We find that that though the Buddhist birth stories largely vilify women yet they themselves bear testimony to the importance of the roles they play in the socio-economic sphere, both within and outside the household. They are primarily to play the roles of wives and mothers but they are also a part of the work force, both as female-slaves and as employed hired servants. We have women who play an equally important role in the economic matters related to their household. They do not only co-operate with their husbands but also connive with them in order to attain domestic prosperity.

From queens to fisherwomen, we find that they share the responsibilities of their men. However, equally true is the fact that we find little mention of their employment in the honorable ranks or professions. The attitude towards the courtesans is ambivalent. The representations of female slaves and hand maidens show that they came from poor classes, and some of them might have been destitute. We have already mentioned to the story wherein the grandmother and daughter seek work only when the merchant family decayed.

Though we do have mention of women carrying out a number of activities but their economic role in production is assigned little value. They are basically looked upon as slaves or servants, rather than skilled labor. The overall, emphasis is on harnessing their labor. This tendency is present both within the household and in the employments.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

CONCLUSION

Overlooking half the humanity is impossible. Although both the primary sources and the early scholarship have failed to acknowledge the varied contributions that women made to socio-economic set up, yet their significance is evident in the sketchy mentions, occasional appreciation, and the idealized roles. Perhaps, more important is the amount of energy spent by the authors or the compilers of the textual sources that has been spent in vilifying and devising efforts to control women, for they demonstrates the anxiety to contain women within a few confined spaces.

From the critical study of the canonical and the popular sources made in the course of this research work, we find that both in the Brahmanical and the Buddhist tradition, women have been expected to limit themselves to the domestic sphere. Secondly, they are largely seen as economically dependent on men. They are denied an independent existence and are mostly defined with reference to the male relations. It has rightly been pointed out that 'classical Hindu (sic) laws focus almost exclusively on women as wives.'¹⁰⁰ Even though motherhood has also been given a high reverence, yet we find that it has been tied up in the webs of the *varna* society wherein the reproductive sources are made subservient to the maintenance of the social hierarchy. Such references are present in all the three sources. There is an attempt to circumscribe the liberty of women not only in the matters of socialization and sexuality, but also in matters of everyday behavior and responsibilities. Thus, individuality of women is grossly disregarded.

'This cultural-cum-material patriarchy is interwoven with perhaps the world's most hierarchical social structure of caste and ethnicity. What is considered to be appropriate-whether it is the form of marriage, female demeanor, or the nature of women's work-is closely linked with the family's position (ascribed and/or aspired) in the social-status hierarchy.'¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Susan S.Wadley, *Women and the Hindu Tradition*, Signs, Vol. 3, No. 1, Women and National Development: The Complexities of Change, (Autumn, 1977), The University of Chicago Press, Pg 117.

¹⁰¹ Kalpana Bardhan, *Women's Work, Welfare and Status: Forces of Tradition and Change in India*, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 20, No. 50 (Dec. 14, 1985),pg2207

Nonetheless, amongst these overriding concerns, the presence of women outside the restricted space is present in all the three texts. There are mentions of women who worked and earned for their households. We have already referred to various economic activities and works where women were actively involved. We find that both in the Buddhist and the Brahmanical tradition, the social and economic status of the women determined their options vis-à-vis work. In fact we find that women from well-off households or higher social strata worked only in case of destitution. On the other hand we find a number of mentions of women engaged in agriculture-related activities and also playing active help to their husbands in industries like fishing, crafts, etc. 'Lower class women had more independence because it was assumed as a sign of inferiority and it was necessary for the socially productive work with which the state was concerned; their independence, however, was at the cost of their status; it was a sign of the inferiority of their *jatis*.'¹⁰²

From the perusal of the sources made in the course of this work, we can have an outline picture of the roles played by the women. From *Manusmriti* we gather that women were largely dehumanized and made into servile life partners and their sole worth lay in providing progeny according to the *varna* rules. Obviously these rules were enunciated for the higher *varna* women, since the sexuality of the lower *varna* women was not required to be regulated. Therefore we find that the canonical literature allows them liberty in matters of sexual and social conduct.

Similar attitude is present in the *Arthasāstra*, for we find that this text also sanctioned different employments for different sections of women. Apart from the analysis provided in the chapter on the *Arthasāstra*, the very fact that the women of 'actors, acrobats, musicians, showmen' etc could go out with strangers showed that their sexuality was rather an object of economic utility. This difference is crucial- sexuality of upper *varna* is a matter of 'morality' while those of other classes can be utilized for

¹⁰²Gail Omvedt, *God as Political Philosopher: Buddhism's Challenge to Brahmanism*, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 36, No. 21 (May 26 - Jun. 1, 2001), Economic and Political Weekly ,pg188

economic purposes. The provisions relating to female slaves in the *Arthasāstra* also hint the same.

The *Jātakas* are ambivalent towards matter of sexuality, perhaps because their overall concern lay not in the society but in the *Sangha*. Interestingly, despite so many provisions relating to protection of female slaves in the *Arthasāstra*, we do not come across such instances in the *Jātakas*. Perhaps it is because these Buddhist birth stories are much more zealous for attributing all the evil nature to women.

The role of women in the form of managing the household and even their own property is evident from all these sources. It was assigned little economic value, and was largely 'cheap labour' and a mechanism of controlling them whether as a wife or as a slave. Their work was only looked upon as labor. However, from this cloudy picture, we can mark out the silver lining. The fact that there were property owning widows, independently working female handmaids, women who tilled for half the produce, mid-wives etc. points towards the fact that women could and did have economic independence despite all attempts to deprive them of the same.

To conclude, we can perhaps summarize the relationship between women and economic sphere by looking at the overall historical context. The historical settings of our sources are the centuries that witnessed substantial changes in the socio-economic sphere. Old kinship pattern gave way to new social order which was yet to have a definite structure. Herein, different traditions were competing with each other to establish authority and find more adherents. Different traditions had variations in their attitude towards women but all of them had a notion of social hierarchy and patriarchy.

A number of customs, traditions, ideas institutions and ideologies were being propagated and the women were accorded a secondary and sub-human status in all of these. But their independent existence has registered itself and a searching eye can always uncover more. Even their subordinate roles hint their powerful presence in the social-economic sphere.

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