

**CULTURAL ROLE OF GANIKAS (COURTESANS)  
IN ANCIENT INDIA**

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**1) Introduction: -**

Ganika or courtesans as an institute came into existence in ancient India with a special purpose. It received social status and support by the kings. It also has social recognition from middle and higher classes. In ancient India, courtesans or prostitutes had a higher place in society than the common people.<sup>1</sup> The men interested in music and dance used to get attracted towards them. Their class was a striking feature of city life. Their life itself was a composition of music and fine arts. The same was their profession. As compared to their present situation, they had a higher position in politics and society. They used to captivate the people with their beauty and musical presentations. Their role was important in cultural and luxurious life. The present research paper is an humble attempt to throw some light on the cultural role of Ganikas in ancient India who remained negligent, unfortunately for a long time.

**2) Meaning of Ganika :-** Some experts opine that The word ‘Ganika’ came from ‘Gana’. All the member of ‘gana’ have a right over her. So the one who is for gana is ‘Ganika’<sup>2</sup> Those women could serve the king in the outer court from that day they waited upon him, holding his umbrellas and the

chauris. Later they were handed over to the ganas and thus the institution of Ganikas came into being.<sup>3</sup>

### **3) The Cultural Role Of Ganikas:-**

The entire life of a Ganika was a mixture of music and fine arts which was also their main occupation. Comparing to recent era, Ganikas were much respected and praised in that era. They had a prominent position in state and society. Ganikas were the most important link between cultural programmes and progressive life.

In the then society Ganikas used to spend a lot of time in music and dance, that's the reason, in Buddhist period, the development of Ganika was at a high rate.<sup>4</sup> Before commencing the profession of Ganika, there were certain rules about the type of training to be taken and the kind of art to be learnt and adopted. Generally, there was a common rule that Ganikas can be proficient in 64 types of arts. This meant that Ganikas should be master in these 64 skills and should be able to entertain their customers along with satisfying their sexual needs. The detailed information of these arts are given in Sanskrit literature specially Vatsyana's Kamasutra, Kshemendhra's Kalavilas, Dandi's Dashmumarcharit, Raja Bhojdev's Shringar Manjarikatha, etc.<sup>5</sup> In Kautilya's Arthshastra, Kautilya has expressed his views about Ganika and Dasis, According to him, Ganika and artist girls known as Dasis who depended entirely on dramas for their survival, essentially had the knowledge of various skills such as singing, playing instruments, dance, dramas, writing, painting, playing specially instruments like veena, venu and mridung, understanding the psychology of others, preparing fragrances, making garlands, communication skills, dialogues and the act of sex and love-making.<sup>6</sup> The prostitutes who were beautiful and had qualities, reached the highest position in these 64 arts and

used to get the title of “Ganika” and became respectable in the society. Such Ganikas were honoured by the Kings themselves. Vaishali Nagar was famous for Amrapali, the Ganikas.<sup>7</sup> In other words she was ‘bride of the city’. During the same period, there was another Ganikas named Salvati in Rajgrah. She was famous for her beauty and expertise in music. A special ceremony was held to bestow courtesanship (Ganikabhishek) on her.<sup>8</sup> The ceremony was again a mark of pride for any courtesan. These two dancers Amrapali and Salvati had received respect from the Kings. A number of girls used to assist them. Of course assistants were also beautiful and masters in dancing and music. Great Scholars used to praise them and also used to request them to teach them these skills. In this manner, these talented Ganikas became famous in all parts of the society.<sup>9</sup> Apart from the most important Yadavas of Dwaraka, the Goshthis<sup>10</sup> of the princes also enjoyed a wonderful time with these Ganikas who used to sing and dance for their entertainment. These Ganikas or artisans entertained the Yadavas with dances, vocal and instrumental performances and dramatic performances.<sup>11</sup>

### **Conclusion:-**

While, studying the Ganikas, there is one thing must be kept in mind that they might be anyone in their professional life, but at the personal level, at the end of the day, they all are human beings and most importantly, they are women. Right from the ancient times, in the life of a human being, women have had a major role to play at different levels. From the age of Vedas, Mahabharata and Ramayana, at the cultural front, on the basis of their mastery in 64 arts, Ganikas have entertained the Indian society and satisfied the sexual desires. In today’s modern era, we look at the prostitutes as someone who do not have any standard and are a negligible part of society. But in Ancient India, Ganikas had

a respectable position in the social life. It can be seen that Ganikas have done an important work by entertaining the Indian society with the help of various arts such as singing, dance, playing instruments, enacting drams, etc.

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8. .Mahavagga,8.1.3
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