

Contribution of Women to the Early Indian Economy (1500 B.C to 600 A.D)

Anita Singh, Ph.D.

Affiliate Faculty, Assistant Professor - Department of History

Arya Mahila PG College, Banaras Hindu University, India

Email: singhanita1133@gmail.com

Abstract

Historically speaking men and women were equal partners in the production-distribution processes in ancient India. This study makes an effort to bring visibility to early Indian economics and highlights examples of a thriving women's labor force in early India. Women's labor was complementary in society; they were equal partners with men in different economic activities. The common woman of early India had to earn her livelihood as well. It is well known that even today the largest section of rural women are directly involved in agriculture, animal husbandry, forestry, etc. The nature of the economy of the ancient ages gives no clear-cut demarcation between the gender roles and they are very much influenced by the demands of the situation. As there was no distinction between domestic and workplace and production was largely for local consumption, women's economic participation was always present in society. This study is an endeavor to highlight the position of the 'women working class' in mainstream history.

Early Indian economic participation of women can be witnessed in the agricultural field and allied activities; women taking up different professions and contributing as a service class to the state administration and the society, and finally, women entertainers and slaves who were engaged in different economic roles. The literary sources provide specific terms in use for the women workers which throws ample light on the fact that they would have been in significant numbers. This means that the lawmakers of the time had to consider women's safety and security, providing the necessary dignity and justice to early working-class Indian women.

Keywords: Women Labor, Economic Participation, Early India, Female Slaves, Skilled Labor, Women Entertainers

Introduction

Women in Indian history are often victims of broad generalizations based on the limited study of historical facts. The objective here is to focus on the misconceptions about the invisibility of women in early India. The study highlights specific examples of women's contribution from 1500 B.C to 600 A.D and thereby makes them more visible in academic discourse. To bring women into historical records we need to adopt an analytical microscopic study of this often overlooked or deliberately marginalized section of India's early period and only then we would have a better understanding of their contributions to society and history. When it comes to women's questions, the parameters need to be redefined, and the sources available need to be reanalyzed. Efforts should be made to analyze the rural-urban dichotomy and the role of women in it. Only a small section of women in early society could afford to lead sedentary lives. The rest had to toil hard for their subsistence.

In the early primitive society, hunting and food gathering were supplemented by slash-and-burn methods of agriculture (jhum cultivation) and every member was actively involved in it. According to Kosambi (1972), "the first division of labor was between men and women, women were the first potters, basket weavers, agriculturists with hoe cultivation of the digging stick" (1972; p. 72). The early women contributed significantly by their productive labor to the village economy. Apart from agricultural activities women also attended cattle, doing menial jobs; preparing cow dung, drying it, milking the cows, preparing milk products, as well as selling these products in markets. Despite the beginning of shifting agriculture, the Rigvedic economic life was predominantly tribal with cattle rearing as the basis of the economy, typical of all pre-agricultural societies women inevitably played a key role in production. In the Vedic economy, women were comparatively free and their place in the community was naturally determined by their ability to share in the work of the community. Therefore, the percentage of women who could lead sedentary lives must have been limited to only a small section of elite women who could afford to remain 'Asuryasprya' means the one who is untouched by the rays of the sun according to the Mahabharata- II.62.5 and XV 21.13 (Shastri, 1983).

By the later Vedic age, the rural-urban divide had begun to take shape and with the adoption of intensive field agriculture and surplus production, there was a need for slaves or hired labor, and women belonging to upper classes were virtually eliminated from the economic production, although women of the lower orders continued to work. This was a landmark shift from the Rigvedic age where there is a reference to 'Sanutri' (Rgveda.I.123.2) in the sense of a woman distributor, to a gradual withdrawal of high-born ladies and narrowing down their access rights to basic resources which consequently began to diminish women's status and economic opportunities open to them. Women of the upper classes were largely restricted to procreation and attending to household duties and their role in society was defined by their relationship with men (Wilson, 1857). As a result of the emergence of a complex economy and social structure, women's non-specialist position became a real handicap and the reason for the lack of specialization was due to overburden in her breeder-feeder role (Shah, 1995; pg. 146).

The real picture of any society is carried by the common people in their daily life. Women of the common masses were the self-supporting units of the family, they kept their paddy fields, gathered and parched the seeds of rice, grew cotton, spun fine threads, and

manufactured their own clothes. Craft specialization which followed in the wake of agricultural expansion to some extent must have led to the separation of home and workplace. Women labor from the common classes were skilled in the textile industry, pottery making, and mat making, and with the coming of the state into existence, women could be seen in state services as state officials, spies, warriors, and attendants. Some women took up noble professions such as teaching, and medicine. There was another rich class of women entertainers and courtesans who were in a position to exploit their talent in arts to earn their livelihood.

Unlike the representation of women in the Vedas, dharmasastra doesn't depict women as weavers, making bows and arrows or breaking reeds to prepare mattresses. But Arthashastra deals with practical concerns and gives us a better idea of the visibility of women in public spaces than the Dharmasastra literature which mainly focuses on Brahmanical norms in domestic and public spheres.

Agriculture and Women

Women were the first to discover agriculture and the early stage cultivation was still considered a continuation of food gathering in which women played a significant role. In Rigveda, we find Apala helping her father in agricultural activities (Rigveda. VIII.91.5.6) (Wilson, 1857). Rigvedic Aryans communally owned the land and collectively worked in the fields. In the Satapatha Brahmana, a husband and wife have been compared to two parts of a grain, which only together give it completeness (Sathapatha Brahamana, 14.4.2.4-5) (Weber, 1885). In Taittiriya Brahmana, the husband and wife have been asked to be together engaged in sacrifices like plough and bullock (Taittiriya Brahmana, III.7-5). Such smilies refer to the involvement of women in agriculture and animal husbandry where the woman is an equal to her male partner. The Vedic women derived importance not only from being producers of producers (male children) but also from being primary producers of food and other goods. In the Sathapatha Brahamana, there is an instance where "khurpi" has been mentioned along with a woman (Sathapatha Brahamana, III.5.4.4) (Godbole, 1898). Female slaves working in the fields are first heard of in the Sruta Sutra. By the later Vedic age, agriculture became the primary concern and Baudhayana Dharmasutra states that vaisyas and sudra women are free (sexually) because they are engaged in agricultural activities (Tyagi, 1994; pg. 52).

In the post-Vedic age generally women of upper castes or high born never undertook open field work as hired female labor was available to supplement it. The poorer classes had no alternative but to allow their female members to contribute to all processes of production. Vedic jana were pastoral warriors and they counted wealth in terms of cattle. The young girl was called 'duhitr', cattle rearing and milking the cow was the chief concern of daughters (Rig Veda III.31,1.2).

With the growth of the agrarian economy, the peasants began to assume an increasingly important economic role. Kautilya states that wives of sharecroppers and herdsmen are responsible for the payment of debts incurred by their husbands. Perhaps Kautilya is the only author who speaks of the Ardhasitikas, women tenants tilling for half the produce (Arthasastra. III.11.23) (Shamasastri, 1956). It would seem that wives of sharecroppers and herdsmen were engaged in the profession of their husbands. In southern India, low caste Velalas called Katiyar meaning the last in the society, women shared in the task of cultivating fields and these women were known as Kataicciyan (Tolkappiyar, 1923).

Women's Skilled Labor

Women could move freely in society in ancient times and were also known to earn their livelihood independently by weaving, dyeing, basket making, and selling flowers. The textile was one of the chief occupations of women and reference to specific terms like Sri (Rig Veda. X.71.9), Vayitri (a female weaver) (Rig Veda. X.71.9) (Wilson, 1957), Rajayatri (a female dyer) (Vajasaneyi Samhita.XXX.12) (Weber, 1880) and Pesaskari (a female embroiderer) (Taittiriya Brahmana III.4.5.1) (Godbole, 1898) were being used for some of the economic pursuits which fell in disuse in later ages. From Sathapatha Brahamana we come to know that women weaved cotton and wool and also used to stitch their own clothes (XII.7.2.11, V.3.20, III.5.3.25) (1898).

Women working with thorns were called 'Kantakari' and those who prepared baskets were called 'Bidalakari;' women skilled in preparing face packs and beautification products were called 'Anjanikari' and there were women who prepared arrow baskets were called 'Kosakari' (Vajsenyi Samhita, XXX.8, XXX.9, XXX.12) (Weber, 1880). Preparing mats with leaves and bamboo was also a women's occupation which they shared with men. Women used to manufacture arrows and bows and the female arrow makers were called 'Ishukartryah' in Vedic literature but the occupation disappeared with time. There are references to 'Upalaparksini' i.e. women engaged in making goats. The epic literature refers to women masseurs, women beauticians, and garland makers.

The Pali text throws considerable light on the women weavers. We come across ladies assuring their dying husbands that they need not worry about the financial future of their families for they could earn the necessary income by spinning and weaving cotton and woolen yarn and piece goods (Tyagi, 1994; pg. 65). In Vinaya Patika weaving is considered as a low type of work (Hinasippani) (Vinaya Patika IV.6) (Oldenberg, 1879). Women carding cotton is evident by the expressions 'Ittinam - Kappasa - Pothana - Dhanuka' (Bhimasena Jataka. Vol.I. no.80.356). Women figured in the industry for wages as 'Kamakar' and we find ample evidence of women being employed in state-owned spinning and weaving factories and also working in their own houses for wages (Saran, 1957; pg.66). The weaving industry was under the supervision of the Sutradhayakashas in the Mauryan State. Generally, old women, widows, ascetics, aged Ganikas, and Devadasis who wanted to earn their livelihood themselves were employed by the state factories for spinning yarn from cotton, jute, wool, etc. Women in purdah or women who had committed some offenses were fined and could pay it off in the form of personal labor by spinning yarn (Arthasastra.II.23, II.23.2) (Shamasastri, 1956). The Purananuru uses the expression 'parutti pentir pannuval' for the thread carded and spun by women (Puram, 125.1). Bleaching and washing was also a women's dominant occupation and the washerwoman was known as Pulatti (Ramaswamy, 2003; pg.88).

Pottery was also under the women's domain. In Bhagavati, one of the oldest ardha-Magadhi texts, we are told of one Halahala of Sarasvati, a rich potter woman of that city, and another such lady named Agnimitra is also mentioned in the Upasakadasa. Women in merchandise production and selling are explicitly mentioned as Bhogasamharapeta narrates that four women earned money as hawkers and they had cheated people by utilizing false weights (Law, 1963; pg. 62). Women were employed for distilling wine and they were called

‘Sidhukarni’ (Anguttara Nikaya.II.82) (Morris & Hardy, 1885). Coastal women are also said to have processed and sold toddy made of Palmyra juice or from rice (Ramaswamy, 2003; pg. 159). The Valaiyar caste was very skilled in preparing liquor though records show that women were associated only with making rice toddy.

Women Service Class

Women labor could be seen in different roles extending their services for furthering the aims of the state. Although they were not directly engaged in productivity, their services were supporting the economy. Early women were engaged in medicinal professions, state services, administration, warfare, espionage, and others took up jobs as female attendants and female entertainers for their livelihood. The scriptures of early India reveal that a good number of women were engaged as teachers, preachers, dancers, musicians, and painters. Women's labor could be seen in the following services:

Administration - Vedic women were members of the Sabha and Vidatha and took an active part in its proceedings (Rgveda, I.167.3) (Wilson, 1857). It was expected that a bride should be able to speak with composure in public assemblies (Atharveda. XIV.1.21). The Rig Veda along with the collections of the Atharveda taken together, furnish at least seven references testifying not only to women’s attendance in the Vidatha but also to her participation. But by the time of the Maitrayani Samhita their position had already changed, the text categorically states ‘men go to the assembly, not women’ (Maitriyani Samhita. IV.7.4) (Vidyalankar, 1986). There is an intriguing reference to King Sragala, who was the head of a woman’s kingdom (Strirajyadhapati) and had participated in the swayamvara of the Kalinga princess (Mahabharata. XII.4.7) (Shastri, 1983).

Women bodyguards - The Digha Nikaya text narrates women being employed as bodyguards to the king. It is said that King Ajatasatru went to see Budha accompanied by five hundred ladies riding on elephants. Buddhaghosa explained that King Ajatsatru thought, “there is no fear for a man when he is accompanied by women and can go safely.” Women escorts to royal families were warriors and skilled in the art of warfare. The early Greek writers refer to these women, Megasthenes relates how the king’s person was entrusted to women who were brought from their parents (Crindle, 1901). Curtius observes how some of them drove in chariots or on horseback or elephants, equipped with all kinds of weapons as if they were going on a military expedition (Saleore,1943, pg. 182). These statements of the Greek writers are well supported by Kautilya and he says, “ on getting up from the bed, the king shall be received by troops of women armed with bows”(Arthashastra.I.21.1) (Shamasastri, 1956).

Female Attendants - Female attendants such as lamp bearers, fan bearers, pitcher bearers, rug bearers, wine bearers, umbrella bearers, and golden staff bearers are noticeable in early India's literary and archaeological accounts. These women performed the duties as Paricharika (attendant), Attacharikaitthi (personal attendant), Perana darika (women doorkeepers), Sahayika, dhatis (wet nurses) (Jataka VI.262, 385, III.413, II.337) (Cowell, 1973). In Digh Nikaya, we find that the retinue of a prince is constituted exclusively of women (Digh Nikaya II.9). It is said that Mahapajapati Gotami accompanied by five hundred female attendants went to Buddha to join the order (Vinaya Patika II) (Oldenberg, 1879; pg. 253).

Teaching Profession – Vedic women were eligible for the Upanayana ceremony, they offered daily Vedic sacrifices just like men and there are instances of women being famous poets, scholars, debaters, and philosophers. Some educated women took teaching as a career and were called Acharyas to differentiate them from the wives of teachers, who were called Acharyanis. Women had different schools for themselves which were possibly managed by Upadhayayas. Poor women also took up teaching as an occupation in the absence of their husbands as means of their livelihood.

Dhatri – Women adopting the profession of nurses were called ‘dhatris’ and they had sound knowledge of child psychology, physiology, and human anatomy. A wet nurse in epic literature was a woman with medicinal knowledge. Among all the female employees, she enjoyed the most respect and was highly trusted. She used to nurse the royal children. King Bimbisara of Magadha suffered from fistula and five hundred nurses served him during this difficult time (Vinya Patika.I.) (Oldenberg, 1879; pg.273). Divyavadana explains the duties of nurses. There were different kinds of dhatris with specific duties like anka dhatri (one who carries the child), mala dhatri (one who bathes the child), stanya dhatri (one who suckles the child), kridapanika-dhatri (one who provides the child with toys and plays with it). Cankam literature also refers to women wet nurses as ‘civilitai.’ The Akananuru and Peromppanamuppatai list the duties of the nurse which include playing with and amusing the child, feeding it, and putting the child to bed.

Female Dasis - Slavery is a very old institution and slaves working on land are first heard of in the Sruta Sutra. Women slaves largely contributed to domestic work and mostly belonged to lower orders of society. Slaves and hired laborers were employed in cultivation and womenfolk were partly engaged in agricultural activities. The total number of slaves both in production and domestic work doesn’t seem to exceed the non-slave population as happened in Greece during the same period (Tyagi, 1994; pg. 121). In Panini’s grammar, the word Kimkara is used for a domestic servant. The Gana Patha mentions various female slaves, namely Pralepika, Vilopika, Anulopika, Manipali, Dvarapali, etc. Different terminology in use again reflects the large section of female slaves that existed such as Geha dasi, Amaya dasi, Kumbha dasi, and Vihikottika dasi. The work done by these women is designated by the word ‘dasi bhoga’ which was opposed to ‘sunisa-bhoga,’ which is work done by the daughter-in-law. The position of women workers particularly female slaves was very much secure in respect of maternity issues. Taking the right care of the dasis was among the chief duties of the householders. Female slaves could be emancipated with the consent of their masters therefore ‘slavery’ is probably a misnomer given the limitations of the English language.

Female Entertainers - Women were also engaged in careers of amusement i.e., nartaiki (dancers), singers, actors, artists, and acrobats. Later evidence seems to suggest that there were regular institutions where a girl could receive specific training, sometimes in the company of male students. Even prostitution was a recognized profession. In ancient literature, there were two kinds of prostitutes i.e. Ganikas, a lady of Gana (republic) for kings and the other was Vaisyas, a lady of ‘Vis’ i.e. common people. But later these two terms came to be used synonymously. There are references from Vedic literature that show professional females as performing artists. At Samana, a Vedic festival, maidens’ dancing skill was put to the test and courtesans earned money and fame by singing and dancing (Vedic Index.Vol.II.pg.429). Another instance of a woman dancing and adorned with ornaments in

an assembly (sabha) is mentioned in Atharveda (II.36.1). Women's interest in dance and music is depicted in Taittiriya Brahmana (VI.16.5) and Maitrayani Samhita (III.7.3) (Vidyalankar, 1986). As far as the women actors (natas), dancers (nartakas), singers, musicians (gayana-vadaka), storytellers (vakjivana), bards (kustlavas), rope dancers (plavaka), showmen (sauhikta), and wandering minstrels (caranas), are concerned, Kautilya lays down that same rules apply to them as to the Ganikas (Shamasastri, 1956).

The Pali text furnishes enough information about the economic freedom of women and their independent means of earning a livelihood. Pali literature focuses on the commerce-oriented urban milieu and the Dharmashastric literature focuses on the agriculture-dominated rural milieu, in which land was figured as the chief guiding factor controlling all socio-economic development. The lower strata of the society of petty traders, artisans, and wage earners are comparatively better projected in Pali literature and other non-religious texts such as Arthasastra. The number of such working women was not negligible as suggested by the fact that the lawmakers had to ponder over their incomes and that these should not be included within stridhana. Only an insignificant part of women's labor belonging to the upper caste came to withdraw from public production due to the patriarchal kinship structure. According to Kautilya, women of low-status communities as wandering minstrels (caranas), dancers (talavacaras), fishermen (matsya), hunters (lubdhakas), cowherds (gopalakas), and sellers of women are uncontrolled (prastrsta). The occupation of all these communities required greater freedom of movement for their women for apart from performing other chores, the women of fisherfolk, cowherds, and hunters must have carried their products to markets or door to door for sale. They represent the counterpart of the 'Anikasini,' women who did not stir in their homes and supported themselves by spinning yarn at home itself. Such women belonged to upper castes. The superintendent of yarns and textiles was to give them work by sending his female slaves to their homes rather than asking them to come to him, in a way we can summarise that work-from-home culture was prevalent in early India. Women's labor class was engaged in supporting the state and enjoyed being an independent economic entity.

Conclusion

This research paper has made an effort to erase the invisibility of women's role in ancient India. It has brought forth numerous references and original textual evidence to highlight the importance of women in manufacturing, agriculture, commerce, state services, the arts, and entertainment. Women were equal partners with men in various economic activities. The common woman of early India had to work to earn her livelihood. It is well known that even today the largest section of rural women are directly involved in field agriculture, animal husbandry, forestry, etc. The nature of the economy of ancient times was progressive and did not discriminate on gender lines. The economic roles of each gender are influenced by the demands of the times. Women's participation is evident in every sector of society, from the top to the bottom. Historically speaking, men and women were equal partners in the production-distribution processes. This study is an endeavor to restore the valuable role and reputation of the women workforce of early India in mainstream historical accounts and academic discourses.

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