

Economic Role of Women in Ancient Kashmiri Society

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I. INTRODUCTION

Man's life is interconnected with various living and non-living things. His life depends on social, political, economic, ethical, philosophical and other aspects of social system, which when combined together form a complete society.

So, all the spheres whether political, social, ethical or economic, form an important part of a particular society. Likewise, economy too has an important place in man's life. Without this aspect, the history of a particular society would be incomplete.

The term economics has been defined differently by various economists.

Likewise, Alfred Marshall defines Economics as a study of men in the ordinary business of life. It enquires how he gets his income and how he uses it."(1)

Thus, it is on one side, the study of wealth and on the other and more important side, a part of the study of man. Though the economy relates to the study of man. However, there are considerable differences in men's and women's access to and opportunities to exert power over economic structures in their societies. In most parts of the world, women were virtually absent from or were poorly represented in the economic pursuits.

Even though the women were rarely represented with regard to their role in the economy but it seems unlikely to believe that they might not have played any significant role in the economic progression and development of man, for they accounted half of a family's talent.

Women in Kashmir might have played a dual role – producers of goods and services as well as their domestic chores and wives and mothers. Yet their contribution to the economic development has been neglected. We hardly find any references of women concerning the economic development in the literature of ancient times.

As such the role of women in the economic activities needs to be reinterpreted and framed in the light of whatever scarce references we have. The economic activities of the people of Kashmir during ancient times revolved round agriculture, trade and various artistic activities.

But agriculture was the mainstay of people and a large proportion of population was dependent on agriculture for their income from the very ancient times i.e. from Neolithic period onwards.

The agricultural process involved a number of activities from preparing the soil, to sowing of seeds, to cultivation of plants, to protection of fields, to harvesting of crops and its subsequent appropriation.

"Given manifold responsibilities, man must have been getting much support from his family members, particularly his spouse for in every social make up the spouses have been essentially contributing together in sex regulations, biological reproduction and socialization of their young ones. Both of them

performed various economic functions, like arranging food and shelter for the family as a whole—a phenomenon authenticated by the Burzahom's stones slab engraving depicting a man and woman undertaking a joint venture of hunting. This piece of archaeological information is significant not because it shows as to how men and women coordinated to enlarge the economic provisions of their family, but also because it furnishes us material for supporting the idea that they must have worked shoulder to shoulder in other fields as well."(2)

In support of the female help to the families, will Durant has argued that females were more robust in the primitive societies and equal in stature and endurance to men. He says that the difference in strength, which now divides the sexes, hardly existed in those days, and is now environment rather than innate in nature.

"Women apart from her biological disabilities, was almost equal to a man in stature, endurance, resourcefulness and courage: she was a robust animal, able to perform arduous work for long hours, and if necessary, to fight to death for her children or her clan. The most economic advances in early society, were made by women rather than men. While, for censures, he clung to his ancient ways of hunting and herding, she developed agriculture near the camp, and those busy arts of the home which were to become the most important industries of the later days. It was apparently she who developed sewing, weaving, basketry, pottery, wood working and building and in many cases it was she who carried primitive trade. But when agriculture became more complex and brought larger rewards, the stronger sex took more and more of it into his hands. The growth of cattle –breeding gave the man a new source of wealth, stability and power: even agriculture was at last accepted by the wandering male and economic leadership which tillage had for the time given to women was wrested from them by men."(3)

"However, given the comparative strong physical stature, the contribution of the men in Kashmir (4)" In the overall input labour must have been relatively larger. He must have entailed hard labour. On the other hand the Neolithic women must have been, as they are now, largely engaged in such smooth family affairs as cooking, collection of edibles, fruits, roots, weaving and stitching garments.

Thus, there are reasons to believe that the women folk of cultivators worked in the fields along with their men folk and contributed to the economy by actively participating in the agricultural functions.

Though agriculture formed the main occupation of the inhabitants of the valley, it appears there were several industries which gave employment to a fair proportion of the population. "The most notable of these were the manufacture of textiles, leather goods and jewellery. There were also sculptors, wood workers and potters. We have a few references which suggest that women took part in economic activities other than agriculture. At one place Kalhana tells us of porter women, at another he refers to women who used to sell bakery.

“From a closer study of Damodaragupta Kuttanimata Kavya, we can have “an idea of the curriculum which the courtesans were being taught. It included erotic texts of Vatsyayana, Madanodaya, Dattaka, Vita, Rajaputra and others, the Natya-Sastra of Bharata, Visakhila’s treatise an art, Dentila’s writing, practical arts like arbori-horticulture, needle-work, wood-work, metal-work and cookery and fine arts like painting, cut-work in leaves, music-vocal and instrumental and dance.”(5)”

Since these subjects were included in the curriculum of women and they received formal education in these fields, it is reasonable to presume that many of them might have adopted these as their professions which would have fetched them with handsome money.

“The Nilamata refers to images made of stone, earth, gold, silver, copper, brass, wood, sand, straw and ghee. Instructions for making Sayanamruti images of Vishnu with his feet placed in the lap of Lakshmi are given. Reference is also made to caturmurti Vishnu with four faces, four arms and Ayudhapurusas.”(6)

“The Nilamata Purana testifies to the existence of the art of painting in Kashmir. In connection with the celebrations of Buddha’s birthday, the people are directed to decorate the caityas with beautiful paintings. References are made to paintings painted on the cloth, the wall and the ground. Bhumishobha or decoration of the ground with paintings seems to have been a necessary item of most of the religious and secular functions.”(7) “Damodaragupta refers to courtesans practicing the art of painting for advertising their trade.”(8)

“Somadeva refers to portraits painters carrying out confidential missions of their masters.”(9)

The industries, in which the women were engaged, have to be inferred only from the stray reference to finished products. Thus the articles of dress point to the art of spinning, weaving, dyeing and washing. Similarly pottery, wood work and leatherwork are pointed to by earthen pitchers, wooden pitchers, wooden seats and leather shoes.

“The terms used in the Nilamata for clothing in general are Vastra, ambara, Vasas, Vasna, and Samvita. Cinamsuka is used for silk imported from china, Kambala is woolen blanket and Pravarana-referred to in connection with the festival of new snowfall-seems to be the same as Pravara mentioned in the Mahabharata as a cloth offering protection against cold”(10).

Both woolen and cotton textiles were produced in ancient Kashmir. Apart from the depiction of finery clad figures on the terracotta tiles unearthed at Harwan, there is the direct evidence of Hieun Tsang who records that the people of Kashmir wore clothes of white linen.

These references are indicative of the fact that women, besides, looking after the domestic chores and their children, might have engaged themselves in pursuits like weaving, stitching, wood work, clay modeling, metalwork ect. Which would have contributed to the economy as well.

Apart from practicing these arts and crafts, the women of Kashmir had enrolled themselves in various military ranks, administration etc. They acted as soldiers, captains and many times look the task of Dutis (envoys) as well.

Damodaragupta’s Kuttanimata Kavya gives us a clear indication of the existence of female dutis during the ancient

times, says Damodaragupta.”the female go between (dutis) played a key role in uniting the two parties.”(11).

In this regard, mention may also be made of “Manjari who accompanied Samarabhata to Varanasi.”(12) we find women as military commanders like that of Silla and chudda.

The cultivation of fine arts by the people of Kashmir has an ancient background. The earliest definite corroboration regarding the popularity of music and dancing in Kashmir is provided by archaeology.”A tile from Harwan, with Kharosthi letters which cannot be later than 4th century A.D, shows three musicians.”(13) “the one to left plays a flute; the centre one, cymbals; the third, a pair of drums . Another tile represents a female musician playing on a drum. One more shows a female dancer.(14)

“The statue of a female dancer was also obtained from the courtyard of Kotisar temple.”(15)

“As regards the literary evidence, Kalhana’s Rajatarangini is full of references to ‘Gitanrta’.”Music, we are informed had become popular even with the Buddhist monks. Reference is made of two female musicians songs which expanded is one melodious tone in harmony.”(16)

“It was however, in the 7th and 8th centuries A.D, that these arts attained their full vigor. In fact no student of classical Indian dance can ignore or by pass the commentaries on Bharata’s Natya-Sastra and original works on dance, like those of Udbhata, Louapata, Sankuka, Bhatta, Nayaka and the last but greatest of them all, Abhinavagupta.”(17)

“The 1st reference to dancing in the Rajatarangini is about king Jalauka, the son and successor of emperor Ashoka, who is credited with being an ardent worshipper of Siva and a lover of music and dance. While worshipping at the shrine of Siva, “a hundred among the ladies of the seraglio who had risen to dance, in honour of the god, at the time fixed for dancing and singing, he gave out of joy to Jyestharudra.”(18)

The two dancing girls whom Lalitaditya met in a forest informed him that dancing at that particular place was an ancient custom of their family.”(19)

Kalasa’s liking for the dancing girls is well described by Kalhana.”(20)Harsa had gone so far as to instruct personally the dancing girls to act.”(21)Bilhana testifies to the high skill of ladies of Kasmira in dancing.”(22)

That this profession was not looked down upon is apparent from another passage wherein it is mentioned that king Chakravarman married two professional dancing girls, sisters Hamsi and Nagalata and although they belonged to a lower caste, he made Hamsi his first queen who “enjoyed among the king’s wives the privilege of being fanned with the Chowries.”(23)

In addition to dance and music, we do also have references of drama/theatrical performances.”The words ‘Preksa and ‘Preksanaka’ mentioned in the Nilamata refer to theatrical performance.”(24) “the Nilamata mentions also a peculiar phase ‘Preksadana.””(25)Literally it means “the gift of dramatic performance.’It seems to have denoted a gift made for the arrangement of a dramatic show.”(26)

“There may have existed some dramatic clubs which gave such shows on demand and the injunction of Yathavidha Preksadana.”(27) i.e. the gift for the arrangement of a dramatic show made in the proper procedure may have been made with reference to them. These gifts of various types are not however, defined separately. The Kashmir poet Bilhana extols the ladies of

his native land for the excellent dramatic performances which excelled the acting of heavenly damsels Rambha, Citralekha and Urvasi.”(28)

The simultaneously use of the terms ‘nartaka and ‘nata’ in the Nilamata indicates the difference between the two: the former was used for a dancer, the latter for an actor.”(29) These people received honours from the public on various occasions and were not regarded as degraded.”(30)

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