

Games, Arts (Dance & Music) & Prostitution Entertainment Sources in Ancient India Society

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Abstract:

In this research, research is analysing, focusing on the ancient sources of entertainment majorly as subjective Games, Arts forms such as Dance & music & prostitution in ancient India. To know in detail how the ancient Indian society existed & what was the sources & mode of entertainment in the lifestyle of the people in that society. How the mode of entertainment evolved with the periods of history

Keywords: Ancient India, Games, Prostitution, Analysis, Nrutya, Sangeet, monarch, Raag, Maurya's, Gupta's, Mahabharat, Gupta, Ganika, Courtesans, dynasties, locals, Entertainment, civilization.

Objective

- To know & explore more about ancient games which were important part of entertainment of life of the then period.
- To gather the information of the ancient games & arts form which were modes of entertainment for the societies of past & also in present world which evolved with the race of time.
- To trace back & understand in detail the origin of the ancient games arts & other entertainment sources & to share information about it for the study purpose for students & future researchers.
- To understand the connections between games, arts, and prostitution, and how they together reflected the values, lifestyle, and structure of ancient Indian society.
- To provide a holistic view of ancient Indian culture, focusing on everyday life, entertainment, and cultural practices.

Introduction

Ancient India possessed a rich and diverse cultural landscape in which games, arts, and social institutions were deeply interwoven into everyday life. These elements not only served recreational or aesthetic purposes but also reflected the broader philosophical, economic, and social structures of the time. The study of ancient Indian games, arts, and prostitution offers a multidimensional understanding of how leisure, creativity, and social norms evolved within early Indian civilization.

Games in ancient India were more than mere entertainment; they were often connected to strategy, education, and even spirituality. Traditional games such as chaturanga—considered a precursor to

modern chess—and dice games referenced in epics like the Mahabharata illustrate the intellectual and moral dimensions associated with play. These activities were embedded in royal courts as well as common life, highlighting their widespread cultural significance.

Similarly, the arts in ancient India flourished across various forms, including music, dance, sculpture, and painting. Treatises like the *Natya Shastra* laid the foundation for classical performing arts, emphasizing the role of artistic expression in conveying emotion, storytelling, and religious devotion. Artistic practices were not isolated pursuits but were closely tied to temple culture, patronage systems, and societal values.

The institution of prostitution, often associated with courtesans or *ganikas*, occupied a complex and sometimes paradoxical position in ancient Indian society. Unlike modern perceptions, courtesans were frequently educated, skilled in the arts, and, at times, held significant social and cultural influence. Texts such as the *Kamasutra* provide insight into their roles, suggesting that prostitution was not merely a marginalized activity but one integrated into the urban and cultural fabric.

By examining these three domains together, this research aims to explore the intersections between leisure, artistic expression, and social organization in ancient India. Such an analysis helps illuminate how cultural practices both shaped and were shaped by the values, hierarchies, and lived experiences of the time.

Information

Ancient India's prestigious & rich culture included not only religion and traditions but also games, arts, and social practices. These elements were an important part of people's daily lives and help us understand how society functioned in the past. Studying games, arts, and prostitution together gives us a broader view of ancient Indian life.

Games were a popular form of entertainment in ancient India. People played different types of games for fun, but also to develop thinking and decision-making skills. Some games were connected with ideas of luck and strategy, and they are even mentioned in ancient stories. This shows that games had both social and moral importance.

The arts occupied a central position in ancient Indian culture, encompassing music, dance, drama, and visual arts. These forms were closely associated with religious rituals, temple traditions, and royal patronage. Artistic expression functioned not only as entertainment but also as a medium for conveying cultural values, narratives, and emotional experiences. The structured development of these art forms indicates a highly evolved aesthetic tradition.

The institution of prostitution, particularly in the form of courtesanship, reveals important aspects of gender relations and urban life. Courtesans were often trained in various arts and could attain a degree of social and economic independence. Their presence in historical records suggests that they played a recognized role within the socio-cultural framework, challenging simplistic interpretations of marginalization.

Ancient Indian Games

Games in ancient India were not merely forms of entertainment or pastimes but also served educational, strategic, and moral purposes. One of the most prominent games was *Chaturanga*, considered the precursor to modern chess. Its original traces back to period of the Gupta Empire, it symbolized military strategy, with pieces representing different divisions of the army such as infantry, cavalry, elephants, and

chariots. It was mainly used as war planner Strategy and often part of educating royal members .

Another widely played game was Pachisi, often associated with royal courts. Historical accounts suggest that Akbar played Pachisi on life-sized boards using human pieces, Where courtesans worked as pieces of game.

Dice games also held cultural importance, as stated in the Mahabharata, where a game of dice led to significant political and moral consequences.

Outdoor games such as wrestling (Mallayuddha), archery, and chariot racing were equally significant. These activities were closely tied to physical training and warfare, emphasizing discipline, strength, and strategic thinking.

Classification of Games Indoor & Outdoor - Indoor Games

Chaturanga : The name of the game Chaturanga is not just ,the word “Chaturanga” have a meaning which means “four divisions of the army” , which are as follow infantry, cavalry, elephants, and chariots. It originated in 6th century CE in Gupta rule. It was not just a game but a well made tool for learning tactical thinking, patience, planning & challenging mind to think more advancely in warfare strategy. Which made it prominent in royal courts & nobles. It is said that it spread from India to Persia & there it evolved in more advanced form ,where it became Shatranj which later evolved into modern world chess. Over centuries, its influence spread globally, eventually becoming the game of chess, which retains many ideas from Chaturanga today. Records indicate that Chaturanga boards were 8×8 grids, similar to modern chess, and pieces represented different types of army units with distinct movements. Chaturanga had rules of its own which were strongly similar to Chess.

Rules of Chaturanga

Chaturanga is similar to chess but has some differences in piece names, movements, and goals:

Board: 8×8 squares, just like modern chess.

Players: Two players compete against each other. Pieces and their roles:

Raja means King : Moves one square in any direction, same as modern king.

Mantri / Senapati : Moves one square diagonally, similar to a modern bishop but weaker.

Ratha means Chariot : Moves like a rook in modern chess (horizontally or vertically).

Gaja means Elephant: Moves two squares diagonally, jumping over the first square.

Ashva means Horse : Moves like the knight in modern chess (L-shape).

Padati means Soldiers : Move forward one square; no two-step initial move like modern pawns.

Pachisi: It was a ancient board game which is considered as predecessor of modern day Ludo . originated in India and has been played for centuries, especially in royal courts and among the nobility. Its named from the hindi word “pachis,” which means 25, indicating towards the total points or moves in the game. The game is played on a cross-shaped board, and it involves a mix of strategy and luck. players move their pieces along the board based on the throw of cowrie shells or dice, trying to reach the central home square while avoiding being captured by opponents just like moden day ludo.

Outdoor Games

Mallayuddha (Wrestling): Mallayuddha is one of the ancient game prominent in ancient India. It roots dating back over 2,500 years. It was considered both a game and a form of military training, helping

warriors develop strength, agility, and combat skills. It was historically traces to Life time Prince siddharth account before becoming buddha. It was noted in many accounts of various empires & their historical records. Major Empire such as Great Mauryan Empire, Satvahana, Guptas to medieval period. In Mauryan Empire, Mauryan Emperors patronized malla-yuddha & encouraged it in akhara like training centres for youths for military purpose & court entertainment which followed by later on dynasties too such as Cholas, Satavahanas, Gupta's. During Cholas it spread & flourished in South India. Wrestling or malla-yuddha was just for soldiers or military purpose or entertainment but disciplined lifestyle involving with diet & exercises for physical & moral development.

Chariot Racing:

Chariot racing was a popular game and form of entertainment in ancient India, majorly associated with royal courts, religious festivals, and public celebrations. It is one of the oldest recorded sports in Indian history, mentioned in texts such as the Mahabharata and the Rigveda. Chariot racing was not just for fun, it demonstrated skill, bravery, and strategic thinking. Monarchs and nobles frequently sponsored races as a display of wealth and prestige. It also had religious significance, sometimes being part of temple festivals or ceremonial processions. Archaeological evidences & historical accounts have most early records of chariot racing game mainly from Mauryan Empire period & Gupta dynasty. Ancient reliefs and carvings at sites such as Sanchi Stupa and Khajuraho temples depicts chariots and racing scenes. Coins and sculptures from the Maurya and Gupta periods show chariots with multiple horses, indicating the significance of racing and military training.

Arts Form: Dance & Music:

Dance and music have been integral to Indian culture for thousands of years, serving religious, social, and entertainment purposes. Evidence of these art forms is found in ancient texts, temple carvings, and historical literature.

Dance

The earliest references to dance are in the Vedas (c. 1500–500 BCE), where dances were performed during rituals and religious ceremonies. The Natya Shastra, written by Bharata Muni is the oldest known text detailing dance, drama, and music. It codified 108 karanas (dance movements) and described rasas (emotions) and bhavas (expressions) used in performance.

Dance forms were not only entertainment—they expressed spiritual themes, storytelling, and social values. Classical styles like Bharatanatyam, Odissi, Kathakali, and Manipuri trace their roots back to these ancient practices.

Temples in places like Ajanta, Ellora, and Khajuraho contain sculptures and murals depicting dancers in ritual and theatrical contexts, showing the deep integration of dance in religious life.

Music

Music in ancient India was closely linked to religion, meditation, and storytelling.

References to music are found in the Samaveda (c. 1000 BCE), which contains musical hymns and chants used in rituals. Instruments such as the veena (string), mridangam (percussion), and flute were widely used.

Music was performed in temples, courts, and public festivals, serving as both entertainment and a way to

connect with the divine.

Cultural Significance

Dance and music were not just entertainment—they were spiritual practices, educational tools, and social expressions. Dancers and musicians were often attached to temples or royal courts, where they preserved and passed down knowledge from generations to generations. The Natya Shastra also describes the theory of music, including notes (swaras), scales (ragas), and rhythms (talas). Performance arts played a key role in rituals, storytelling, and courtly culture, blending aesthetic beauty with moral and spiritual lessons. In Mauryan period under the rule of Emperor Ashoka The Great music flourished in its basic structured mostly religious chants of buddhism & courtly life but he prohibited dancing courtesans in his court by presenting his respects towards

women's and sending a message in his empire & other existing neighbourhood empire that women's shouldn't be objectified as he followed teaching of dhamma. Veena & mridanga like drums were major instrument in this period.

During Gupta period under the rule of Chandragupta 2 arts of dance & music got great patronage. In this period music became more systematic & classical & structured. Along with veena & mridanga, instruments like flute & drums came into mainstream. During Harsha period in his kingdom arts like dance, drama & music got golden age. As per description of Xuanzang accounts of Harsha period, it was stated that Harsha was great fond of Arts such as dance & music & drama he supported & gave patronage to many artist with wealth, honour & rewards. Harsha himself wrote plays Nagananda & Ratnavali..

Prostitution

Prostitution has existed in Indian society since ancient times and was viewed differently compared to modern perspectives. In ancient India, it was not always considered immoral; instead, it was often recognized, regulated, and sometimes even respected in certain social contexts.

Historical texts and literature provide evidence that prostitution was a structured part of society, especially in urban centers.

Early references can be found in texts like the Rigveda, while more detailed descriptions appear in the Arthashastra by Kautilya. This text shows that the state regulated prostitution, imposed taxes, and even appointed officials to supervise courtesans. Similarly, the Kamasutra by Vatsyayana describes courtesans as skilled, educated, and socially important women. Another important aspect was the devadasi system, where women were dedicated to temples. Although its nature is debated, it reflects the connection between sexuality, religion, and society in

ancient India. Devdasi were minor girls of villages dedicated to temples on the name of God's but sexually used & harassed by temple priests & nobles of villages & towns.

Overall, prostitution in ancient India was a complex institution influenced by social norms, economic factors, and political control. This paper examines its historical development and role in society using literary and historical sources.

Ancient Indian texts such as the Rigveda provide some of the earliest indirect references to women who lived outside conventional marital structures. More explicit discussions emerge in later works like the Arthashastra, where prostitution is treated as a regulated & well recognized profession under state supervision. The text outlines administrative measures, taxation, and the role of officials responsible for

overseeing courtesans, suggesting that prostitution was integrated into the economy of that period. the Kamasutra by Vatsyayana detailed insights into the lives of Ganikas (Courtesans) mentioning them as educated, skilled in arts, and socially influential women. These accounts challenge modern assumptions by highlighting the agency and cultural significance of certain categories of sex workers in ancient Indian society. Amrapali of Vaishali was famous, influential & later revered historical figure of Ancient History. Amrapali was the most beautiful girl born in Vaishali janpad and due to her seductive & attractive beauty & charm she was chosen as to trained as the dancer to make her royal courtesan of vaishali. She became much more wealthy & influential than many of kings of her time. Later she renounced her status as Royal courtesan & became a nun of buddhism by attending the sermon of buddha which converted her heart deeply. She was most prominent figure in early age of buddhism. In Kamasutra importance of Ganikas & their position in society and their status & value in royal court & life of common people strongly detailed.

Sculpture of khajurao also stated many historical importance of courtesans in royal courts & social life of ancient society.

In early dynasties such as haryanka of magadh during reign of Bimbisara it was similar period where religion or faith such as Buddhism & Jainism emerged & rise in magadh & neighbouring regions unlike prior society, offered new moral & ethical framework mainly buddhism generally advocated moral discipline and restraint, they did not completely exclude or condemn courtesans. Instead, these traditions often emphasized compassion and the possibility of moral transformation, as seen in the life of Amrapali. Buddhism gave a new beginning to amrapali by its fundamental principle of equality for all and set a remarkable & praiseworthy example for society which help many courtesan to get escape from being marginalized in later period.

During Nanda period prostitution was existed as in semi-organised form. although there was not a special regulations or supportive measures mentioned for them. Courtesans during the Nanda period probably occupied varied social positions. Elite courtesans may have been associated with courts and urban elites, offering not only physical companionship but also entertainment through music and dance. At the same time, lower-class prostitutes likely existed on the margins of society with less protection and recognition. As we can't get clear ideas of this period in details as less historical records were available as compare to later maurya empire sources which were more evidence based & most early proper historical facts based records available of ancient history. Prostitution in the Nanda period appears to have been an existing and socially recognized institution, shaped by urbanization and economic growth. Although detailed administrative records are lacking, later developments under the Mauryan Empire indicate that the foundations of regulation and organization were already in place. Thus, the Nanda period can be seen as a formative stage in the historical evolution of prostitution in ancient India.

In Mauryan Emperor during the rule of Founder of mauryan empire, Emperor Chandragupta Maurya it's stated that he had female bodyguards who were trained in military exercises, arts & many other important skills so they can protect the king from any internal dangers but they were not on duty as courtesans. But in Emperor Chandragupta Maurya period some courtesan were assigned different role too unlike from their traditional used for sex related activities. He mainly used them in his Espionage and Statecraft purposes. the Arthashastra also mentions the use of courtesans in espionage. Skilled courtesans were sometimes employed by the state as informants to gather intelligence from influential clients. This reflects the strategic importance attributed to them within the Mauryan political system and demonstrates how prostitution intersected with governance and security.

The reign of Chakravartin Samrat Asoka The Great (c. 268–232 BCE), the most prominent, efficient, influential & powerful ruler of the Indian history, marks a significant phase in the moral and administrative history of ancient India. His rule is particularly noted for the promotion of Dhamma (moral law) following the Kalinga War. While prostitution as an institution continued during his reign, Ashoka's ethical policies and emphasis on social welfare likely influenced its perception and regulation. Ashoka advocated respect for women and discouraged immoral behavior, which may have indirectly affected how society perceived prostitution.

However, there is no historical evidence to suggest that he abolished or strictly banned the practice. Ganikas or Nagarvadhu(courtesans) likely continued to exist during Ashoka's reign, especially in major cities like Pataliputra. As in earlier Mauryan times, elite courtesans may have retained their roles as entertainers, skilled in music, dance, and

conversation. However, Ashoka's moral reforms might have reduced their prominence in official or courtly life, though this remains a matter of historical interpretation. mainly in Ashoka dhamma rule its said the royal courtesans prominence nearly disappeared in maurya courts due to ashoka embraced buddhism & he strongly respected womens.

The Satavahana period represents an important phase in the social and cultural history of ancient India, particularly in the Deccan region. During this time, prostitution continued as an established social institution, evolving from earlier traditions of the Mauryan age while adapting to regional and cultural influences. Evidence from inscriptions, literature, and archaeological findings suggests that prostitution was both socially acknowledged and economically significant. Literary works and inscriptions from this period provide indirect but valuable insights. Prakrit literature, including texts like the Gatha Saptasati attributed to King Hala, contains references to love, urban life, and relationships that suggest the presence of courtesans and socially independent women. These poems often depict romantic and erotic themes, reflecting a society where such relationships were openly acknowledged.

Inscriptions from Satavahana sites also mention donations made by women, some of whom are believed by historians to have been courtesans. This indicates that certain women in this profession could accumulate wealth and participate in religious and social activities, such as making contributions to Buddhist establishments.

Prostitutions & courtesan were source of entertainment with their beauty charm, performance arts skills such as dance & music & sexual services for the pleasures of royal courts, mainly monarch & nobles this courtesan & prostitution were considered as elite class courtesans or royal courtesans which were only reserved for royal duties for royal class people &

guests. Royal courtesans or ganikas enjoyed very luxurious & wealthy lifestyles, they were very much rich & influential in many kingdoms they played important role & even control the kings & nobles who completely give up to this ganikas in lust & seductions & for their companionships. Royal courtesans were trained in hunting, basic learnings of literary arts & music & dance, fighting, & chariot controlling or horse riding which distinguished them from local prostitute on extra level along with their physical beauty. They were protected by administration & soldiers were provided for their security in many historical kingdoms such as Magadha in Haryanka dynasty under Bimbisara rule, Nanda dynasty, Maurya Empire, Shungas, Satvahanas, Guptas & many more such as.

⁷Prostitution in life of Locals

Prostitution as an institute not only limited to royal court & elite class as the other aspects of it also there

in the living of local people of the following period of ancient Indian history. Since the early stage of mankind & every living being, sex is a natural need of body for every being. As the human being started settling in a proper settlement, their attitude towards sex & pleasure got more open & direct and for satisfying their sexual pleasure & needs & entertainment it's stated in Vedic period too that outside marriage institution some sources were created in its first basic forms for the requirements of settlement existed that period. During early period of human settlement, these women's were marginalised & forced to be used for sexual services by the communities formed in

settlements. They were only used for sexual pleasure & in return they were paid with barter system. During the monarchy period, prostitution in locals was continued in a more evolved form, taking its early form of to get an institute along with elite class courtesans & prostitution. Local people used to visit in their capital cities of their respected kingdoms where local weekly or daily bazars were organised and where women's were first used to be sold as slaves along with men's slaves which were brought by merchants, nobles & wealthy persons who used them with purposes & work including for domestic, farm & also for sexual activities. Later on this market along with other needs & commodities & purchasing things became a place for prostitution but with specific places were made for them in the main market of the cities & towns which are on small distance from main market of other goods & services & commodities, to make a safe environment for other people. Locals used to visit the specific area of market where the local prostitutions were organised & provide services. Many historical sources stated many people from various classes & working categories visit frequently to such places without considering it as anything immoral or uncivilized.

Locals were very much interested in this institution & due to this sometimes many beautiful girls from villages & towns were forcefully or with the direct declaration of village councils or administration order declared as courtesans, nagarvadhu, or ganikas who were bound to be with duty of providing sexual services to whole kingdom or towns or village of the specific region and she was not allowed to love & keep one single lover forever but she can choose with whom she can spend night or reject whom but this was not allowed for local prostitution in some regions. In the Vaishali republic people were majorly involved & very much affected to ganikas & prostitutions and indulges so much in sexual activities that according to historical sources it is stated that once the administrator of the Vaishali republic invited Buddha for preaching morality in people in their janapad, which later founded effective too.

During Maurya Empire, local prostitutions also enjoyed respectful & people welfare benefits of administration. As the rule of Maurya administration maintained proper care of local prostitutes along with Royal courtesans. Officers were appointed to look down on institution & proper guidelines were set for people too for ensuring the safety & justice towards local courtesans or prostitute. People also keep a respected approach & attitudes towards the courtesans which helped to evolve this institution in later period of history in local life of society towards with more open & productive view.

In Shunga period local prostitution seen worst causes along with royal courtesans too. It was stated that in this period courtesans lose their right to consent for some period mainly locals used to marginalize them and many times sexual activities were forced on the local courtesans & disrespect towards them increased but later in Shunga period it came into reduction.

Other periods of history also seen good attitudes of local towards this institution but some region local prostitutes or courtesan faced some harsh treatment & obstacles in compare to royal or elite courtesans & prostitutes.

Conclusion

The study of games, performing arts, and prostitution reveals not only the daily lives of people but also the broader values, structures, and dynamics of ancient Indian civilizations. Games in ancient India were more than entertainment served as tools for mental development, social interaction, and even moral instruction. References in texts like the Mahabharata highlight how games such as dice could carry deep ethical and philosophical implications, reflecting the interplay between fate, skill, and human behavior. Similarly, the arts of dance and music occupied a central place in cultural and religious life. Classical traditions, as systematized in the Natyashastra, demonstrate the high level of sophistication achieved in performance arts. Dance and music were not only forms of aesthetic expression but also mediums of storytelling, devotion, and social communication, deeply integrated into temple rituals and royal courts. The institution of prostitution, though often viewed through a modern moral lens, must be understood within its historical context. In ancient India was a regulated and socially embedded practice. Courtesans, particularly the elite ganikas, were often educated and influential, contributing to the cultural and economic life of urban centers.

Taken into consideration all these aspects illustrate that ancient Indian society was neither rigid nor uniform but characterized by diversity and adaptability. Cultural practices such as games, music, and dance enriched social life, while institutions like prostitution reveal the pragmatic and complex nature of society & its organization & administration. Understanding these elements in their historical context allows for a more appreciation of ancient India, moving beyond simplistic judgments and recognizing the depth of its cultural heritage.

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