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WOMEN'S SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTIONS IN ANCIENT INDIA: INSIGHTS FROM THE ACCOUNTS OF CHINESE TRAVELLERS

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ABSTRACT

The socio-economic roles and contributions of women in ancient India are studied in this research based on the accounts of Chinese travellers Fa-Hien, Huien Tsang and I-Tsing who travelled throughout the Indian subcontinent between the fifth to seventh century CE. In addition to their active involvement in religious and educational institutions, their accounts offer unique insights into the diverse roles that women play in fields including trade, agriculture, craft production, and intellectual life. By demonstrating the role of women in lots of aspects of public life, these finds cast doubt on contemporary views of gender roles in early Indian communities. Through an analysis of these historical narratives, this study aims to provide light on the process in which women shaped ancient Indian society and the socio-economic and cultural environments. This study provides a deep knowledge of gender dynamics in historical narratives through placing these contributions within larger sociocultural contexts.

KEYWORDS: Women, Ancient India, Socioeconomic roles, Gender dynamics, Chinese travellers

INTRODUCTION

Women in ancient India had a significant part in the social, economic, religious and cultural life. They were placed and involved in different positions and situations depending on socio-economic status, family backgrounds, religious affiliations and historical contexts. In order to appreciate women's contribution, one must consider the indigenous literary and epigraphic sources as well as foreign visitors. Fa-Hien, Hiuen Tsang and I-Tsing's travel narratives are valuable sources for the study of various aspects of Indian society between the 5th and 7th centuries CE. These accounts, however, were composed largely with the interests and point of view of the Buddhist pilgrims, and should therefore be studied in conjunction with other historical sources with a critical perspective.[1]

Fa-Hien was a Chinese traveller who visited India during the Gupta period in the early 5th century CE. A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms contains details of Buddhist institutions, key towns and cities, Buddhism, and a glimpse into daily life. His observations are important in helping historians to understand the religious and social setting of the time.[2] However; his

story does not give a full picture of women's economic roles. Thus, any assertion on the role of women in trade, property ownership or any other activity needs further documentation from contemporary inscriptions, legislation, and other sources.

Hiuen Tsang travelled to India in the seventh century CE and observed the social, religious and educational institutions of the country as well as its political structure. It is especially valuable for reconstructing the historical background of the Harsha period his book Si-Yu-Ki: Buddhist Records of the Western World.[3] The seventh-century Chinese Buddhist pilgrim I-Tsing offers valuable insights on the intellectual ties between India and China, on education in Indian Buddhism, and on the practices of Buddhist monks. These stories provide the chance to explore women's roles in religious life and the institutional setting in which women may have helped shape social and religious life. Specific statements regarding women's education, training as teachers or in economic pursuits, however, must be substantiated by direct textual evidence, not by general descriptions of Buddhist institutions.[4]

The economic history of early India also affords an essential matrix to explore women's potential role in production, exchange, and trade. The analysis of trade and traders is contributing to the understanding of the organisation of commercial activities and the development of economic networks. For this broader economic context, one can refer to the studies of Ranabir Chakravarti on trade and traders in early India. This secondary scholarship is useful in conjunction with the Chinese travel accounts and indigenous sources, not in place of them, relating to the Chinese.[5]

The present study thus focuses on the socio-economic role of women based on comparative analysis of the reports of Fa-Hien, Hiuen Tsang and I-Tsing. It explores the value and constraints of these stories on social status, religious involvement, education and economic involvement of women. The study aims at drawing a historically informed picture of women's role in ancient India by analyzing the Chinese texts in light of relevant literary, legal and epigraphic sources. It also acknowledges that women's experience was not singular and that the evidence doesn't allow for the complete reconstruction of every aspect of their lives.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

During the times of Chinese travellers' visit ancient India had a very diverse culture, economy, and social structures. These visits ranged in time between the 5th to 7th centuries CE, during which India was ruled by various dynasties, including the Gupta which many historians consider as the 'Golden Age' owing to the many achievements made in the fields of art, science, and economy. During this period, trade was significantly active, with overland and sea route trading links between India and other regions of Asia such as China.[6]

India of the ancient period though consisted of fields and villages it also had many urban cities that were major centres of trade, learning and civilization. Trade was extensive including agriculture arts and craft and craft products for both local use and export. This formed the economy base with crop farming; rice, wheat as well as barley being some of the crops that were grown. The craft industries such as textile, metal, and pottery were well

developed and played the role of trading locally and internationally. As a result, the trade routes of the Indian Ocean were more important and involved exchanges with areas like Southeast Asia, the Middle East and China.[7] The caste system that was practiced here defined the organization of the society concerning social relationships and working stations.

Among the prominent Chinese travellers who contributed to the documentation of Ancient India include Fa-Hien, Hiuen Tsang and I-Tsing about socio-economic and cultural aspects. Fahien visited India in the early part of 5th century CE. Although his travel was to study exclusively the places of Buddhist interest and the performances of Buddhist religious functions and rituals nevertheless his narratives contain commentaries which help to understand the life and economy of the country and its people. Chemical mind Hiuen Tsang, who visited India during the early part of the 7th century CE, has provided an invaluable description of the Social, Educational and Economic structure of Indian society during the reign of Harsha.[8] This can be admired in the detailed descriptions of the actual functioning of monasteries, and universities as *Nalanda*, as well as the general wealth of the areas he travelled through. Another traveller, I-Tsing of the 7th Century, detailed the cultural and religious interaction between the two great countries of India and China and drew attention to the role that Indian scholarship in the development of Buddhism in China.

The travelling experiences of these visitors are very resourceful as they tend to give outsiders a view into the socio-economic structures in ancient India. They include details of daily behaviors stretching from religious activities to female involvement in society. Indeed, these accounts are useful because they add a modern-day account to the indigenous historical records, which, in turn, can give a more encompassing view of the events. They provide rich information that external and internal interactions, trade and non-trade related economic dynamics, cultural practices and systems, and women's roles were closely integrated.[9]

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTIONS OF WOMEN

The reports presented by Chinese travellers about the socio-economic status of women in ancient India depict a strong and active participation of women in various aspects of life. These accounts offer concrete instances and stories that show the multiple aspects and roles of women in contributing to or interfering with the economy, culture, and organizing systems during the mentioned period.[10]

The Chinese travellers like Fa-Hien, Hiuen Tsang and I-Tsing described how did women in India engage in economic activities. While travelling still in the early 5th century CE, Fa-Hien reported seeing women involved in buying and selling, and in commerce. Even in the major cities such as Pataliputra, women were seen conducting the market business, selling products and participating in buying and selling activities.[11] This point to the fact that women were not just confined to home and hearth but were engaged in economic activities in urban areas.

Ancient sources which might shed light on the subject of women's economic activities include Hiuen Tsang who was a Chinese traveller to India in the 7th century CE. He mentioned that women participated in agricultural activities especially when it came to the management

of estates and farming. The women also took an active participation in the agricultural sector where they involved themselves in food production and aspects of farm work as far as crop production was concerned.[12] Moreover, Hiuen Tsang provided information on women who worked as weavers, potters, and other occupations that involved arts, and crafts, which came in handy in trade and business.[13]

Another traveller, I-Tsing who travelled in the 7th century CE, also provided information on the roles of women in religious and educational sectors. He saw women becoming nuns and laymen in Buddhist monasteries in which they were involved in tasks like writing and teaching. These roles were not only religious but also had economic implications; religious texts making and copying were key to the spread of Buddhism as well as the related economic activities.[14]

ANECDOTES

One of the great stories that Fa-Hien shares during his travels is the story of a wealthy widow who was a businesswoman who also owned property. This example depicts the economic sovereignty that some women were capable of achieving and this has implications on modern perceptions of women as passive in the ancient societies.[15] Hiuen Tsang describes a scene where he saw women involved in the buying and selling process at a fair. Such fairs were important economic meetings which involved exchanges of commodities and the inclusion of women in commerce.[16] Besides, I-Tsing's accounts also refer to women who were scholars and teachers in Buddhist monastic schools. They were actively involved in intellectual and educational activities contributing to the cultural and religious aspects of that age.[17] Considering the Chinese travel journals and modern Indian sources allow for a better understanding of women's socio-economic role. The Arthashastra and other records also speak about women and economic activities of that period. The Arthashastra that is an early treatise on politics and economics also shows women working as forewomen of weaving houses and also as managers of agricultural lands.[18] From the Gupta period itself, inscriptions that report gifts made by women to religious institutions show that women were involved in trading and charitable works.[19] Thus, unlike Indian sources that are extensively detail elite women, the Chinese travelers' accounts offer a broader view of the role of women across the layers of society. From this comparative analysis, the role performed by women was more complex and was wide ranging cutting across most sectors of the economy such as agriculture and hand crafts, trade and education among others.

Lastly, the role of women in socio-economic aspect of ancient India as described by Chinese travelers was evident and many-faceted. These accounts, which are incorporated with particular details and narratives, provide a picture of the active engagement of women in economic responsibilities. A comparative analysis of the textual sources which can be considered as the contemporary for ancient Indian women confirms that women played an important and significant role in ancient India and powerful Indian women played an even more significant role in the socio-economic life contradicting the stereotyped picture of women in ancient Indian past.

WOMEN IN TRADE & COMMERCE

The travelogues of Fa-Hien, Hiuen Tsang and I-Tsing contain detail description about the business like and active participation of women in trade and commerce of ancient India. Their findings go further than recording the economic enterprises for which women were involved in doing, but also, their control and participation in local and regional trade systems and its effects on their status and movement. Women were seen often in the marketplaces and major towns like *Pataliputra*, according to the Chinese traveller Fa-Hien, who lived in the early 5th century CE. It was women's responsibility to run the market booths selling goods, to trade, and to handle the money, he said.[20] The fact that women were involved in the city's economic activity rather than relegated to the role of housekeeper is supported by this. Hiuen Tsang, a traveller during the early 7th century CE, gave certain other interesting details about the involvement of women in business. The author also portrayed women performing other tasks in the realm of commerce, including running petty business and operations of big trading firms.[21] According to Hiuen Tsang, women engaged in selling textiles, jewelries and other investments including foods, clothing, utensils, ornaments and other essential requirements in the local and international markets.

Another traveller from the 7th century is I-Tsing who also mentioned that women were involved in economic systems as they participated in religious practices. In the context of Buddhism, women especially those who are affiliated to monasteries were able to participate in the manufacturing and sales of religious art effects, manuscripts and others.[22] These activities were not only a source of income to the monasteries and their affiliated institutions, but also provided opportunities for trade beyond the specific regions. For instance, textiles that women both produced and sold locally and across regions were acceptable and bartered wealth. It encouraged economic integration, thereby creating ties that brought together different regions, peoples, and cultures. Women's economic activities therefore became important in supporting local household and community economies as well as participating and supporting wider regional market trade networks.[23]

SOCIAL CLASS CHANGES AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

The economic independence and contributions of women had far reaching effects on women's status and social standing. Engaging in trade and commerce made women relatively financially and socially liberated at that time. Married women of the sixteenth to the early twentieth century who traded or were involved in business at the time were respected and appreciated in the society.

Based on her narrative, Fa-Hien provides the reader with real-life examples of women who were business women and who owned property – something that demonstrated their economic status and independence.[24] Likewise, Hiuen Tsang pointed out that 'Women who practiced trade and commerce were also respectable and had authority to move up socially.' This economic interaction enabled them to overcome some of the social restraints which the highly disciplined structure of the Indian Caste System offered.[25]

The benevolence exhibited by women, which has been evidenced in inscriptions from the Gupta period, further attest to their elevated position in society. Such writing normally

provide records of gifts and donations made toward various religion uses most of which were made by women signifying their philanthropic nature and their ability to address social and religion challenges.[26]

Analyzing these Chinese travellers' notes with other Indian sources such as Arthashastra of present times is helping to understand the socio-economic status of this section of women. Even in the prehistoric times, the Arthashastra talks about the political economy which state that women had the authority to be a head of a weaving house and a manager of agriculture lands it also explain that women were an important part of the economy.[27] Inscriptions dating back to the Gupta regime also mention dowry sums and gifts contributed by women they were involved in trading and charitable activities.[28]

WOMEN IN RELIGIOUS PRACTICES AND CULTURAL SPHERES

Fa-Hien, Hiuen Tsang and I-Tsing give copious information as to the social, cultural and religious role of women in ancient India. These observations define the importance of women in religious practices and religious contributions, the impact of women in cultural processes, and the part played by them in the passing of knowledge. Fa-Hien, an early 5th century CE traveller, also reported the engagement of women in the religious events and activities. He noted that many women went to the temples and engaged in festivals suggesting that they were essential in spiritual matters of their societies[29]. It seemed that women were more responsible for their preservation and continuation as they participated in daily rituals and festivals.

The Chinese monk named Hiuen Tsang who visited India in the 7th century CE offered more elaborate account of the status of women in religious sphere. He recorded the role of women in Buddhist monastic tradition of ordained nuns and Buddhist laywomen. These women were engaged in teaching, writing, and performing religious ceremonies and script copying. The public involvement of such individuals in those religious communities was vital to supporting and disseminating Buddhism. However, I-Tsing during his travels in the 7th century CE also pointed to the participation of women in intellectual pursuits in religious sphere. He also talked about women scholars who were knowledgeable in scriptures and Buddhists' philosophy. In addition to engaging in religious discourses such women were also involved in the translating and interpreting of scripts hence helping in the dissemination of knowledge on religion[30].

The roles of women in religion were varied and far-reaching. During the Vedic period, women also had a significant role to play in domestic rituals and occasions. It was their duty to pray to the household shrine, rites of passage, create fairs, and offer sacrifices across the community. These activities were prerequisite for the continuation of religious practices and impartation of culture bear values. As mentioned by Hiuen Tsang and I-Tsing, women embraced Buddhism and even participated in monasteries. The nuns were able to play an active role in the administration of monasteries, being responsible for the teaching of new monks and nuns, and being responsible for copying religious scriptures. Their contribution in this area was monumental, especially in manuscript copying and translation, to ensure that Buddhism teachings were preserved and passed on across regions. Women also supported

religious organization through giving of their wealth and other charitable contributions. Epigraphical evidence of the Gupta Era and other historical evidences suggest that women, whether single or grouped, donated to the temples, monasteries, and other religious institutions. Such charity and patronage supported religious establishments, contributed to their development and support, as well as their growth[31].

IMPACT IN THE PRESERVATION OF CULTURAL HERITAGES AND CULTURAL BELIEFS TRANSMISSION

It was quite evident that women played significant roles in matters concerning their cultural prowess and knowledge retention. They were the custodians of cultural beliefs, practices, stories, songs, and traditions, particularly folktales and rituals, which played a long way in passing down heritage. Female Oral Narration and involvement in dancing and singing activities ensured the continuity of culture and enhancement of culture related activities.[32] Chinese travellers also pointed out to the gender role of women as scholars. Teaching professions that were once dominated by men also embraced women in teaching religious education, English, art, and literature among others. Indeed, many of them represented invaluable assets to the growth of the intellectual and cultural life of their societies due to their ability to preserve knowledge and pass it from generation to generation. Evidenced by the observations of Fa-Hien, Hiuen Tsang, and I-Tsing, women had progressive and transformative cultural and religious influence beyond the local or regional sphere but across regions. Religious and cultural assembled involvement of women for cultural exchange and spread of religious ideas in different regions of India as well as other parts of the world.

Classical and medieval sources of the Indian subcontinent, and, for example, the Arthashastra and epigraphs, as well as authors of Chinese origin can support the remarks made by the Chinese travelers regarding women's roles in cultural and religious aspects. According to the Arthashastra, women are involved in the performance of religious rites and altar responsibilities are also given to them signifying their importance in religious practices. Some epigraphic texts-date back to the Gupta regime state the contributions made in cash and kind by women to religious buildings and monuments which point towards their roles in endowing and maintaining them[33]. Hence, religious and cultural activities of women in ancient India as recorded by Chinese travellers and corroborated by present day Indian data depict that women were active participants in the practice of religion, their role in preserving cultural traditions and passes in spreading knowledge among the women of the society. Each of these contributions not only benefited their own society but also beget cultural and intellectual cross overs while highlighting the significance of women in socio-cultural society of the ancient India.

EDUCATION & INTELLECTUAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The travellers like Fahien, Huian Tsang, and I-Tsing like I-Tsing offer precise perspectives about the educational and intellectual roles for ensured in ancient India. Such travelers provided details on women's opportunities for education and learning, their brilliant

brain, and performances in comparison to gentlemen. Mentioning, Fa-Hien, a traveller who visited China in the early 5th century CE, it is possible to note that women had the right to education, especially if they followed the Buddhism. He observed that females, including nuns, could study religious materials and could therefore be engaged in learning and religious debate[34]. This education was possible due to the monasteries established by Buddhism, most of which offered education to women and men. The famous Chinese traveller Huien Tsang, who visited India in the early part of the 7th century CE, has given a vivid account of the training facilities prevailing in Indian society during his time. He recorded their participation over education where they pursued such courses as philosophy, literature, and scriptures. According to the observations made by Hiuen Tsang, women were not only receiving education but they were also transmitters and recipients of education and scholars in their particular society. Another traveller of the 7th century CE, I-Tsing, also reinforced the rights of women in sharing knowledge. He observed that women scholars undertook the role of translating and interpreting prescribed texts in a bid to propagate Buddhism and other areas of learning. They all emphasize the fact that women are equally responsible of preserving and passing on knowledge from one generation to the other.

Most pertinent intellectual contributions have been highlighted as created and embraced by the travelers. The travelers pointed out many significant achievements that have been accomplished by women in the field of ideas. Fa-Hien described some women who were learned in Buddhist scripture and regularly debated with monks, which shows that some of them at least were quite knowledgeable in philosophical matters. All these women were well-respected and appreciated for their knowledge as well as their ability to reason, which was same as men of their time.[35] Some examples of women who contributed to literary and philosophical books were recorded by Hiuen Tsang. He defined female poets and writers who wrote poems and prose to exhibit their writing abilities and cleverness. These ways were appreciated and incorporated into the tapestry of Indian literature and philosophy. In her writings, I-Tsing focused on the involvement of females in terms of scholarly pursuits, especially within the Buddhist process. He described women who participated in the collection and preservation of written works especially religious texts calling attention to their careful work and academic accomplishments. These contributions were necessary for the continuity and propagation of Buddhism knowledge in different locations. Thus, women had adequate access to education and made quite important intellectual contributions, but their opportunities and acknowledgements were not always similar to men's. More often than not, male scholars and religious figures boasted of greater educational opportunities and resources and institutional influence. This was partly attributed to the culture and social norms that prevailed at the time and which provided more support to the education of boys and males.

CHALLENGES & LIMITATIONS

The social and economic roles of women in ancient India as described by Chinese travellers were quite prominent yet women encountered various barriers and restrictions. Moreover, the travelers' accounts themselves have certain biases and limitations that have to

be considered in connection with more encompassing historical perspectives. The most significant problems of women in ancient India were the factors that limited their role in socio-economic processes. Nevertheless, they also suffered from the constraints of the gender roles and prejudices of that time. For instance, the involvement on economic activities was informed by patriarchal structures where they were restricted to certain types of work that were deemed appropriate for women. Caste and social order became less mobile, and this also contributed to women's limited participation in trade and commerce.

Furthermore, women economically contributed to the society, but such contributions were considered to be of little value. Despite engaging in trade, agriculture, and crafts, their activities were considered secondary to men's activities, and their efforts were not valued as much. This underestimation was also noticeable in the intellectual output where women scholars and writers could be less credited than male counterparts. It is important to note that while the Chinese travelers' accounts are rich sources of information, they cannot be considered entirely objective and may contain certain biases. Firstly, being foreign visitors, Fahien, Huian Tsang, and I-Tsing could not have been privy to the entire range of activities that women were involved in at the socio-economic level. Their observations were often a result of what was visible to them or what locals told them, which may have offered only one side of a story.

However, it is also possible that the cultural bias of the travellers distorted the observations and perceptions made during the journey. For example, the impressions from their native Chinese culture regarding gender roles and other social norms could have influenced their accounts and appraisals of India's women roles[36]. To understand the role and significance of women in ancient India, one would have to position the anecdotes narrated by the travelers in the broader historical and cultural context of the period. Although the extant travellers offer external biases, there is also much that independent Indian sources such as the Arthashastra and various epigraphs offer in the same context. These sources assist in constructing an information-rich perception of women's activities and functions. For instance, from reading the Arthashastra which discusses the economic and managerial positions of women, one finds a context that corresponds to and elaborates on the observations of the travellers. Likewise, writings of the Gupta age which refer to women's participation in trading and donation support the testimony of ancient travellers and identify the role that women were playing economically and socially [37].

A desire to obtain education, legal rights to property, better social status, and economic opportunities make the accounts of Fa-Hien, Hiuen Tsang, and I-Tsing tremendously helpful to understand the socio-economic position of women in ancient India. These travellers described women in different fields of endeavor such as trade, learning, and religious practices and their representation was a reminder of the important but often overlooked role of women. The travellers got to know that women engaged in business and trade, were involved in religious and other rituals, and were even learning and writing. The following are some of the details based on their reports that women in ancient India were educated and prominent in the aspect of scholars, poets and devotional practitioners. Such information's are crucial as they undermine the phallocratic representations of the Antique

and reveal the utterly essential functions of women in social and economic spheres. Thus, far from erasing women, the accounts of the travelers offer a multifaceted view of female roles in the context of the historical period of India and enrich the understanding of gender relations in this country.

Fa-Hien's observations, those of Hiuen Tsang and I-Tsing are of productive value for modern gender and socio-economic history studies. This means that they focus on the importance of paying attention to the achievements of women in various societies' histories. In addition, these accounts compel the modern historians to search for the multi-faceted sources and explore other possibilities in order to acquire more comprehensive picture of women's contribution to history. Therefore these recordings by these Chinese travellers when used in correlation with the available Indian evidences give a much broader and inhibited side of women's Socio-economic status in ancient India. These kinds of accounts are still important for learning about the history of society and provide important experience for gender studies of the present days.

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