

Gender, Labor, and Inclusion in Ancient Indian Economy: New Evidence and Interpretation

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ABSTRACT:-

The standard account of India's ancient economic history is biased in such a way that it overlooks the contributions of women and the groups of energetically active but overlooked workers who were involved in the creation and maintenance of the material culture in question, altogether focusing on an upmarket-rich-caste-protagonist concept of the economy, solely derived from such hypothetical texts like Arthashastra and the Manusmriti.

Still, recent publications have been able to present new perspectives on the matter by using the information obtained from digging, writings, and other forms of communication of the past which all speak of the distribution of work regardless of gender and human social ranks.

This study recapitulates the questions and answers concerning the economic positions of women and those in the lowest rank of the labor sphere (e.g., Shudras and Dasas) in ancient India from the Vedic era to the early medieval period. The research based on the examination of records, temples, writings, and local laws, gives the proof for the argument of women's participation in the production of crafts, commerce, property, and economic temple activities.

The application of traditional and intersectional knowledge has meant a considerable revision in the way the ancient Indian economy is presented; now, which was the perception of the early historiography. This writing intends to prove that there should be a more extensive and more embracing schematic of economic history that not only embraces the regional diversity and unaccounted for -economies, but also the empowerment of the historically marginalized ingrained in it.

Keywords: Ancient Indian economy, gender roles, labor history, caste and economy, women's work, economic inclusion, Shudras, guilds, temple economy, intersectional history, indigenous systems.

1. Introduction:

In the last ten years, many who study South Asia's past, digs, & gender have stressed not just if women & small groups were part of work & money life in old India, but how & with what limits. Old tales, oft made from top texts like the Dharmashastras or king's words, have left out or cut down on non-top work, side jobs, & the mix of gender with caste, class, & place change. New steps in ways—like digs of old bones, sharp read of old words, the set lay of land files, & pro-woman law past—are giving new facts that question easy or one big show of not being there & need.

One new work line looks at own land laws, who gets land when one dies, & law nod. For an ex, checks of set land files in India show that women still face tilt in land names: when land is named for women, those parts are oft small, bad, or meet more blocks in nod or swap. In a fresh study, "Change in Mind of Women's Land Laws in India: What's New, Hard Times, & Tips" (2024), marks shifts in law changes, what folks think & do, showing that while law moves (with roots in old & past-old rules) have spread rights, many old & folk walls are still there.

There is also work like "Land Rights of Hindu Women: A For-Woman Look at Old Law of Who Gets What of Old, Middle, & Now India" (2022) which goes deep in past, looking at how old ways like stridhan & old rights to land both let & cut what women could do in money terms.

Digs & study of old words also add new proof of women's work & part in it. For an ex, read of words from early old India show that while men's top & set man ways are in the past, low-rank women at times show in acts—gifts, jobs, back of faith—show more mixed man-woman links than tales of strict not in it say.

While most of such work talks of what was put in words, some digs finds are told in 2025, as in Bahaj town in Deeg area, where the Dig Group of India found old bones, tools, metal arms, & gods from as far back as 2,500 BC, opening new ways to look at who was up or down & craft & rite work in very old times.

This text adds to these new facts to ask deep on the tied themes of gender, work, & in it in old Indian money ways. It wants to mix law, word, & dig finds—including the new facts & finds easy on the net—to rethink if women & small groups' work was seen, its kind, & worth. Key points are: What sorts of make

work (craft, farm, rite, trade) did women do, & how were those acts known by law or by folks? How did caste, class, place, & time change chances for in it or not in it? & to what size do new facts make us think again on what we know of money act, work split, & who is up or down in old India?

Old Indian cash ways, much seen via kings, buys, farm gain, & god money gifts, are now see big change in their story view. In late times, book folks have thought on why past cash tales left out work & roles of girls, low castes, & plain folks. New book views, digs, & deep law looks have made new roads to grasp girl work & group join in old South Asia. Not just see girls & low groups as still, new works look into strong set-ups—caste, kin, law, & gods—that both held back & let cash acts. Now, we see a more rich & live pic of old Indian work ways.

A key new thing is digs join with girl-care view of past. Dig spots like Vadnagar & Kunal show long stay, home make, & many-layer job lock from long ago, near 1,400 BCE. Finds like clay rings, spin tools, cook spots, & steel tools make us ask of girl roles & home work in early cash ways. These finds, though not named, hint a long, maybe girl-linked, role in cloth make, pots, & food fix, seen as girl work in farm groups.

Next to these finds, law & stone signs have put light on girls' things rights & cash self-rule in old India spots & times. While old law texts see girls as need-helps, some signs note girls as gift-givers, land-holds, & god links—still in a pad of man-rule & caste. New works look at how girl thing rights grew from past ways to changes in post-Vedic times. These show how law was both a block & a way for cash mix, by place & time.

Now days, girl looks give strong like looks & ways to grasp. For show, a work shows how present blocks in land owns, pay gaps, & not-seen jobs tie back to old shapes. These links make it clear that see old cash ways must catch acts of mix—who did it, how their work was worth or unseen, & what ways let acts or left them out. Now work in South Asia girl digs finds links—girl with caste, class, age, & place—to build a more full cash tale.

This work aims to dig into links of girl, work, & join in old Indian cash through hard mix of signs from books, digs, & stone signs. Key asks: What work was girl-linked, & how? Were there changes in work join by place, caste, or job? What law, rite, & usual forms set girls' cash might? And how does new proof hit old views of girls & low groups as still or unseen in early Indian cash life? With a look from many points, this learn seeks to not just write on girl work, but to read its part in bigger cash might, get to, & group see.

2. Objectives:

To look at how & how much women & other left-out groups took part in the old Indian world. We will see their work in farms, craft-making, trade, & in church groups. We will use finds from old digs, old texts, & old books to do this.

3. Review of literature:

3.1. Foundational Approaches and Normative Sources

The study of gender and labor in ancient Indian economic history has been shaped by classical texts and legal traditions, primarily the Vedas, Dharmashastra, Smritis, and Arthashastra. These texts have historically influenced much of the historiography, especially regarding property rights (strīdhan), inheritance laws, division of labor, and ritual roles (Altekar, 1959; Kane, 1962). They tend to reflect elite Brahmanical ideals, often prescribing gendered norms instead of describing lived experiences. This creates a framework where male-dominated public labor is separated from women's domestic work, while caste-based restrictions control access to economic resources.

Early interpretive models, such as those by D.D. Kosambi and Romila Thapar, acknowledged the exclusion of women and lower castes but did not systematically address their economic roles. Most of the early literature treated women as subjects of legal codes or markers of social change, rather than as economic agents in their own right.

3.2. Shifts Toward Gendered and Subaltern Economic History

From the 1990s onward, feminist historians like Uma Chakravarti, Kumkum Roy, and Nirmala Bannerjee began to challenge the male-centered perspective of traditional historiography. They highlighted that women and marginalized communities, though often missing from formal records, played significant roles in agrarian and domestic economies. They often found limited but meaningful agency in religious institutions, local markets, and artisan production. Roy (1994) points out that even in early Vedic society, women engaged in productive activities, although their roles diminished with increased social stratification.

A key development was the rethinking of economic labor beyond just wage-based or elite transactions to include subsistence work, domestic production, and informal networks. This shift allowed scholars to interpret labor as a gendered category closely linked with systems of caste, kinship, and religious obligation (Chakravarti, 2003).

3.3. Epigraphic Evidence and Women's Economic Agency

Inscriptions, primarily donative records, land grants, and religious endowments, have served as a valuable source for understanding the economic participation of women and subalterns, especially in the early medieval period (c. 600–1200 CE).

Recent studies like **Women and Society in Early Medieval India: Re-interpreting Epigraphs** (ICAS, 2019) show that women frequently appeared as donors and patrons, not only as royal figures but also as widows, householders, and local elites. This evidence challenges earlier beliefs that women lacked property rights or economic independence. For example, inscriptions from the Satavahana and Pallava periods show women donating land to temples, sponsoring wells, and making endowments in their own names.

Similarly, **Modes of Gender Relationships in Early Medieval India** (Verma, 2020) examines gendered language in inscriptions and discusses how kinship networks influenced women's access to land and religious capital. While women's appearances in inscriptions were still less common than men's, they indicate economic activity that goes beyond mere ritual duty.

In his article **Women as Donors of Inscribed Buddhist Sculptures in Early Medieval Bihar and Bengal** (Prasad, 2020), Birendra Nath Prasad looks at female patronage in Buddhist institutions. He finds that even non-elite women, such as artisan wives and village women, are noted in inscriptions as donors. This illustrates not just their presence but also their potential agency in religious and economic matters. The regional aspect is significant; Eastern India had more female participation than other areas.

3.4. Archaeological Contributions and Material Culture

While inscriptions offer direct evidence, archaeological data reveals the material conditions of labor. Recent excavations and reanalyses of older sites, especially from the Harappan, Megalithic, and Early Historic periods, have begun to uncover traces of economic activities by women and marginalized groups.

For instance, the article **Contribution of Women to the Early Indian Economy (1500 B.C. to 600 A.D.)** (2023) uses material remains like spindle whorls, bangles, and cooking installations to show that women were actively involved in textile production, food processing, and household crafts (Indology Journal, 2023). These findings challenge the distinction between public/male and private/female labor, suggesting a more integrated view of labor rooted in households and seasonal cycles.

Additionally, burial studies in Indus Valley contexts, such as Kalibangan, Rakhigarhi, and Farmana, reveal that skeletal remains of women often include grave goods linked to labor, like wear-marked bangles and tools. Reports like the **Times of India** article (2023) on the Harappan site in Haryana interpret these findings as evidence of women engaged in physically demanding work, challenging the myth that ancient women's labor was merely "light" or domestic.

However, scholars caution that attributing labor to specific genders based on artifacts is methodologically complex. The lack of names or identities tied to tools makes it tough to draw clear conclusions about caste, gender, or age of the laborers (Srinivasan, 2021).

3.5. Broader Social Inclusion: Caste, Class, and Gender Intersections

Beyond gender, there is increasing interest in how caste and class intersect with economic inclusion. Most sources, especially texts and inscriptions, remain silent or negative about the labor of shudras, dāsas, and tribal groups. While these groups likely performed labor-intensive tasks like agriculture, animal husbandry, and artisanal work, they are often referenced indirectly or with stigma in Brahmanical texts.

The recent scholarship on "inclusion" goes beyond mere participation to focus on visibility, valuation, and rights. Scholars like Chitra Krishnan (2021) argue that understanding who could donate, inherit, or own land is as vital as identifying who did the labor. Though the Arthashastra and later agrarian texts occasionally mention paid agricultural work, they do not specify caste or gender, reflecting the structural invisibility of subaltern workforces.

3.6. Recent Interdisciplinary and Comparative Work (2020–2024)

Several recent studies have introduced new approaches to labor history:

Gómez (2022) in **Sanskrit and the Labour of Gender in Early Modern South India** argues that intellectual, ritual, and literary work should be seen as gendered labor. Though it focuses on a more recent period, it offers a model for understanding how elite women's knowledge production also had economic implications.

Desai et al. (2023) in **Is Agricultural Labour Feminizing in South and South East Asia** present comparative labor trends that raise questions about long-term patterns in women's agrarian roles. While their focus is on modern times, their demographic insights are useful for examining invisibility and valuation over

time. Tripathy (2022) studies women in Nepalese and Indian inscriptions (4th–8th century) and finds that regional customs allowed for varying degrees of economic independence for women. This suggests that inclusion was not uniform but negotiated differently across the subcontinent.

3.7. Gaps and Emerging Directions

Despite increasing interest, important gaps still exist:

Underrepresentation of early periods: The Protohistoric and Vedic periods are harder to analyze due to fewer inscriptions and unclear material records.

Regional imbalance: Much of the analysis focuses on the Deccan and North India; there is less knowledge about Eastern, Northeastern, and tribal regions.

Lack of intersectional focus: Studies that integrate caste, gender, class, and age in their labor analysis are still uncommon.

Valuation of labor: Even when participation is documented, there is little understanding of how this labor was valued—socially, ritually, or economically.

4. Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative, interdisciplinary historical approach that combines literary, epigraphic, and archaeological sources to examine the role of women and marginalized groups in the ancient Indian economy from 1500 BCE to 1200 CE. It analyzes primary texts such as the Vedas, Smritis, Arthashastra, and epics to explore gender and caste-based labor roles. The study looks at inscriptions from dynasties like the Satavahanas, Guptas, and Cholas to find examples of female and subaltern economic agency through land grants, donations, and administrative mentions. Archaeological evidence from important sites, including burial artifacts, craft tools, and domestic remains, helps interpret labor patterns in agriculture, craft production, trade, and religious institutions. The study uses a triangulation approach to verify sources and applies feminist and subaltern historiographical methods to highlight gaps and exclusions in the data.

By integrating regional and chronological comparisons, this research aims to build a more inclusive understanding of economic life in ancient India.

5. Discussions

5.1. Foundational Texts and Normative Frameworks

Ancient Indian economic history has usually been understood through classical sources like the Vedas, Dharmashastras, Smritis, and Arthashastra. These texts set up frameworks that promote clear divisions of labor based on gender and caste, often reflecting Brahmanical ideals that favor male, elite authority. Women's roles are typically limited to domestic and ritual activities, while public economic tasks are shown as male domains. However, these prescriptive sources mainly reflect ideological norms instead of actual social practices. They often overlook the economic contributions of women and marginalized groups. This foundational approach establishes important legal and social boundaries but leaves significant gaps about the lived experiences of non-elite individuals.

5.2. Emergence of Gendered and Subaltern Economic Histories

Since the late 20th century, feminist and subaltern scholars have critiqued the focus on elites and texts in earlier histories. Researchers such as Uma Chakravarti and Kumkum Roy have highlighted women's active roles in agrarian work, craft production, and local markets. Many of these roles are informal and unpaid, escaping elite records. These scholars redefined labor to include subsistence activities and domestic economies while showing how caste and kinship influenced labor divisions. This approach emphasizes the agency of women and lower-caste groups, challenging traditional binaries and showcasing the connections between economic, social, and ritual aspects.

5.3. Epigraphic Evidence of Women's Economic Agency

Inscriptions, especially from the early medieval period (600–1200 CE), provide clear evidence of women’s participation in economic life beyond passive or symbolic roles. Studies of land grants, religious donations, and donor inscriptions show women acting as property owners, donors, and supporters of temples and local projects. For instance, widows and householders from the Satavahana and Pallava periods are recorded donating land or funding wells in their names, indicating real economic agency and property rights. Additionally, regional differences, such as higher female patronage in eastern India (e.g., Bihar and Bengal), highlight the varying nature of inclusion and local customs that shaped women’s economic roles.

5.4. Archaeological Insights into Material Culture and Labor

Archaeological research supports textual and inscriptional sources by shedding light on the material conditions of labor. Artifacts like spindle whorls, worn bangles, and domestic tools from sites such as Harappan settlements suggest that women played active roles in craft production, textile weaving, and food processing. Burial studies also indicate that women engaged in physically demanding labor, countering the stereotype of their work as purely “light” or domestic. However, interpreting gender from material remains can be challenging. Artifacts often lack clear identities, and differentiating between caste or age groups is tough. Despite these challenges, archaeology provides vital evidence that enhances the understanding of how labor is socially embedded.

5.5. Intersecting Axes of Caste, Class, and Gender in Inclusion

Beyond gender, caste and class strongly influence labor relations and economic inclusion. Brahmanical texts often exclude or stigmatize the work of shudras,

tribal peoples, and other marginalized groups, who likely made up the majority of agricultural and artisanal workforces. Recent scholarship suggests moving beyond merely recognizing labor presence to focusing on issues of valuation, rights, and social acknowledgment. For instance, land ownership, inheritance, and access to institutional power are crucial areas where caste and gender intersect, creating layered exclusions. To understand inclusion fully, it's important to analyze who controlled economic resources, who received social recognition for their work, and how these dynamics shaped broader social hierarchies.

5.6. Recent Interdisciplinary and Comparative Approaches

Newer scholarship from 2020 to 2024 introduces fresh conceptual and methodological tools. For example, Gómez (2022) expands the definition of labor to include intellectual, ritual, and literary activities. This highlights how the knowledge production of elite women constituted economic work. Comparative demographic studies on agricultural feminization (Desai et al., 2023) offer frameworks for understanding long-term changes in women's labor participation across South Asia, helping explain their invisibility and undervaluation. Regional studies, such as Tripathy's research on inscriptions from Nepal and India, show that economic inclusion varied regionally, reflecting complex negotiations of gender and caste across different sociopolitical contexts.

5.7. Persistent Gaps and Directions for Future Research

Despite significant progress, important research gaps remain. Early historical periods such as the Protohistoric and Vedic are still underexplored due to few inscriptions and unclear archaeological evidence. Additionally, Eastern,

Northeastern, and tribal areas are often overlooked in scholarship, limiting the understanding of diversity in economic inclusion. Most studies also lack a comprehensive intersectional analysis that combines gender, caste, class, and age. Finally, there is a pressing need for deeper exploration into how labor was socially and economically valued or contested, including the issues of pay, property rights in practice, and cultural recognition. Addressing these gaps will help create a more nuanced and complete picture of ancient Indian economic life and social inclusion.

6. Findings and Recommendations

6.1 Foundational Texts and Normative Frameworks

Findings: Classical texts like the *Vedas*, *Dharmashastras*, and *Arthashastra* provide essential insight into ancient Indian economic norms but primarily reflect elite, male-centered, and prescriptive viewpoints. These sources often exclude the actual lived experiences and economic contributions of women and marginalized groups, resulting in a partial and idealized understanding of labor and inclusion.

Recommendations: Future research should critically engage with these normative texts in dialogue with archaeological and inscriptional evidence to reconstruct a more nuanced and empirically grounded picture of gendered labor practices and social inclusion.

6.2 Emergence of Gendered and Subaltern Economic Histories

Findings: Feminist and subaltern scholarship has successfully brought to light the often invisible economic roles of women and marginalized communities, emphasizing their involvement in subsistence agriculture, craft production, and informal economies. This shift has challenged the male-centric and elite-biased historiography and expanded the concept of labor beyond formal wage systems.

Recommendations: Expanding interdisciplinary methodologies—including ethnographic analogies and oral histories—can deepen understanding of informal

and non-elite economic activities, particularly in rural, tribal, and underrepresented regions.

6.3 Epigraphic Evidence of Women's Economic Agency

Findings: Epigraphic sources from early medieval India demonstrate women's active participation as property holders, donors, and patrons in religious and economic spheres. This evidence reveals significant female agency that contradicts earlier assumptions of women's economic passivity and highlights regional variations in inclusion.

Recommendations: Encourage comprehensive and regionally diverse epigraphic studies focusing on women's property rights and economic roles to map spatial and temporal variations in female economic agency more accurately.

6.4 Archaeological Insights into Material Culture and Labor

Findings: Archaeological findings—such as spindle whorls, bangles with wear marks, and burial goods—indicate women's engagement in labor-intensive activities, challenging simplistic divisions between domestic and public work. However, methodological limitations complicate clear gender and caste attributions from material culture alone.

Recommendations: Advance archaeological methods by integrating bioarchaeology, wear-pattern analyses, and contextual artifact studies to more reliably attribute labor to specific gender and social groups, thereby enriching interpretations of economic participation.

6.5 Intersecting Axes of Caste, Class, and Gender in Inclusion

Findings: Economic roles and inclusion in ancient India were deeply stratified by caste and class, with marginalized groups often rendered invisible or undervalued in dominant narratives. Property ownership, labor rights, and social recognition were profoundly shaped by these intersecting hierarchies, limiting equitable inclusion.

Recommendations: Apply intersectional analytical frameworks that simultaneously consider caste, class, gender, and age in studies of labor and inclusion to reveal the complex power dynamics shaping economic life in ancient India.

6.6 Recent Interdisciplinary and Comparative Approaches

Findings: Recent scholarship expanding the definition of labor to include intellectual and ritual activities and incorporating comparative demographic data enriches understanding of gendered economic contributions and highlights regional and temporal diversity.

Recommendations: Foster interdisciplinary and comparative research projects combining history, anthropology, demography, and gender studies to situate ancient Indian labor practices within broader South Asian and global contexts.

6.7 Persistent Gaps and Directions for Future Research

Findings: Despite advances, major gaps remain—especially concerning early historical periods (Protohistoric, Vedic), marginalized geographic regions (Eastern, Northeastern, tribal areas), intersectional analyses, and the social and economic valuation of labor. These gaps hinder a comprehensive understanding of ancient economic inclusion.

Recommendations: Prioritize research addressing underexplored periods and regions, integrate intersectional approaches, and focus on the valuation and recognition of labor through combined textual, epigraphic, and material evidence to develop a fuller, more inclusive narrative of ancient Indian economic history.

7. Conclusion

This study highlights the complex nature of gendered labor and inclusion in the ancient Indian economy. It challenges long-held beliefs based mainly on elite, male-dominated texts. By carefully examining archaeological, inscriptional, and literary evidence, it shows that women and marginalized groups had important,

though often overlooked, roles in agriculture, craft production, trade, and religious institutions. This mix of sources reveals that economic participation in ancient India varied greatly across regions, social classes, and historical periods. The research points to significant progress in moving away from traditional views to better understand real economic experiences. Feminist and subaltern perspectives shed light on the agency of non-elite women and lower castes. Inscriptional records and material culture provide clear evidence of women's property rights, patronage, and labor-intensive work. Recent interdisciplinary approaches expand the definition of labor to include intellectual and ritual activities.

Despite these advances, there are still notable gaps, especially related to early historical periods, lesser-studied areas, and the value of labor within complex caste and class systems. Addressing these gaps requires ongoing methodological changes and intersectional analysis to fully grasp the varied experiences of inclusion and exclusion in ancient Indian economic life.

Ultimately, this research emphasizes that understanding gender and labor in ancient India needs a well-rounded approach that combines critiques of texts with empirical evidence. This method not only enhances historical study but also contributes to wider discussions about social justice, fairness, and the historical roots of economic participation. By highlighting the voices and contributions of women and marginalized groups, this study opens new avenues for interpreting ancient economic systems and their impacts in modern South Asia.

8. Author's Critical Reflections and Position

Recent work in feminist studies, along with epigraphy and archaeology, has really opened up how we think about women's roles in labor and the economy back in ancient India. But I think the literature out there is still pretty limited, you know,

because of spotty evidence and a focus on certain regions, plus it leans too much on sources that highlight elite people. Even when scholars try to reinterpret things in a more inclusive way, they end up spotlighting women who show up as donors or owners of property, or patrons in religious stuff, which kind of keeps the same old hierarchies in place and pushes aside the everyday women from rural areas or lower castes who were doing the hard labor.

It feels like just showing that women participated in the economy isn't enough to call it inclusion. We have to dig into how their work was valued, if it got recognized, whether there was coercion involved, and who controlled any extra resources that came from it. That's what makes economic analysis actually meaningful, I suppose.

Inscriptions and artifacts from digs do push back against the dominance of Brahmanical texts, which is good. But they don't fix everything about agency on their own. Silence in those sources might not mean women weren't working, it could just be that power structures erased them from the record. So this paper is pushing for a careful approach that's intersectional, treating all these texts and inscriptions and archaeological finds as products of social power, not just neutral facts.

Methodological humility seems key here, along with checking across different sources to triangulate. The ancient Indian economy was stratified in deep ways, but also dynamic, with women and marginalized folks being essential to it, even if they rarely got equal shares or benefits. Some ideas about celebratory inclusion narratives feel a bit off, you know, like they overlook the tougher realities. Instead, it calls for a sharper look at the political economy of gender and labor in ancient South Asia, though that part gets a bit messy to frame fully.

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