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## Slavery In Ancient India

Parmod kumar

**Abstract----** In the history of mankind ,slavery has found its place in almost all civilizations religion as well as customs. This paper deals with the social developments and changes of slavery ,which have taken place over time in early india.The utilization of social history and its conditions in the study requires verification by contrasting them with other theories and practices of different periods. The main aim of the paper to develop a better understanding of slavery in ancient iIndia and providing knowledge on the outcome of the social orders and their existence in ancient India. In this paper we discuss about origin and growth of slavery in early India,types of slavery ,women slavery ,sudra and slavery ,rights of slaves ,slave as a class or social entity

Slavery is usually referred to as an inhuman treatment which is inflicted upon human beings by their owners who treat them as property and force them to work beyond their limits and capabilities .The word slave ,or a person servile to another ,or a group of person servile to another group of persons comprises their social position in an established social structure .The economic ,poltical and conditions in the society can be held largely responsible in the change of social status and duties of slavery the respective societies .In the same sense ,the ancient Indian social structure comprised of a number of slaves in different occupations ,i.e. agriculture and domestic . In the succeeding paragraph ,the institution of slavery will be discussed taking in to view the social aspects in ancient India .

### Origin and Growth of Slavery in early India

The ancient Indian literary sources bring to notices that slavery was a recognized institution in india in the vedic age<sup>1</sup> .In fact ,early Indo Aryan settled in north west India during the second millennia BCE.They were the early hordes called Aryans. These people generally lived in small village clusters and developed a distinct socio-economic sand poltical culture from the aboriginal tribes. In the literature produced by them, we find professional and social linings in which tribal system prevailed,but with the division of labour. The Aryans were agrarian communities who began to cultivate the larger portions of land chunks during their eastward expansion in the Gangetic region.These operations required enhanced labour techniques, which led them to tame the aboriginal tribes for the free labour in the form of slaves called Dasas and Dasyus. The proof of such developments is apparent in the Vedas ,Brahamans,Upanishads and Puranas.

During the period of the Rig-Veda,we have instances of the Aryan folk defeating and subjugating the aboriginals and enslaving their women and children,which laid the foundation for slavery.The other causes in its growtg were the tradition enslaving by purchase,sale, mortagaging,defeat in war,losing in bets etc. The born slavery was there as children born to slaves were slaves rather than free. Even the freedom persons could be enslaved on the grounds of penalty, fines or loss in bets etc.irrespective of caste and creed. Thus, the caste was least important in the growth of slavery in early India because any high born dvija could

also be a slave. This is the reason people who were defeated in the wars during the Rigveda period were enslaved. However, during the Smrti period, they multiplied in categories up to fifteen, which showed the increase in the demand and dynamism of slavery as a profession during this period. The practice of harsh slavery in India existed but it also had some of the human values found in the writings of Kautilya and the Smritikaras. Further more, a slave could be employed from any caste though the Sudras comprised most of them. The free individuals could become slaves under various punishments or as awards of serious offence in the eyes of the state, society and nature. In the epic period, the institution of slavery grew because of incessant warfare and feudal organizations. The multiplication of slave classes points that more and more population was put under slave tags as the forces of production and distribution increased manifold. These were many variations in their works during the period of Mauryas and Smrtis such as agriculture, industrial in the state as well as some individual services but the employer master or state had been under obligation to look after their slaves on moral and ethical grounds.

### Types of Slavery

In the early Indian literary traditions, we come to know about two distinct groups, i.e. Aryans and Dasas. The terms like Dasas and Dasyus, as they appear in the earlier Sanskrit texts, can be considered for further elaboration. The Dasyus were considered different from the Dasas in terms of functions and characteristics. They are twice described as vow less [avrata]<sup>2</sup> without Brahman or gods [abrahman] and possessing large property [mayavat]<sup>3</sup>. However, they were also described as cunning in nature and inhumane [amanusha]<sup>4</sup> but they are also described as rich [dhanin]<sup>5</sup> and always ready to usurp their religion. It is argued that Dasyus and Dasas were racially not Aryans<sup>6</sup>. The Dasyus probably spoke a different language and had a different life style, which was not the case with the Dasas. Further the Dasas were organized into a tribe called Vis, which is the term used for Vedic people or tribes<sup>7</sup>. There are more references to the destruction and subjugation of Dasas than of the Dasyus. There are ten references to the killings of Dasyus in the Rigveda<sup>8</sup> like Dasyuhatya, Dasyuhan, Dasyuhantama etc.<sup>9</sup> These references point to the fact that the Dasas were treated less contemptuously than the Dasyus who were asked to be destroyed by the Aryan god Indra. However, it is important to note that the designation of Dasas has been mostly assigned to the Cimyus, who were king Sudas' enemies and were considered equivalent to the Dasyus and Kikatas led by Parmaganda. They were treated with contempt due to their skin color [varna]. Dasas were also known for their non-Aryan beliefs and did not worship the Aryan gods; they were criticized for performing phallus worship. The phallus worship, which found its way into worship in the Brahmanical system, started only in the age of Mahabharata.

The text of the Arthashastra describes nine types of slaves existing in Mauryan society. The Manusmriti<sup>10</sup> provides for seven kinds of slaves which were allowed during the time when Manava Dharmashastra was in force and these classes have been mentioned below;

- a. Dhvajahrita—The person who is kept captive under a standard applicable to him.
- b. Udradasa --- The person who serves for getting food from the upper castes.
- c. Grhajatab – Someone who is born within the house itself.
- d. Krita—The person who has been bought by others for slavery.
- e. Dayab- agatah--- The person who is inherited from his ancestors.
- f. Dandapreneeet---The person who was given the punishment of being a slave.

In the Narad smati fifteen kinds of slave i.e. the war captives, received in gifts, a slave for maintenance, a son of female slave, hereditary slave, those censured offence, maintained slaves in certain famines or calamities, mortgaged slaves, born in masters house, slave of declaration, slave of a limited period, self sold slave, purchased for money, to get some sustenance and obtained in inheritance, Narada said that Kstrijas, Vaisayas and Sudras could be slave of Brahmin, Vaisyas and sudras of a Kstriya and Sudras of a kstriya and Sudras of a Vaisya.<sup>11</sup> From the description of slaves in the smatis of this period it is clear that the master of a slave could sell him, give him on hire<sup>12</sup>, present him to someone else, mortgage him and give him as inheritance. Even a father could sell him son as a slave to maintain himself<sup>13</sup>. In his categorization of services, Narda has placed some good points for the slave populace. According to him there were Susruksha who were of five types such as a Sisya, adhikarmakrt, antevasin, bhrataka and a dasa. He drew a line between the pure and impure works such as karamakaras working in the first four works and the fifth one, a Dasa would be required to be engaged in the filthy works like the cleansing the wood remains, carcasses of the humans and animals, filthy dustbins, roadsides, dunghill heaps, shampooing the masters private parts, throwing feces and urine etc.

It is clear the above paragraph, that various categories or kinds of slave provided under smrtis that any person who is either punished by the king or who is born as a slave or someone who was given the punishment of becoming a slave of the person who tends to become the slave of another person for food or someone who was bought by the other person to pee his leave is asleep as defined under the man of Dharmasastra. therefore, clearly the Manava Dharmasastra does confer a slave, with all the rights which were possessed by the four Varna as mentioned in smarti and so it shall be considered that slave is one such person who can be treated like a commodity and made to work for food as part of the punishment, this depriving him of free will which is deemed to be violates of the basic human rights that are now enjoyed by every person of every possible caste, religion, creed or background within the modern India <sup>13</sup>. It makes the social life to static and it is creates difference between masters and slaves. To him, an occupation is essential to each and everybody according to their ability, skill and efficiency.<sup>14</sup>

### Women Slavery

The women of a slave girl was authorized, in case of her running, stealing or disseminating any rumor about him to beat her down, pull and drag her by hair, tie her, and set her again to work as a slave. If she did not her obey his orders the owner could kick her and beat her with sticks till she was killed and this would not be an act of guilt for the master. There are numerous other such examples about the cruel trouncing, or whipping which the slave received. The slave girls are asked to serve their masters throughout their life, which is a compulsory binding. Janma Grahaka is the term assigned to a purchaser of a lifelong slave and his rights over the life of the slave.<sup>19</sup> It is also interesting to note that here that the text does not have any reference or provision about the manumission of a slaves. In a statement, it is confirmed that the recuperation of a slave girl can not be had at all by her relatives because she is born to serve her master of his house for life.<sup>20</sup> These traditions also signify it clearly that slaves were permitted nothing but bare maintenance for the upkeep of their life.<sup>21</sup> However, the offspring of slave girls seems to have been a social burden, wasting their vigor and energy in unsocial conducts. Thus it appears from Haribhadras commentary on the Dasavalkalikasutra<sup>25</sup> that a slave girls son often had only a bare garment and was a rogue who would for the sake of stakes in gambling break in to a house, kill the residents by kicking them and then visit a prostitute and eat fish and drink wine. The above noting makes it a miserable interpretation and specifies what a wretched life a slave had to lead. Another noted scholar Mahapandita Rahula Sankritayayana <sup>26</sup> tells clearly that the slave in the period were treated as semi humans. Above all the slaves were a part of the family unit and it is easy to imagine that the steady group of a family might have created the masters some thoughtfulness over the harsh treatment meted out to their whole time slaves. It was the nature of the the master on whom the condition of the slave or slave girl depended.

## Sudra and Slavery

Manu states that though it was the duty of the Sudras to sit at the feet of the higher Varnas, he may not be considered his slave. One occupation only the lord prescribed to the Sudras, to serve meekly even to these three castes." They - very Dharma of a Sudra or their religious obligation has been defined and the Manusmriti, is to serve Brahmins, who are famous for their virtues and those who are learned in Vedas. It is also mentioned in the said Smriti, that if a Sudra served the Brahmana who belonged to these three particular classes of being a learning household or having a virtue, then such a Sudra will be able to attain supreme blessedness, which will further lead him to heaven." A Sudra with a Brahmins will ultimately achieve a better life in his next birth. Manusmriti - believes that a Sudra who is not considered to be a twice born will become one in his next birth if he serves the other caste. Consequently, to a certain extent discrimination can be witnessed in the Manusmriti against Sudras, since only they have been instructed to be kind towards others and serve the other people so as to get a better life which will be in the form of a higher caste.

From the above analysis, it can be inferred that verses in Manusmriti reflect upon the extent to which Sudras were the slaves of the other three Varnas, with their first and foremost duty as per the Manava dharmasastras, being that of living in servitude. Furthermore, being the slaves of Brahmins and other Varnas, is their primary religious duty, since it was only the Sudras who cannot be considered as twice born (those which are born with knowledge) and for in order to get a better life in the next birth, they have been instructed by the Manusmriti to follow a life of slavery, thus allowing them to uplift their status from that of a Sudra to that of other three upper caste Varnas in their next birth.

## Rights of Slave

Manu Smritikars had suggested certain ways relating to their manumission and liberation under some special provisions. The idea behind all this was to abolish the rigidity and inhumanity of the traditional slavery." "On the freedom of a slave, both Yajnavalkya' and Narada opined that when a slave saved his master from death, he naturally became free from the bondage of slavery and Narada goes to the extent of saying that such a slave may, like a son, inherit some property of his master. Yajnavalkya's further stated that if an ascetic leaves his asceticism, he had to be converted into a king's slave for the rest of his life. In the legal terms slaves were made witnesses in absence of other persons, which also includes the list such as a woman, an old person, a pupil, a relative or hired servant. Therefore, they began to be accorded some litigant position in the Smritis." In the Smritis, we observe certain norms of relaxation in the work, conduct and conditions of the slaves up medieval India. Some conceptions regarding Sudras and Varnas were different in nature. Manu made a sharp division between the free and slave Sudras. In the above description, we observed that these ideal philosophers have felt an idea of sympathy on the desolate condition of the slaves. Medhatithi tries to curtail the meticulous state of the rules set up in Manu, by offering a liberal understanding and an explanation. Commenting upon the statement the wife, the son and the slave have no property and whatever they acquire is the property of him to whom they belong Medhatithi" takes perception of the fact that, that slaves also have proprietary rights over their property, and observes that the text means that the slave and others are dependent and submissive and without the master's permission cannot employ their wealth as they choose. On the one hand he explains Manu's" perception that a mischievous slave, a wife or a son should be given a harsh beating with a rope or a split bamboo, as commanding a method of making them correct and not as ordering an actual thrashing. To support his view that he inserts that oral reprimand should be applied to them as a correction method and only harsh or extreme cases should be taken to be worth beating.

## Slave as a Class or Social Entity

In the different literary traditions discussed above, we see that the position and status of the slaves was a worst lot as has been seen in Buddhist teachings whereby he forbade its followers to indulge in any kind of violence acts with their servants and slaves. The slaves both men and women are shown to be beaten, kicked or even killed at the master's will. That is why there are number of instances when the slave men and women tried and sometimes succeed to escape their master's clutches in order to escape their further violence. It should also be borne in mind that with the inclusion of more areas under one's dominion and increase in the private

landholdings, the number of tenants and working slaves increase which gave rise to new relationship between landlords and slaves. However, the stratification of in the stratification of society, the slaves were not accorded the status equivalent of untouchable because they had to work along with their masters in domestic and other professions. Thus, the slavery is not studied in the context of caste but a class, which is excluded of caste studies. We also come to learn about the non-Aryan or the upper Varna people being converted into slaves as an act of punishment or otherwise. Thus to confuse

caste with class within social hierarchy is unacceptable because these are different concepts. From above debate on slavery we noticed that a Brahmin could be converted into a slave but not into a Sudras. We see a horizontal rather vertical division of society in slave study whereas the study of caste is a vertical study of social hierarchy.

Thus, it can be said that the overall social status of the slaves was not underestimated because it did not evolve the untouchability in the institutions of slavery and because they are working in the households, agrarian workshops and also bearing the children of the masters in different phases of early India and such as are sometimes recognized by the intellectual classes for the betterment of the slaves. However, the above discussion on slavery does not mean that slaves enjoyed a high social status. They were treated as the base class in the society. Throughout their life, they were destined to serve their masters, laurels to those who fortunately enjoyed redemption from slavery. They were a distressed class as their evidence was not relied upon by courts of law and their property was regarded to be possessed by their Brahmin masters. Female slaves were treated at par with prostitutes and they apart from menial domestic and miscellaneous works, had, at times, to satisfy the sex hunger of their masters.

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