

Slavery in Ancient and Medieval Odisha: A Study

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Abstract

Socially slavery is a symbol of fundamental social system. In this article it is an attempt to analyse the existence of slavery in the social structure of ancient and medieval Odisha. Though Odisha is geographically located in the eastern direction of the Indian subcontinent the centralised social system had influenced the social life of a part of eastern India significantly. The study also investigates the existence, evolution and social stratification of slavery with its changing nature, forms, factors and types from ancient to medieval period with the flow time.

Keywords: slavery, medieval Odisha, social structure, social condition

The term slavery means forced labour. It is a system where individuals are owned by others and forced to work without any compensation. In India it has a complex history over the years. Slavery is one of the oldest institutions in the history of mankind, infested the Indian society since remote antiquity. Literary and other evidences clearly disclose the existence of slavery in India since the time of Rig-Veda. It is conceivable that after the Aryans settled in the land of the seven rivers they had to fight with the non-Aryans of the country and many of these non-Aryans became dasas or slaves of the conquering white lords. The Rig-Veda refers to the gift of one hundred dasas ¹. The Aitareya Brahmana records the gift of 10,000 dasis or slave girls made by king to his purohita² (priest), while we read in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad how king Janaka offered himself with all the subjects of his kingdom as slaves to the sage Yajnavalkya. ³ From the above discussion we can draw the following conclusion regarding slavery in India in the Vedic Age.

- a. The prisoners of war were often reduced to slavery.
- b. A person could be a slave of another man voluntarily.
- c. The slaves included both males and females.
- d. The slaves were like chattels of masters who could dispose them of e. g. by gifts etc. according to will.

Manu enumerates the factors that led to one's slavery. They are (i) he who is made a captive under a standard (dhvajahrta), (ii) he who serves for his daily food, (iii) he who is born in the house, (iv) he who is brought, (v) he who is given (vi) he who is inherited from ancestors and (vii) he who is enslaved by way of punishment ⁴.

In the Artha sastra of Kautilya, we find the following kinds of slaves:

- I. dhvajahrta ---- captured in battle
- II. atmavikrayin ---- who sells himself
- III. udar adasa ---- who is born of a dasa in the womb of a female slave
- IV. ahitika ---- one enslaved for failing to pay debt
- V. dandapranita... one enslaved by way of punishment ⁵

According to Yajnavalkya slavery was caused by force, sell of the person, by one evidently who is not a relative by pledge, voluntarily for food and apostacy. This shows that he differs from Manu and Kautilya on one important point, He is not in favour of reducing the prisoners of war into slavery, nor he sanctions that one should be a slave by way of state punishment ⁶. Yajnavalkya really brings a revolutionary change in the Indian social life by enacting that a man in the descending order of caste may be a slave to one belonging to a higher order. Katyayana states, "the three castes may be taken to slavery, but never the Brahmana. Among the various castes, the lower can be a slave to the higher but never a higher to the lower. Among the Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras there may be slavery among members of the same caste, but a Brahmana should never be made to work as a slave." He further adds, "if a Brahmana be made to work as a slave, the king's glory fades away."

Katyayana evidently goes to a further extent than Yajnavalkya in maintaining not only that the Aryans could be reduced to slavery, excepting the Brahmana Aryans but also that among the three lower castes one may make a slave a person belonging to his own caste as well.

The few aspects of slavery that we described in the preceding pages seems to have infested the Odisha society. It has been a well-recognised institution in some form or other and existed as a constant factor in the social life of the period under review.

The institution of slavery expanded significantly under various Islamic dynasties like Delhi Sultanates and Mughals in northern India and deccan sultanates in southern India. The literature of our period is full of extensive references to gifts, sales and purchase of slaves. The frequent reference of *dasa* and *dasi* which appear in the medieval literature clearly shows that slavery was a recognised institution. Sarala Das in his *Mahabharata* writes that in the marriages of Draupadi,⁷ Uttara,⁸ Bhanumati⁹ and Duhsila,¹⁰ hundreds and thousands of *poilies*, *dasis* and *ganikas* were presented as *jautuka* (dowry) by their respective fathers to the bridegroom. These were nothing more than the female slaves. In *Dandi Ramayana* of Balaram Das also we get references to the offering of female slaves as gift¹¹. Upendra Bhanja while dealing with the marriage ceremonies, has pictured certain functions of the *dasas* and *dasis*. In his *Rasalekha* *kavya* we get a clear picture of purchasing *dasas* and *dasis*, from foreign countries for the personal service of aristocratic families. Kapisanya Rishi purchased eight female slaves (*Ashta saki*) from the Chola country for the personal service of *Rasalekha*¹².

Further, in the 17th century Pipli and Balasore the port towns of Odisha remained as the main centres of slave trade. The Portuguese and Arakanese (pirates) were the active slave traders. William Hedges and C. R. Willson inform us that the Portuguese ships picked up the people from the coast of the Bay of Bengal and carried them off captive to sell them into slavery at Pipli.¹³ R. K. Mukherjee in his "History of Indian Shipping writes, "they (the Portuguese and Arakanese) carried off the Hindus and Muslims... threw them one above another under the decks of their ships, and sold them to the Dutch, English and French merchants at the ports of Deccan. Sometimes they bought the captives for sale at a high price to Tamluk and the ports of Balasore¹⁴. William Bruton who visited Odisha in 1633 A. D. in his account states that, "they have many wives, which they purchase and buy of their parents: some they keep to their vessels, to do their drudgery; others, which are handsome, for issue sake and pleasure "¹⁵. Francois Bernier (1656-1668) refers to the slave trade at Point Palmyras¹⁶ (on Odisha coast) by the Portuguese who often visited that place¹⁷.

The medieval period was marked with the growth of Muslim community in Odisha. In the Muslim community slavery was a recognised institution. They came to India with this tradition. The kings, princes, nobles and rich persons had slave boys and girls, slave men and women.

Their number was very large. Sometimes they were also distributed as ordinary gifts or presents: In Muslim society slaves were sold and purchased like commodities in markets. Keeping large number of slaves was often considered as fashion of the days.

From the above discussion it can be concluded that slavery prevailed in the society of Odisha. Both the Hindus and Muslims were accustomed to keep slaves. Generally, servants, male and female, were bought or hired for doing menial work. As in case of any society, war, poverty, poor economic condition, indebtedness, natural calamities and female-plundering etc. seems to have encouraged the institution of slavery. The slaves were also engaged in the temple building activities of the state¹⁸. Further, slaves were imported to and exported from Odisha during the period under survey. It appears, the slaves were at the lowest level in the society, performing diverse house-hold tasks. So the stratification of Indian society reflects and explains its influence in the scenario of society, history and culture of Odisha.

References

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