

(b) Social and Economic History

SLAVE-TRADE IN ANCIENT AND EARLY MEDIEVAL INDIA

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Though some attention has been paid to slave trade in early medieval India, a systematic and methodical study of it is still a desideratum. The present paper embodies an attempt in this direction.

Although references to slavery are found in the *Rgveda*¹, the earliest references to slave trade occur in the *Jatakas*.² The period between C. 4th century B.C. and C. 2nd century A.D. is known for its brisk trade from a number of sources both, indigenous and foreign. Strabo³ (2nd c. B.C.) says that the king was waited upon by women purchased from their parents. He also says that by 150 B.C., slave trading became a profitable vocation in the East. That an active sea-borne trade was established with India by Egyptian and Greek merchants testified by the accounts of Eudoxos⁴ (the end of C. 2nd B.C.), Periplus⁵ (C. 1st A.D.) and Athenaus⁶ (C. 1st A.D.). Yet a direct reference to slave-trade made by the author (C. 1st A.D.) of the *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*. He mentions that beautiful girls for royal harems, as also slaves, were imported to Barygaza. He also mentions the export of women slaves from India to Socotra.⁷ Thus at least in the time of the author (C. 1st A.D.), one of the important articles of the sea borne trade was human cargo.⁸

In the *Justinian law Digest* (C. 6th A.D.) Indian eunuchs have been mentioned as one of the trade commodities subjected to duty at Alexandria.⁹ Some black male slaves were also imported to India in the 5th and C. 6th A.D. from Borneo and other islands of South-East Asia.¹⁰ The decline of the Roman Empire and the Persian rivalry with the Byzantine Empire rendered the volume of Indian trade, including slave trade, apparently less in the Gupta times than in the first century A.D.,¹¹ when Pliny had complained of the heavy drainage of Roman money for Indian merchandise of luxury.¹² Slave-trade with the western world appears to have suffered decline in its

volume in this period (C. 3rd A.D.—C. 8th A.D.) which lasted till its revival with the contacts of the Arab and Turks.

The statement of the Chinese writer Janyun-Hua (C. 8th A.D.) that human beings are not sold in five Indies and that there are no female slaves¹⁸ does not appear to be correct because there are many pieces of evidence to show that the slave trade existed in early medieval India. In spite of this fact, on the whole slavery was on the decline.¹⁴ The classification of slaves as mentioned in Narada¹⁵ has been generally accepted by the commentators¹⁶ of the early medieval period. Purchased-slave (krita-dasa) was one of the varieties of the fifteen categories of slaves which find mention not only in Hindu¹⁷ but in Jain works¹⁸ also.

Some inscriptions also refer to slave trade. Among the literary works throwing light on slave trade mention may be made of the following: the *Nisithac-urni* (C. 7th A.D.), the *Samaraiccakaha* (C. first half of the 8th A.D.), the *Kuvalayamalakaha* (779 A.D.), the *Ganitasarasangraha* (850 A.D.), the *Upamitibhava prapancakatha* (905 A.D.), the *Kathakosa* (C. 10th A.D.); the *Kathasaritsagara* (C. 11th A.D.) the *Jnatridharmakatha* (C. 11th A.D.), the *Uttaraddhyayanatika* (G. 11th A.D.), the *Rajatarangini* (C. 12th A.D.), the *Lilavati* (1150 A.D.), *Lekhapaddhati* (V S. 1288) and the *Prabandhacintamani* (C. 13th A.D.). The Muslim and the Arab accounts, such as the *Futuhu-L Buldan* (892-93 A.D.), the *Tarikhu-S-Subuktigin* (1011-1059 A.D.), the *Tarikh-Yamini* (1020-50 A.D.), the *Jami U-L Hikayata* (1211 A.D.), and *Tarikh-i-Firoz Shahi* (C. 13th A.D.), also give information about the problem in question. Though not many, some Indian inscriptions of the early medieval period found in the 3rd, 5th and 8th volumes of the *Epigraphia Carnatica* contain materials relating to slave trade. A few other inscriptions also throw light on the internal slave trade of this period.

With the contacts of the Arabs and the Turks the slave trade, along with trade in general, witnessed a vigorous increase. With the rise of the feudal complex in Indian society,¹⁹ trade and traffic (illegal trade) in slaves got an added impetus from the prevailing internal conditions too. The period also witnessed frequent wars and raids which were the most important sources of slavery from the

earliest times.²⁰ The wars waged by the Arab and Turk invaders led to the capture of numerous prisoners who were often reduced to slavery.²¹ This brought about a considerable increase in slave traffic not only in India and other Muslim lands but Christian Europe as well in the early medieval period.²² We find the testimony of Al'Utbi that after Mahmud's victory (1013 A.D.) over Nidar Bhim slaves were so plentiful that they became very cheap in the same region.

The two documents of the *Lekhanaddhati*²³ state that the girls captured in raids on other kingdoms by indigenous feudal chiefs and soldiers were also sold as slaves. According to Kalhana, king Vajraditya, who ruled from 762 A.D., is said to have sold many men to the *Mlechchhas*²⁴ who seem to have been the Arabs of Sindh.

Sometimes robbers sold their captives as slaves. The forest tribes are often described as indulging in such activities.²⁵ *Tha Upamitibhava-praponcakatha* (905 A.D.) refers to robbers feeding a man so that he might be sold for a handsome price.²⁶ The *Kathakosa* relates how Mitrananda fell into the hands of robbers who sold him to some merchants who took him to Persia.²⁷ It would appear from this that there was a regular export of slaves to Persia. The *Kathasaritsagara*²⁸ also contains a similar story.

The luxurious life of the ruling aristocracy is attested to by the testimonies of art²⁹ and literature.³⁰ Temple building, enriched with erotic scenes in this period (11th & 12th centuries), was mainly commissioned by the kings and the feudal chiefs³¹, in which the reflection of their outlook and taste got crystallized.³² The secular literature of the period also reflects a luxurious court culture.³³ This must have resulted in the increased volume of slave trade and traffic. For the purpose of comparison, it may be noted here that the slaves served a demand of luxury for the rich and the prosperous princes, ecclesiastical institutions and dignitaries and feudal chieftains even in medieval Europe.³⁴

The slave as a commodity of trade can be divided into two main categories on the basis of their sex and functions. Biologically, they belonged to the male or the female or the third category of eunuchs.³⁵ We find several references to trade in the first category of the slaves

in indigenous literature. The *Kuvalayamala*,³⁶ the *Kathakosa*,³⁷ the *Katha-saritsagara*³⁸ and some Muslim accounts³⁹ mention trade in male slaves, while the *Ganitasarasangraba*,⁴⁰ the *Upamitibhavaprapancakatha*,⁴¹ the *Lilavati*,⁴² the *Lekhapaddhati*⁴³ and some Muslim accounts mention trade in female slaves. The *Upamitibhavaprapancakatha*⁴⁴ states that eunuchs were sold for lucrative prices. The import of the eunuchs for royal harems is known from Muslim accounts.⁴⁵

Though slaves could be technically asked to do any kind of work⁴⁶, in earlier times the majority of them were mainly connected either with productive works or with domestic services in the early medieval period. We find the greater evidence of the sale and purchase of slaves, especially female slaves, meant for domestic services. Thus the slaves were generally purchased for domestic use in this period, but in emergency they were also used for economic purposes, such as cultivation etc. In the documents of the *Lekhapaddhati*⁴⁷ (V.S. 1288), we find that the duties of the purchased slave girls included outside works, such as cultivation, field works, thrashing, bringing grass, etc. along with other domestic works.

Domestic slaves can again be subdivisible into two types, those for household purposes and those for luxury purposes. The duties of the purchased slave girls as enumerated in the forms of documents contained in the *Lekhapaddhati*⁴⁸ include the following : cutting of (vegetables), pulverizing (spices), smearing the floor (with cow dung), sweeping, bringing water and fuel, throwing away human excreta of her master's family, milking the cow, buffalo, goat, churning curd, bringing grass for fodder, weeding and cutting grass, and other household works (*Grhakarma*). Earlier rules as laid down in the *Arthasastra*⁴⁹ show that causing a slave girl to remove dead bodies, urine, the remains of food, hurting or abusing her, or asking her to attend on the master while he was bathing naked, involved the forfeiture of the price paid for her.⁵⁰

The use of slave girls as concubines had been prevalent since very early times.⁵¹ In our period this practice appears to have become quite common. Medhatithi⁵² made provision for the sustenance of slave girls who were kept for pleasure. The high prices for the

girl of younger age in the *Genitasarasangraha*⁵³ indicate that they were slave girls bought for luxury purposes. From the evidence of the *Lekhapaddhati*⁵⁴ we can infer that apart from household purposes slave girls could also be used for pleasure.⁵⁵ In the first two documents, we find references to slave girls of white complexion, sixteen years old and with pleasing and auspicious limbs.⁵⁶ In another document the slave girl is described as having black eyes, a sharp nose, long hair, with all her limbs in proper form. Obviously slave girls were purchased for sexual pleasure also.⁵⁷

We find references to slave eunuchs also, who were kept in the harem service, especially by Muslim rulers. They were usually bought in childhood and castrated.⁵⁸ It appears that eunuchs and castrated boys were used as private attendants upon royal women. Minstrels were also made available for company.⁵⁹ Handsome lads were sold in the market of Delhi during the time of Alau-ddin Khalji (1246-1316). It is likely that they were used as catamites. We do not find any clear reference to purchase and sale of the boys for sexual pleasure.⁶⁰

Inter-regional slave trade continued in our period. This is obvious from literary and archaeological evidence. There is mention of male slaves being taken to *Mahilarajya*, the kingdom of women (probably Kerala in South India⁶¹), where they were exchanged for gold.⁶² This account seems to be exaggerated. However, it may be inferred that male slaves were exported from North to South India for attractive prices.

The *Lekhapaddhati*⁶³ throws light on the capture of a girl from Maharastra and her sale in Gujarat or Rajasthan. Dr. Muhammad Ashraf is of the opinion that the slave eunuchs were imported from Bengal and sometimes also from the farthest Malaya island in the thirteenth century.⁶⁴ This tradition appears to be old. Sometimes the slaves were imported from among the hill tribes who were especially valued because of their strong physique and their power of endurance.⁶⁵

The slave as a commodity of trade is also referred to in certain Indian inscriptions. A record⁶⁶ dated in Kali year 4431, falling in the reign of the Hoyasala king Viraballala (1173 A.D.), mentions the tax

of 2 Kasu for one slave. Some (at least four) other inscriptions⁶⁷ of South India also specify slaves as articles on which toll was charged.

In spite of increase in the volume of slave trade, no reference to regular slave market is found in this period. In one of the documents of the *Lekhapaddhati*⁶⁸ we find references to slave girls offered for sale at *Catusapatha* (crossing of four roads). L. Gopal⁶⁹ is of the opinion that the *Catusapatha* served as a regular place for the sale of slaves. The choice of the place was with a view to making the sale known to every body in the city. Certain South Indian inscriptions⁷⁰ reveal that slaves were sold in the market along with other articles. Barni⁷¹ mentions the regular sale of male and female slaves in the market of Delhi during the time of Alau-ddin Khalji (1296 A.D.-1316 A.D.). However, the *Catusapatha* may have ordinarily served as the regular place for the sale of slaves from the earliest⁷² time to this period.⁷³

In spite of what has been written on slave trade by scholars, the topic of valuation of them on the basis of their different uses has hardly engaged their attention. More often than not luxury purpose had put the highest premium on the price of a beautiful female slave. Factors like age, sex and other personal qualities of the person offered for sale could also affect the price level. The *Ganitasarasa-ngraha*,⁷⁴ which throws light on the condition of the region of south India mentions that a ten years old girl fetched 33.33 gold coins while a sixteen years old woman could be bought for 20.83 gold coins. A ten year old girl could be used for a longer duration for sexual enjoyment than a sixteen year old woman. A woman of white complexion, sixteen years old, with pleasing and auspicious limbs and for multipurpose use, had higher price, i.e., 504 *Visalpri-drammas*.⁷⁵ The price of a slave woman mentioned in the second document of the *Lekhapaddhati*⁷⁶ is 60 drammas. In the above documents of the *Lekhapaddhati*,⁷⁷ we find two different prices, i.e., 504 *Visalapriya-drammas* and 60 *drammas*, for the woman of the same complexion and age, who were meant for the same purposes. Such a difference between the prices of the former and the latter is understandable. It seems that the price mentioned in respect of

the former is in silver coins, whereas that of the latter in golden coins (probably) but not in gold coins.

The price of a sixteen year old woman, in the same region, was less in the time of Mahaviracharya, the author of the *Ganitasarasangraha*⁷⁸ (850 A.D.), than in the time of Bhaskaracharya, the author of the *Lilavati*.⁷⁹ (1150 A.D.). The scarcity of coins in circulation must have resulted in the increased purchasing value of money. Apart from this, the slaves, too, appear to be less in demand in the 9th than in the 12th century. In the later times the demand for female slaves may have increased on account of the growing luxury of the ruling aristocracy. The *Lilavati*,⁸⁰ dealing mainly with Karnataka, informs us that the price of a sixteen year old woman was 32 gold *Niskas* or $32 \times 16 = 512$ silver drammās, while the *Lekhapaddhati*,⁸¹ which deals with the region of Gujarat and Rajasthan, mentions 504 *Visalpriya drammās*, or 60 *drammās* ($60 \times 8 = 480$) drammās as the price of a woman of the same age. It seems that prices for women in two different regions did not vary much. In the Muslim society also beautiful female slaves fetched higher prices, i.e., 20 to 40 *tankas* than did the ordinary female slaves who were sold for 5 to 12 *tankas*.⁸²

Al'utbi⁸³ states that in the first quarter of the 10th century Mahmud took away prisoners of war in thousands to Ghazna and sold them for 2 to 10 *dirhams*. It appears from this that prices for slaves varied according to their qualities and uses.⁸⁴

The legal procedure for the sale of slaves has been mentioned in some forms of documents in the *Lekhapaddhati*.⁸⁵ They provide for the specification of the day, *tithi* and year when the sale of a slave was effected. The names of the buyers, the sellers and the persons who were offered for sale with identifying marks, were also given. The witnesses and the writer of the sale deed are also mentioned in one of the documents. The *Panchamukhanagara* was also, sometimes, duly informed. The duties of the slave girls in the buyer's house were set forth in detail.⁸⁶ In return, the purchaser was to provide her food, clothes, etc; according to his capacity and the prevailing customs. The punishment which was to be meted out to the slave for the violation of duties was also proclaimed in public. It was laid down that if she committed theft or misbehaved in any other

manner in her master's house, or she was interrupted in her duty by virtue of the wealth of her father, brother or husband, while she would be working in her owner's house, or committed any dereliction of duty or disobeyed her master, the latter was at liberty to tie, molest or beat her cruelly. If, on being tortured, she ever committed suicide, the master would not incur any guilt or sin. In the *Likhanavali*⁸⁷ (14th century), we find some model of traditional documents for the sale of male and female slaves. They mention the day, date, and year of the sale and also the village, pargana, district and the state where the sale was made. They also give the word '*amuka*' to indicate the names of the persons concerned with the sale deeds of slaves, including witnesses and writers. A slave was sold for the price demanded by the sellers or that fixed by the *pancha* (mediator). The duties⁸⁸ of the slaves are also defined in the documents. These documents do not mention any punishment for dereliction of duty on the part of slaves. It seems that the condition of the slaves in the region of Mithila in the 14th century was somewhat better than in Gujarat, Rajasthan and the adjoining regions.

Slave trade with outside countries continued throughout the early medieval period. That slaves were exported to Arabia, Irak and Persia is evident from indigenous literature and Muslim accounts. The *Upamitibhavaprapancakatha*⁸⁹ (905 A D) which throws light on the conditions of Rajasthan and the adjoining regions, mentions that female slaves and eunuchs were sent to the adjoining countries (probably foreign countries also) for lucrative prices. From the stories of the *Kathakosa*⁹⁰ and the *Kathasaritsagara*⁹¹ also we come to know that the Indian slaves were sometimes, taken to Persia and Arabia. The *Lekhapaddhati* also refers to female slaves being shipped overseas and sold or exchanged for other commodities. Muslim historian Mir Ma 'sum says that the Khalif' Abdul Malik (8th century), the sultan of Iran, Irak and Makran, sent some people to buy female slaves and other things of Hindustan.⁹²

Slaves were not only exported to foreign countries but also imported from Turkistan, Khurasan and China by the Turk rulers of Hindustan. References to import of female slaves to India occur in some Jain works,⁹³ which informs us that female slaves described as Bakusira (from Bakusadesa), Isanika (from the east, probably China),

Dhorukini (Tharukini, probably from Arab), Murundi and Parsi (Persian) were present in the court of a legendary Indian prince, clan in the garments of their own countries. Sometimes, eunuchs were also imported from Malaya Islands.⁹⁴

Now let us see the attitude of Dharmasastrakaras towards slave trade. The attitude of early Dharmasastrakaras that the first two varnas (brahamana and Kshatriya) should not trade in human beings, even in the time of distress, continued throughout the early medieval period. It was also laid down in these *Smrtis* that a brahamana or kshatriya who indulge in slave trading automatically became a *vasiya* in seven days. However, we find deviation in actual practice, and kings and feudal lords indulged in slave trading in the early medieval period.

Thus in spite of the prescriptions of the Sastras to the contrary, trade and traffic in slaves were gradually increasing as a lucrative profession during the 10th-12th centuries. Sastric injunctions were honoured more in breach than in observance. These slaves were mainly used for domestic and luxury purposes.

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86. *Supra*.
87. pp. 42-44,
88. *Supra*.
89. Sharma, D., *op. cit.*, p. 74.
90. p. 157.
91. VII, 3. 3-51.
92. Elloit & Dowson, Vol. I, p. 118 fn. 2. Biladuri, however, gives a different account that the king of Isle of Rubies (Ceylon) sent as present to Hajjaj (705 A D.), 'the governor of Irak and Makran, certain Muhammadan girls. who had been born in his country, the orphan daughters of the merchants who died there, but the ship in which the girls were embarked was attacked and taken away some barks (pirates) belonging to Meds of Delhi'. *Ibid.* Vol. I, p. 118.
93. *Nisitha Sutra*, IX, 28; *Uttaradhyayantika*, VI, p. 39; *Jnatridharmakatha* I, p. 21, vide; Jain, H.L. *Jain Agama Sahitya Men Bhartiya Samaja*, pp. 161, 256.
94. *Ibid.*