

'Chains of Servitude: Bondage and Slavery in India'

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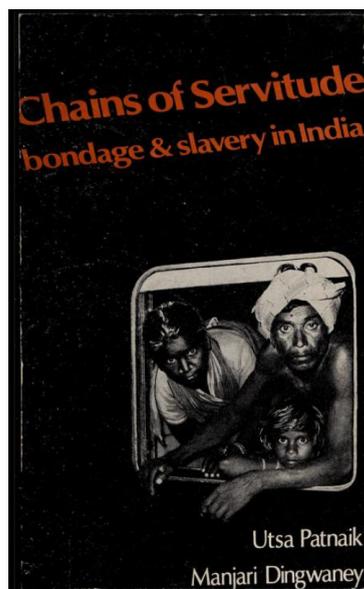
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The genesis of slavery in India can be traced to at least late Vedic times with the emergence of the caste system in the Aryan's conquest. Unlike in the West, servitude in India did not exist in one particular form of bond labour ensured by extra-economic coercion, but the evolution and survival of the caste system and adaptations of the social norms complicated this issue further, where some castes remained in permanent subordination of other castes, hence providing different dimensions to forms of slavery in India. This volume, edited by Utsa Patnaik and Manjari Dingwaney, puts up nine essays to draw together different aspects of bondage along with the survival and evolution of these exploitative employer-labourer relations in the capitalist period. The essays are differentiated on the lines of the historical genesis of slavery, survival of past modes of production in contemporary readings, and depth analysis of the limit of law in the process of emancipation. The historical genesis is traced from the Vedas, Buddhist literature and the available religious literature hinting towards the presence of diverse forms of servitude under different reigns. Contemporary readings are based

on surveys and the case studies providing vivid representations of the conditions of bonded labour which continued even in the post-independence period. The third section focuses on limiting the laws introduced to abolish slavery but remains ineffective in its implication.

The introduction by Utsa Patnaik has outlined the timeline of the modern wage class from its historical origin to its continuation in the post-independence period. Appropriation of surplus by the Mughal Empire through the channelised process is regarded as the Indian version of feudalism which survived the precapitalist employer labourer relations (p. 3). However, the extent of these relations differed in regions and periods but existed throughout medieval India, framing the basis for hereditary servitude. Her discussion on the capitalist development of agriculture in the post-independence period outlines the inflationary pressure and redistribution of income, increasing profit/wage ratio, and significant difference in interest rate to landlord-turned-capitalists (approx. 8-9 per cent) as compared to poor peasants (approx. 18-44 per cent, informal loan).

The deteriorating effect of the Green Revolution on agricultural labourers is highlighted as benefits were not percolated down to rural power. The period witnessed a fall in real wages of agricultural labour, and they could not fetch the minimum amount required for reproducing labour-power. Bondage was not a static phenomenon as indebtedness was an in-built characteristic of contract by the landlords, enslaving the generations of labour-power.

In the essay on servile labour in ancient India, Uma Chakravarti describes servitude types between chattel slavery and free citizens. Her description of the word 'dasa' from the diverse ancient literature is a good source to interpret slavery in their respective (or masters') reigns. Among the various categories of dasas mentioned, it was propounded that the ones captured in the war have been significant in the origin of the institution of slavery. The forms of servitude, which involves the slaves captured in war or the enslaved people born in masters' houses, or those reduced to slaves due to their caste, are some of the dominant forms of slavery that existed in the ancient time instead of bondage labour. A historical timeline of the origins of the slaves and the words associated with them are provided with the analysis of their evolution over different periods. The above statement can be supported by analysing the term 'visti' (forced labour) provided in the essay (p. 54). Her investigation of the women in bondage, their servile conditions, and their reference in terms to the wealth of the master are detailed and mentioned. Exploitation suffered by the bondswomen was unique as they were not only faced with physical violence but also vulnerable to sexual abuse. Though there seems to be a lack of consistency in the essay, the detailed analysis of the above is quite interesting. Generalisations made by the author, such as bondage became the dominant form of slavery in the Mauryan period, need further investigation because it was extracted from Brahmin writings, which are acceptable for a particular area but not suitable for generalisation at the country level.

Salim Kidwai, in his essay 'Sultans, Eunuchs, and Domesticity', emphasised more on chattel slavery than bonded labour. In medieval India, domestic slavery turns out

to be the dominant form. Although domestic slavery was present in the ancient era, it remained under-reported. In this essay, many new dimensions have been touched upon such as Muslim religious texts on slavery, the dependence of Sultans on slaves, bonded labour and its role in production (which is not so significant), tremendous growth in the incidence of domestic slavery, etc., which helped shape the notion of slavery and bondage in this period. Though the Muslim religious text calls for the emancipation of slaves, the opposite has been found in reality, as Caliph raised an army of 70,000 slaves as their exclusive basis of strength. The poor economic conditions and the repeatedly occurring famines have presented slavery as an alternative to ensure their survival. Hence, slavery and bondage become a passport for their entry to service in the military, which is desired to have a successful career. To ensure the reserve army of slaves, voluntary and involuntary surrender was carried out across regions (p. 86). Craftsmen were enslaved and sent to work in state factories and workshops. Though the import of slaves also occurred, the local supply ensured the major volume through the above means. It is interesting to note that despite this scratched period of different reigns, primitive forms of caste-based bondage survived in this period. Although the essay is limited to his Persian sources, it provides a detailed overview of different issues.

Tanika Sarkar deals with the bondage in the colonial period. Due to the shades of the caste and economic conditions on each other, delineating slave labour categorically is not an easy task. Different reigns and periods have led to the existence of all forms of labour. It is even difficult to distinguish between slavery and bondage for most of our period. Several categories exist among the slaves, each attracting different treatments from their masters based on their caste. Higher caste slaves were restricted to the more privileged domestic labour, while those of the low caste were employed in the menial outwork work. In this essay, the author has discussed several issues such as urban chattel slavery, the framework of caste within the slaves, the hereditary nature of bonded labour, the emergence of another form of slavery (other than chattel slavery and bondage), i.e., agrestic slavery, domestic slavery, indentured labour, the religious shade of slavery and bondsman and even the system for manumission. Though it is not easy to cover all of the above areas in one essay, given the varied literature on all the topics, fitting all of the above topics in a short essay has confused the standard timeline of events. Given the heterogeneity in different regions and policies during colonial rule, generalisations made by the author are broader than their scope. It was mentioned that slaves were sold for their defaults in revenue, but no further comment was made to state that this was done based on the earlier policy, which was soon abolished. The much-needed latitudinal description of various topics was missing, such as the framework of manumission or the inhumane conditions of forced labourers in plantations.

The second section of the book contains five studies of prevailing conditions of slavery and bondage. Surveys and case studies presented in each chapter capture the

vivid description of different forms of slavery and the extent of these exploitative employer labour relationships. These studies have also presented a brief historical overview of the existence of slavery in the areas taken up for observation. All the five studies in the second section, i.e., agricultural labourers and handloom weavers in South Arcot (R. Vidyasagar), brick kiln workers in Muzaffarnagar (Sumeet Chopra), bondage in the Santal Parganas (S.P. Tiwary), migrant labour in Ludhiana and Hoshiarpur (Manjit Singh and K. Gopal Iyer), and female bondage in the Himalayan region of Jaunsar Bawar (Jayoti Gupta) points towards the evolution and survival of well-entrenched forms of debt bondage.

The case study of agricultural labourers and handloom weavers by R Vidyasagar points out that the heavy revenue extractions and pauperized peasantry are responsible for swelling up the rank of agricultural labourers. As a result of the industrial revolution in Britain, artisans, especially spinners and weavers, also added up to the rank of agricultural labour. Weavers were settled in the areas near the port to facilitate trade for European merchants and feed the industrial revolution in Britain. Merchants slowly gained control over the weavers by paying them advances. Contracts were drawn on such conditions in both the agricultural labour and weavers, facilitating their bondage to the respective moneylenders. The study of brick kiln workers in Muzaffarnagar district by Suneet Chopra shows inhumane working conditions of forced labour in brick kilns and how their wages were not even enough to ensure the minimum consumption. The Green Revolution and the capitalist approach to agriculture have mainly concentrated the profit from it at the top level. This capital approach's slow and spillover effects can be seen among poor peasants and cultivators. Although the failure of capitalism to overthrow the semi-feudal relations of the agrarian sector has been analysed, existing land relations seem to facilitate the survival of the past mode of production. The question of women in bondage is directly addressed in Jayoti Gupta's essay on the system of polyandry in a Himalayan region: because they are the common property of males within patriarchal families, women in this area have been driven to prostitution as pawns in relations of debt bondage and hence face compounded oppression as compared to their male counterparts.

All these studies center on the one main point that calls for more capitalism and redefining land relations to overthrow the exploitative employer labourer relations. Despite the introduction of various acts in colonial and post-independence times for the abolition of slavery, these were intentionally designed to remain ineffective as the colonial government did not want to disturb the revenue sources which were these landlords feeding on the profits generated by this bonded labour. These fieldworks and surveys confine the survival of past modes of production in even the capitalist mode.

The ineffectiveness of the law is emphasised by Manjari Dingwaney, who surveys the provisions of the various Acts dealing with slavery, indentured labour, and bonded labour. It was pointed out that the act's objective was tactical instead of based on principle. Though the proper treatment was given for explaining the ineffectiveness of

the acts, a detailed historical analysis behind the introduction of acts does not find any mention. The needs for industrial capital in England are not sufficient to explain why specific laws and not others were passed nor why some were effective. This important field still awaits historians to understand better the problems of analysing the making and consequences of policies.

There is no easy line of continuity among the three historical chapters and the contemporary regional studies brought together in the Patnaik-Dingwaney volume. The field surveys of small samples put the derived results under observation. In many instances, generalisations made from derived data go out of scope. The reason for selecting these particular articles other than the availability is not made clear.

The series of articles in this book describe the history admirably and the research quoted, though small scale, is often heart-rending in its description of the cruelties inflicted on untouchables and tribals, whether they are working on the land or in such associated professions as making bricks. The coverage of diverse forms of servitude and their evolution over time explained with the case studies and fieldwork makes it more interesting. This volume opens up future research on land and labour relations and research on a larger scale.