



References on Slavery and Slave Trade – Tamil Nadu

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Abstract

Slavery seems to have been a recognised institution of Indian society from earliest times. Though the different sources of ancient Indian history glean valuable information about the practice of slavery, the kinds of slaves, work done by them and treatment meted out to them, but all this material is scattered in the sources and a systematic account dealing with this institution is not given. Slavery was one of the socio economic institutions in the history of Tamil Nadu. Thus efforts taken by the government and Christian missionaries brought transformation of slavery in Tamil Nadu. This study throw fled of light on the condition of slaves and slave trade in the history of Tamil Nadu.

Introduction

In the history of mankind, the practice of enslaving the meek and weak groups by the dominant groups of fellow human beings is very common. By victory in the war, hegemonic rulings, dominance by wealth, racial and gender dominations were some reasons that laid foundations for slavery and slave trade. In Afro-Asian countries, Mesopotamia, India and China the slave trade was predominant in the past eras. Likewise the Roman and Greek empires were leading in the engagement of slavery and slave trades.

The slavery and slave trade was mainly contributing to the growth and the development of their master societies and governments through the poorly paid and most exploited system of compulsory labour. Altogether it was forced labor to satiate the masters. Human beings treated as commodities and enslaved. The Mesopotamian code of Hammurabi (C.1860 B.C.) even refers it as an established institution. A significant role was played by the Dutch, the Portuguese, the British, the Spanish and the French in the Atlantic slave trade after A.D.1600.



The form of modern world slavery existed as child labor and bonded labor system in many third world countries including India. This study gives a light on the slavery system in the history of India, particularly the South India.

Origin of Slavery in Tamil Nadu

It is observed by many historians that the Aryanisation and the introduction of caste system was the gate opener for the slavery system in Tamil Nadu. A.L.Basham mentions that the early Tamil literature gives no evidence of caste, but the growth of Aryan influence and the development of more complex and political and economic structure produced a system in some ways more rigid than that of the north.¹ During the period of the imperial Cholas, the Aryanisation reached a culmination and strongly founded the caste system in the south India.

Many European and Indian historians opened studies in the 19th century and established the non-Brahmins as Dravidians and the Brahmins as the Aryans. Notable scholars among them were Caldwell, Gustav Oppert, Sundaram Pillay and U.Ve. Swaminathier. They have also pointed out that the Aryanisation led to the influence of Brahmins over the castes and caused a social disruption.

In due course of time the Dravidians were sidelined and enslaved. The Sanskritic Aryan religion subdued the non-Brahmins and kept them as slaves for centuries. Robert Caldwell who was a Bishop in Tirunelveli (1877-1891) points out that “*the Pariars, the Pallars and the Pulairs and several other low caste tribes are slaves to the higher caste and appear always to have been in an enslaved condition.*”²

Slavery in the Medieval Period

The agrarian sector, particularly in the Kaveri delta areas, was the main portion of slavery development during the Chola period. The serfdom of the agriculture industry paved the way for this slavery system. K.A.Nilakanta Sastri mentioned it as,

“That a considerable element in the population, especially among agricultural labourers, lived in a condition not far from slavery is clear from the literature of the age. There are several inscriptional which show that the most form of private property, property



*in human beings, signalized by their being bought and sold by others irrespective of their own wishes, was not unknown. Free men and women fell into slavery for various reasons, and would appear that there were several fads among slaves. Most of the sales recorder in the inscriptions are sales of persons to temples.*³

The British anthropologist namely Kathleen Gough who did an extensive research on the Kaveri delta points out that,

*“varying grades of communal serfdom and social slavery existed in Tamil Nadu, and particularly in the Kaveri delta and that these forms of enslavement were distinguishable both from the private slavery of the classical Western Europe and the serfdom of feudal Europe in the Middle Ages and also from the “general slavery of the Orient”, which was a characteristic feature of the Asiatic mode of Production.*⁴

Existence of slavery during this period could be understood from the episode of the Sundaramurthi Nayanar (Thaduthaatkonda Puranam). The lord Siva in the disguise of an aged Brahmin stopped the marriage of Sundaramurthi and took him away as a slave.

Devadasi System and Slavery

The renowned magnificent temples in Tanjore, Kanchipuram and Madurai had many streets surrounding area to keep a number of Devadasis to serve as musicians and dancers in the festivals and temple services. The kings were patronizing this institution of forced dedication of thousands of women and their children in the name of service to Gods and later stage they were compelled for prostitution and became a slave caste. This kind of women slavery started in 9th and 10th centuries during the growth of Chola, Pallava and Pandya dynasties – to keep the harlots in numbers. An incident of a Vellalan (farmer) of Tiruppanapuram sold himself and his daughters to the temple treasury for 110 Kasu has been recorded during the reign of Kulottunga III (1178-1217). In his time a severe famine ravaged the Tamil country. An inscription of Tiruvalangadu of the same time notes that men and women were sold as slaves to the matha for the cultivation of the lands owned by it. The slaves of mathas were known as ‘matha adimaigal’ are the slaves of the monasteries. They were the two important medieval institutions which played a very prominent role in the



religious and cultural life of the people. The central role played by the Hindu temple complex in the life of the people and their rulers in Tamil Nadu has been great and continuous.

As land holder, employer, and consumer of goods and services, as bank, school and museum, as hospital and theatre, in short as amulets which gathered round itself all that was best in the arts of civilised existence and regulated them with humaneness born of the spirit of Dharma, the medieval Indian temple has few parallels in the annals of mankind. While the temple stood as an aesthetic expression of the religious experience of the people, the maths stood for the propagation of religious education and metaphysical ideas.

A certain individual by name Vayiradaryar had a number of slaves, some belonging to him and some brought by his wives as part of their dowries. When demand came, with the consent of his wives, he sold some of these slaves to the local temple as matha adimaigal.⁵

Slave Trade on the Coromandel Coast

Travelers of the medieval period like Abdur Razak, Duarte Barbosa, Nocolo dei Conti and the Jesuit missionaries of Madura mission give a lot of references of slave trade during the Vijayanagar period. The Portuguese and the Dutch followed slavery custom of the land and earned good fortunes out of it. Madras offered peculiar and special facilities for slave trade. There was less customs duty for slave trade than the European centers. Domestic slavery was officially recognized in Madras. Slaves had to be licensed and purchased and the sale had to be registered in the choultry specially meant for that. The Dutch conducted the slave trade mainly in Pulicat and they engaged brokers for slave catching. Barbosa, a Portuguese sea captain mentions that many families sold their children as slaves for four or five Panam in exchange of rice and coconuts. His narration goes like this,

*“the Coromandel is the best supplied of all lands in that part of India saving Cambaya, yet in some years it so happens that no rain falls and then there is such a dearth among them that many die of hunger and for this reason they sell their children for four or five Panams each. At such seasons the Malabares bring them great stores of rich and coconuts and take away shiploads of slaves”.*⁶



In 1630 there was cruel famine in South India and the slaves were traded to the other parts of India and the East Indies.⁷ Again in 1646 a dreadful famine appeared. The cargo of Portuguese vessel that arrived at Acheen from Nagapattinam in October 1646 is described as below:

“There came upon this small vessel upward of 400 slaves so hunger starved that they were scarce able to crawl when they brought them ashore and are now sold for 5 to 6 tale per head, whereas at other times they yield 10 and 12 tale. They report a very strange famine to have been for 13 months past, and yet death continue in those parts, insomuch as for slaves to any man that will but feed them, all kinds of provisions, especially grain, being at expensive rates”.

Nocholas Manucci, the Venetian traveler from Italy gives an account of an episode of an Italian priest cunningly selling the wife of an Indian Christian and his four children as slaves in Tranquebar for 30 Pagodas and shipped them to Manila. In the days of Chokkanatha Nayak (1659-1682) the Madura country suffered untold misery for three or four years. During the period war and famine killed the people. The Dutch exploited the situation. The Jesuit missionaries write as,

‘But shame, eternal shame to the Dutch, who cruelly speculated on the misery of the Indians. They enticed them by the boat of abundant food; then when their number became pretty large and their ships and transported them to other countries to be sold as slaves. Yes, shame to the barbarians’.

Baldaeus, the Dutch priest who visited Tanjore during the bad time of famine narrates as follows;

‘At the time of our first arrival (1660) we find the affairs of Negapatnam in no small Confusion occasioned such a famine, that the poor country wretches being forced to fly to the city for want of rice and other eatables, you saw the streets covered with emaciated and half starved persons. Who offered themselves to slavery for a small persons, who offered themselves to slavery for a small quantity of bread and you might have bought as many as you pleased at the rate of 10 shillings a head; about 5000 of them were there bought and carried to Jaffnapatnam as many to Columbo besides several thousand that were transported to Batavia’.



Nicolo Dei Conti, an Italian traveler records the condition of Vijayanagar Empire in its heydays as '*they have a vast member of slaves, the debtor who is insolvent is everywhere adjusted to be property of the creditor*'.⁸ So the institution of slavery was the result of wars, famines, their natural cohabitation and social stratification etc.

Slavery and Bonded Labour

When the concept of plantations started in the British colonies of Ceylon, Malaysia, Singapore and Burma there were large migrations of Tamil labourers to these countries. They were all converted as bonded labourers in the tea estates and rubber plantations. In the middle of 18th century this slavery system took a large number of low caste Tamils like Pallans, Paraiahs and Padyachis and Gouwndas to these countries by the agents of the colonial regime.⁹ A. Sivasubramanian points out from the Jesuit diaries that the Dutch and the Portuguese transported a huge number of slaves to their colonies. Thousands of indentured labourers from Tamil Nadu were sent to work in the rubber plantations in Malayasia during the British Raj.¹⁰ Even inside India many Tamils were moved to the plantations in Coorg, Wynad, Anamalais, Mysore and Nilgiris. They were used for road constructions and later in the railways. The census report of 1931 says that there were 74,732 labourers enumerated in Malabar, Nilgris, Coimbatore and Salem districts who were not born there. Even Tamil bonded labourers were moved to distant countries like Mauritius, British Guiana, Trinidad, Jamaica, Fiji, Natal, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, East Africa, Uganda, Nyasaland, Cayne and other places.

According to a report of walk Free Foundation in 2016, there are 18.3 million people in modern India living as slaves in the form of bonded labour, child labour, forced marriage and forced begging.

Conclusion

The whole of the Tamil country came under the effective control of the East Indian company. Hence slavery particularly the praedial type continued to exist. The company and later the Collectors of the Raj were safe guarding the slavery system to promote their economic interests. The slaves, bonded labourers and the estate workers were helping to fill the coffers of the British government. Even the Collectors were acting in favour of slave



masters. The British government officers were against the missionaries and Christian evangelists because they feared about the spread of the freedom thought. But the vehement movements in the British parliament led to the enactment of many slavery abolition acts in England as well as in India. This movement started in 1830 and reached to the enactment of the famous Act of 1833. The Act V of 1843 made a fourfold attack on the institution of slavery in India. A final blow on slavery system in India was made only in 1861 when the Indian Penal Code was passed.

¹ Basham,A.L., *The Wonder that was India*,Rupa&Co,Delhi,1975,p.153.

² Robert Caldwell, *A Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South Indian Family of Language*, Asian Educational Services, Madras,1998,p.496.

³ Nilakanta Sastri,K.A.,*The Colas*,Madras University Historical Series,Madras,1975,p.555.

⁴ Kathleen Gough,*Modes of Production in Southern India*, Economic and Political Weekly,Vol.XV, 1980, p.345.

⁵ Mahalingam,T.V.,*Administration and Social Life under Vijayanagar*, University of Madras, 1975,p.227.

⁶ Natarajan,B., *Slave Trade in Madras*, The Madras Tercentenary Commemoration Volume,Oxford University Press,Madras,1939,p.248.

⁷ Mahalingam,T.V.,*Economic Life in the Vijayanagar Empire*, University of Madras, Madras, 1975,p.21.

⁸ Robert Sewell, *A Forgotten Empire (Vijayanagar)*,Mastermind Publications,Madras,2012,p.87.

⁹ Manikam,S.,*Slavery in the Tamil Country – A Historical Over-View*, The Christian Literature Society, Madras,1993,p.72.

¹⁰ Sivasubramanian,A.,*Tamilzhagathil Adimai Murai- A Monograph on Slavery in Tamil Nadu*,Kalasuvadu Pathipagam, Chennai,2010,p.83.