

Slavery in Ancient India

(Vedic Times to Gupta Period)

Indian Society Through Ages – Assignment 3

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The term that is most often used to refer to a slave in ancient Indian texts is *dasa*. This term may have been derived from the word “*das*” which means to finish or terminate something. It was associated with slaves because their work was to finish various jobs¹. During the Rig Vedic Period, the word *dasa* did not have the same connotation. Here, it meant people belonging to another group, possibly distinguished from the Aryas on the basis of their phenotypic features. However, the term was used to denote a slave by the Later Vedic Age². According to some scholars the same term was used for two different groups of people since there is a possibility that the enemies, after being defeated and captured, were kept as slaves. Some of them could have also been acquired by winning gambles against the *Dasas*, which meant that debt-based slavery was prevalent. *Dasas* were not kin of their masters but often, women slave captured during wars were expected to deliver children who would make up for the lives lost during the war³. Another group of slaves was also present which could have included those who had migrated to the region of Indus Valley along with their masters⁴.

Slaves were considered to be some form of objects and there were instances where they were listed as gift items⁵. Their work was primarily associated with domestic chores but they could also be used as helpers for agriculture. Since they were normally equated with other objects that were used communally, they could have also been viewed as property of the whole tribe⁶. There are some contradictions regarding the overall status of slaves during this time. Slaves are believed to have held a lower position than even the *Shudras*. However, some children of female slaves could rise up to a higher status. One of the composers of a hymn from Book 10 of the Rig Veda is said to be the son a slave woman. However, these cases may just be exceptions⁷. Even after giving birth to the master’s son, female slaves could not be taken as wives. They could continue living as concubines though⁸.

Association of slaves with agricultural work continued even during the period of Second Urbanisation (c. 600-300 BCE). Those who worked on fields were known as *dasa-karmakaras*. While *dasa* refers to slaves, *karmakara* refers to those who were hired to do work. Since, this term was used as one, it is not known if the slaves were more important workers for agriculture than the hired

¹ Chanana, Dev R. "2. Slavery in Ancient India: As Depicted in Pāli and Sanskrit Texts." Ed. Aloka Prasher-Sen. *Subordinate and Marginal Groups in India*. N.p.: Oxford UP, n.d. 96-97. Print.

² Singh, Upinder. "5. Cultural Transitions: Images from the Texts and Archaeology, C. 2000-600 BCE." *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India*. N.p.: Pearson Education, 2009. 204. Print.

³ Jha, Vivekanand. "Social Stratification in Ancient India: Some Reflections." *Social Scientist*19.3/4 (1991): 23. *JSTOR*. Web. 12 Sept. 2013. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3517554>>.

⁴ Chanana, Dev R. "2. Slavery in Ancient India: As Depicted in Pāli and Sanskrit Texts." Ed. Aloka Prasher-Sen. *Subordinate and Marginal Groups in India*. N.p.: Oxford UP, n.d. 108. Print.

⁵ Singh, Upinder. "5. Cultural Transitions: Images from the Texts and Archaeology, C. 2000-600 BCE." *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India*. N.p.: Pearson Education, 2009. 204. Print.

⁶ Jha, Vivekanand. "Social Stratification in Ancient India: Some Reflections." *Social Scientist*19.3/4 (1991): 23. *JSTOR*. Web. 12 Sept. 2013. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3517554>>.

⁷ Singh, Upinder. "5. Cultural Transitions: Images from the Texts and Archaeology, C. 2000-600 BCE." *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India*. N.p.: Pearson Education, 2009. 204. Print.

⁸ Chanana, Dev R. "2. Slavery in Ancient India: As Depicted in Pāli and Sanskrit Texts." Ed. Aloka Prasher-Sen. *Subordinate and Marginal Groups in India*. N.p.: Oxford UP, n.d. 108-09. Print.

workers. Most of their work was still related to the household⁹. The Digha Nikaya mentions existence of male and female slaves, both of whom were not masters of themselves and were completely dependent on their owners¹⁰. Multiple terms were used when describing slaves of both the sexes. A male slave could also be known as dasavya, dasabya, dasatta, dasattha or dasabhoga. Besides dasi, a female slave was called dasiya or dasika. When referring to a group of slaves, terms such dasa-gana (a group of male slaves) and dasi-gana (a group of female slaves) were used¹¹. A lot of the slaves were from the Shudra community but slaves from other varnas including Brahmana and Kshtriya were present. Even people holding posts such as those of village headmen or ministers could be enslaved but this was rare¹².

The Vinaya Pitaka mentions three types of slaves that existed during this period – slaves brought from another country (kara-mara-anito), children of women slaves (antojatakko) and slaves who were purchased (dhankito)¹³. However, other categories of slaves – gifted slaves¹⁴ and self-accepted slaves (samam dasavayam upagato) – might have also been present. The Buddhist monks were not allowed to do manual labour but since they were expected to settle down as a group for certain period of time each year, the need for labour arose for construction and maintenance of the monasteries where they lived. Such labourers were known as aramikas and were most likely slaves rather than free men. There were also instances where after becoming a monk, the master would bring along his slaves because the master had rights over the slaves even after renunciation of world¹⁵. Another group of workers called kappiya-karaka was present in the monasteries, which was responsible for arrangement of various things. The doubt over acceptance of aramikas was not present when kappiya-karakas were first employed but the status of both the groups was similar¹⁶.

The Arthashastra from the period of the Mauryan Empire had more complexities in the concept of slavery. Slavery had become a well-established and accepted institution which by this time had approximately eight or nine categories. The three types of slaves from the previous period continued to be present. In addition, there were prisoners of war (dhvajahrita), slaves who were inherited (dayagat), slaves received as presents (labadha), those who sold themselves as slaves (atmavikraya), those who were mortgaged (ahitaka) and criminals whose punishment for their offence was to serve

⁹ Thapar, Romila. "5. States and Cities of the Indo-Gangetic Plain: C.600-300 BC." *Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300*. N.p.: University of California, 2004. 149. *Google Books*. Web. 12 Sept. 2013.

<<http://books.google.co.in/books?id=-5irrXXOapQC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>>.

¹⁰ Singh, Upinder. "6. Cities, Kings, and Renunciants: North India, C. 324-187 BCE." *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India*. N.p.: Pearson Education, 2009. 294. Print

¹¹ Chanana, Dev R. "2. Slavery in Ancient India: As Depicted in Pāli and Sanskrit Texts." Ed. Aloka Prasher-Sen. *Subordinate and Marginal Groups in India*. N.p.: Oxford UP, n.d. 96-97. Print.

¹² Sharma, R. S. "IV. Servility and Disabilities (c. 600 - C. 300 B.C.)." *Śūdras in Ancient India*. 3rd ed. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1990. 104. *Google Books*. Web. 17 Sept. 2013.

<<http://books.google.co.in/books?id=gsZkAu-RHVgC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>>.

¹³ Chanana, Dev R. "2. Slavery in Ancient India: As Depicted in Pāli and Sanskrit Texts." Ed. Aloka Prasher-Sen. *Subordinate and Marginal Groups in India*. N.p.: Oxford UP, n.d. 97-98. Print.

¹⁴ "Social Order and Structure in Ancient India." *Optional: Indian History - Ancient India*. Agra: Upkar Prakashan, 2010. 57. *Google Books*. Web. 15 Sept. 2013.

<http://books.google.co.in/books?id=_SbiUXtBzAsC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

¹⁵ Chanana, Dev R. "2. Slavery in Ancient India: As Depicted in Pāli and Sanskrit Texts." Ed. Aloka Prasher-Sen. *Subordinate and Marginal Groups in India*. N.p.: Oxford UP, n.d. 101-02. Print.

¹⁶ Chanana, Dev R. "2. Slavery in Ancient India: As Depicted in Pāli and Sanskrit Texts." Ed. Aloka Prasher-Sen. *Subordinate and Marginal Groups in India*. N.p.: Oxford UP, n.d. 102-03. Print.

as a slave (danda-pranita)¹⁷. Debts continued to remain one of the reasons behind slavery but raiding villages specifically to acquire slaves was no longer practiced¹⁸. There was no distinct social group which was by nature considered to be that of slaves. Instead, slavery was mainly a result of economic factors. Defaulting on a payment during the time of famine for example would be overcome by becoming a slave to the creditor till the dues were paid¹⁹. From this, it can be observed that slaves could be owned for a temporary phase or permanently²⁰. While most of them did household work, there were a few who would work in mines or were employed by guilds of certain crafts²¹.

From the same period comes a completely contradictory view of Megasthenes who in his book, *Indica*, stated that the Mauryan Empire was an empire free of slaves and slavery²². Many scholars believe that this could have possibly been because of the differences in type of slavery in the Indian sub-continent and his homeland²³. Ashoka's edicts are used to provide one of the reasons why such a distinctive account was recorded. The edicts often talk of two different groups of workers – servants (bhatakas) and slaves (dasas) – but they were expected to be treated in a similar manner. People's attitude towards them might not have been as harsh as of those from the Hellenistic empire. Also, slavery could have existed in a milder form and the work expected from the slaves could have been limited in comparison²⁴. The good treatment of slaves is also reflected in the *Arthashastra* because of presence of laws meant for protection of slaves. These rules included ensuring maternity care for a pregnant slave when sold or mortgaged and suggestion of punishing those who caused their miscarriage. Instances of further leniency include manumission of women slaves who bore their masters' son and allowance of becoming free by paying a certain amount²⁵.

Information regarding slavery in the Post-Mauryan Period can be obtained through the *Manu Smriti*, a text of the *Dharmashastra*, which served a similar purpose to that of the *Arthashastra*²⁶. Prisoners of wars, gamble losers, purchased slaves, gifted slaves, self-accepted slaves in times of famine (bhaktadas), children of female slaves, slaves gifted specifically to relatives (dalrma), inherited slaves

¹⁷ "Social Order and Structure in Ancient India." *Optional: Indian History - Ancient India*. Agra: Upkar Prakashan, 2010. 57. *Google Books*. Web. 15 Sept. 2013.

¹⁸ Chanana, Dev R. "2. Slavery in Ancient India: As Depicted in Pāli and Sanskrit Texts." Ed. Aloka Prasher-Sen. *Subordinate and Marginal Groups in India*. N.p.: Oxford UP, n.d. 110-11. Print.

¹⁹ Chanana, Dev R. "2. Slavery in Ancient India: As Depicted in Pāli and Sanskrit Texts." Ed. Aloka Prasher-Sen. *Subordinate and Marginal Groups in India*. N.p.: Oxford UP, n.d. 111. Print.

²⁰ Singh, Upinder. "7. Power and Piety; The Mauryan Empire, C. 324-187 BCE." *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India*. N.p.: Pearson Education, 2009. 340. Print

²¹ Thapar, Romila. "6. The Emergence of Empire: Mauryan India: C. 321-185 BC." *The Penguin History of Early India*. N.p.: Penguin, 2002. 186. *Google Books*. Web. 14 Sept. 2013.

<<http://books.google.co.in/books?id=gyiqZKDISBMC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>>.

²² Singh, Upinder. "7. Power and Piety; The Mauryan Empire, C. 324-187 BCE." *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India*. N.p.: Pearson Education, 2009. 340. Print

²³ Thapar, Romila. "6. The Emergence of Empire: Mauryan India: C. 321-185 BC." *The Penguin History of Early India*. N.p.: Penguin, 2002. 186. *Google Books*. Web. 14 Sept. 2013.

<<http://books.google.co.in/books?id=gyiqZKDISBMC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>>.

²⁴ Sen, Sailendra N. "22. Culture and Civilization in Ancient India." *Ancient Indian History and Civilization*. 2nd ed. New Delhi: New Age International, 1999. 561. *Google Books*. Web. 16 Sept. 2013.

<http://books.google.co.in/books?id=Wk4_1CH_g1EC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

²⁵ Singh, Upinder. "7. Power and Piety; The Mauryan Empire, C. 324-187 BCE." *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India*. N.p.: Pearson Education, 2009. 340. Print

²⁶ Class notes

and people forced to become slaves as a part of their punishments constituted the nine types of slaves listed down in this text²⁷. This period saw co-existence of a lot of small dynasties, which were often at war, leading to deteriorating economic conditions. Also, laws governing agricultural activities were not always well-imposed. This led to a decline in the number of rich families who could employ multiple slaves and lack of control over them in cases where slaves were affordable. As a result, slaves had chances of improving their social conditions. Conversely, there were families which were forced to sell or mortgage their children and sometimes even the husbands and wives themselves because of financial problems²⁸.

Complexities in the types of slaves only grew with the Gupta Period which is sometimes also referred to as the "Golden Age" of India²⁹. There were fifteen types of slaves present, some of which were sub-categories of the types which had existed previously³⁰. Contrasting this was Faxian's account, which like Indica mentions non-existence of slavery in the Gupta Empire, possibly because of a different (possibly better) nature of slavery³¹. In addition to the eight categories mentioned by the Manu Smriti, the Narada Smriti lists down seven more categories. Some of them include men who were made slaves for having sexual relations with a female slave, people who became householders after reaching the sanyas ashrama (or stage of renunciation), those who were sold by thieves and robbers, etc³². The Yajnavalkya Smriti has stricter policies regarding returning after renunciation and states enslavement for life as punishment for doing so³³. Another category of slaves has also been suggested for those who had to become slaves out of fear³⁴. However, enforcing slavery through abduction has been stated as a serious crime in the Yajnavalkya Smriti alongside other slave-related crimes such as killing the foetus of a pregnant slave and any form of violation of female slaves³⁵.

The concept of mortgaging, gifting and inheriting slaves continued but a new feature of hiring out one's slaves for a period of time had started becoming prominent³⁶. The number of slaves that worked for food production continued to decrease during this period³⁷. Most of them were employed as domestic servants or personal attendants. Like before, slaves were looked down upon

²⁷ "Social Order and Structure in Ancient India." *Optional: Indian History - Ancient India*. Agra: Upkar Prakashan, 2010. 57. *Google Books*. Web. 15 Sept. 2013.

²⁸ Chanana, Dev R. "2. Slavery in Ancient India: As Depicted in Pāli and Sanskrit Texts." Ed. Aloka Prasher-Sen. *Subordinate and Marginal Groups in India*. N.p.: Oxford UP, n.d. 111. Print.

²⁹ Class notes

³⁰ Singh, Upinder. "9. Aesthetics and Empire, C. 300-600 CE." *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India*. N.p.: Pearson Education, 2009. 508. Print.

³¹ Sen, Sailendra N. "11. The Gupta Empire." *Ancient Indian History and Civilization*. 2nd ed. New Delhi: New Age International, 1999. 235. *Google Books*. Web. 16 Sept. 2013.

<http://books.google.co.in/books?id=Wk4_1CH_g1EC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

³² "Social Order and Structure in Ancient India." *Optional: Indian History - Ancient India*. Agra: Upkar Prakashan, 2010. 57. *Google Books*. Web. 15 Sept. 2013.

³³ Chanana, Dev R. "2. Slavery in Ancient India: As Depicted in Pāli and Sanskrit Texts." Ed. Aloka Prasher-Sen. *Subordinate and Marginal Groups in India*. N.p.: Oxford UP, n.d. 117. Print.

³⁴ "Social Order and Structure in Ancient India." *Optional: Indian History - Ancient India*. Agra: Upkar Prakashan, 2010. 57. *Google Books*. Web. 15 Sept. 2013.

³⁵ Chanana, Dev R. "2. Slavery in Ancient India: As Depicted in Pāli and Sanskrit Texts." Ed. Aloka Prasher-Sen. *Subordinate and Marginal Groups in India*. N.p.: Oxford UP, n.d. 118. Print.

³⁶ "Social Order and Structure in Ancient India." *Optional: Indian History - Ancient India*. Agra: Upkar Prakashan, 2010. 57. *Google Books*. Web. 15 Sept. 2013.

³⁷ Sharma, R. S. "The Origins of Feudalism in India (c. A.D. 400-650)." *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 1.3 (1958): 320. *JSTOR*. Web. 12 Sept. 2013. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3596372>>.

as objects which could be inherited and hence were equivalent to other material property. However, they were not exploited and there were chances for a slave to get manumission. This was done through a ceremony where after removing and breaking a jar of bottle from the slave's shoulder, the master would sprinkle some parched grains and flowers over the slave's head while repeating the statement "You are no longer a dasa" thrice³⁸. Many times, the attitude towards a slave was dependent upon the master. So, if a master was happy that his dasi bore his son, there was a possibility that she would be released³⁹. Rules to protect masters from losing their ownership of slaves were also present. For example, in case a person tried to abduct another person's female slave, the Narada Smriti states amputation of the thieves' foot as the ideal punishment⁴⁰.

Instances of manumission were present even before this period but they were not ceremonious. People who were free to act according to their will were known as bhujissa(a)⁴¹. Nish-kri (or buying back of freedom) could be through payment of a monetary sum which the slave could raise through his relatives and friends⁴². The Arthashastra states that if a freed slave was an Arya, the original social status of the slave could be retained after purchase of freedom⁴³. The Mauryan Period also saw masters release their slaves voluntarily and this practice was present even in the Early Historic Period before this. Buddhist texts give one such example where a master freed his female slave and made her a bhujisaa so that she could renounce the world join the Buddhist sangha to lead the rest of her life as a nun⁴⁴. In order to join a Buddhist sangha for becoming a monk or a nun, all slaves had to have been manumitted for otherwise people could have joined the sangha simply as a getaway rather than devoting themselves to the Buddhist philosophy⁴⁵.

Considering the emergence of laws to protect slaves and punishments for people ill-treating them or causing them harm (e.g. leading a female slave to have a miscarriage), it can be understood that slaves were not supposed to be overly exploited. Accounts by foreign writers such as Faxian and Megasthenes lend support to this since what they observed was not slavery according to them as it had been far worse in the empires they belonged to. Also, cases of manumission started increasing over time. However, Manu Smriti, a text which talked of Shudras normally in a negative light, justified using them as slaves by stating that "Shudras had been created by Lord for the slavery of the Brahmanas". Nevertheless, Shudras who were slaves were not categorised as untouchables (since they could not enter a house and work otherwise) and to some extent might have had a

³⁸ Singh, Upinder. "9. Aesthetics and Empire, C. 300-600 CE." *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India*. N.p.: Pearson Education, 2009. 508. Print.

³⁹ Sen, Sailendra N. "11. The Gupta Empire." *Ancient Indian History and Civilization*. 2nd ed. New Delhi: New Age International, 1999. 235. *Google Books*. Web. 16 Sept. 2013.
<http://books.google.co.in/books?id=Wk4_ICh_g1EC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

⁴⁰ Singh, Upinder. "9. Aesthetics and Empire, C. 300-600 CE." *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India*. N.p.: Pearson Education, 2009. 508. Print.

⁴¹ Chanana, Dev R. "2. Slavery in Ancient India: As Depicted in Pāli and Sanskrit Texts." Ed. Aloka Prasher-Sen. *Subordinate and Marginal Groups in India*. N.p.: Oxford UP, n.d. 96-97. Print.

⁴² Chanana, Dev R. "2. Slavery in Ancient India: As Depicted in Pāli and Sanskrit Texts." Ed. Aloka Prasher-Sen. *Subordinate and Marginal Groups in India*. N.p.: Oxford UP, n.d. 99. Print.

⁴³ Thapar, Romila. "6. The Emergence of Empire: Mauryan India: C. 321-185 BC." *The Penguin History of Early India*. N.p.: Penguin, 2002. 187. *Google Books*. Web. 14 Sept. 2013.
<<http://books.google.co.in/books?id=gyiqZKDISBMC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>>.

⁴⁴ Chanana, Dev R. "2. Slavery in Ancient India: As Depicted in Pāli and Sanskrit Texts." Ed. Aloka Prasher-Sen. *Subordinate and Marginal Groups in India*. N.p.: Oxford UP, n.d. 98. Print.

⁴⁵ Class notes

better life than others from the same varna⁴⁶. Despite the improvements observed overall, cruelty towards slaves cannot be ignored. A story from the Jatakas where a master ties up a boy slave and a girl slave and then beats them to the extent which causes their skin to cut and bleed, according to scholars, reflects the prevailing (Early Historic Period) attitude towards slavery. To such an extent was degradation of slaves that the only resort a lot of them had was to run away from their master's house⁴⁷.

⁴⁶ Chanana, Dev R. "2. Slavery in Ancient India: As Depicted in Pāli and Sanskrit Texts." Ed. Aloka Prasher-Sen. *Subordinate and Marginal Groups in India*. N.p.: Oxford UP, n.d. 118. Print.

⁴⁷ Sen, Sailendra N. "6. New Religious Movements." *Ancient Indian History and Civilization*. 2nd ed. New Delhi: New Age International, 1999. 103. *Google Books*. Web. 16 Sept. 2013.
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