

## **Shades of Slavery in Ancient India:A Peep Into Mauryan Times**

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The role of women in Mauryan society is quite significant. Their position as subordinate to men was often taken for granted. This case can be seen particularly in the type of society visualized by the *Arthashastra*. Brahmanical treatises usually treated women with severity and regarded them, without any evasiveness, as of inferior species in the later works. The Buddhists maintained a much more humane attitude. While the Brahmanical norms did not permit education for women, the Buddhists allowed nuns into the Buddhist order. It has been suggested and with some justification that, since women were not regarded merely as child bearers, their life in the Buddhist society was not as difficult as in Brahmanical society.<sup>1</sup> Unlike the Hindu rituals, birth of a son was not necessary to Buddhist rituals. Due to the acceptance of unmarried women in Buddhist societies, the women tended to be less concerned with finding husbands, making them less subservient. However, marriage remained to be regarded as the most appropriate occupation for a woman. Working women were discouraged and prohibited from getting employed, especially in male dominated areas. They were only allowed to work at circus or perform at play. They could serve as domestic slaves in private or royal households, and as prostitutes or courtesans. Later, women's importance declined even further, when such Hindu ideas infiltrated into Buddhism and the older Brahmanical attitude had a revival.

Megasthenes and Arrian, while talking about the Indian systems, remark about the dominant attitudes towards women and their position in Indian society. Megasthenes in his work stated his observations about polygamy in the Indian society.<sup>2</sup> Evidently, there existed a fixed bride-price comprising of a yoke of oxen in exchange for the bride. This price, perhaps, most people could afford since it was commonly used to pull carts and carriages. However, for those who could not arrange a yoke of oxen, might have had paid the equivalent in value. The *Arthashastra* refers to the gift of a pair of cows in exchange for a

maiden girl in marriage. It is also included in one of the eight types of possible marriages. Later, this gift of cows became symbolic and equivalent value amount was accepted instead. It is suggested by Megasthenes that while some women solely dedicated their lives to bearing and raising children, some also assisted the male members of the house in their manual labour works. This latter category of women belonged to the class of cultivators since they were allowed to work on fields unlike the women of other classes who were not expected to assist men in their labour, especially in urban spaces. While referring to the domestic spaces, Megasthenes states how in upper class families some female members upheld and managed the household while others looked after the children.

The unchastity of Indian women is a point of discussion in several works. Many women chose to enter prostitution unless impelled to remain chaste. Arrian writes that the even most chaste of women willingly gave up her chastity for a gift of an elephant which was considered as a compliment.<sup>3</sup> Elephants were gifted to the worthiest of them. It is not surprising to note how Indian literary sources depict stories about the adventures of various Hindu gods with the daughters of high caste Hindus, in a very casual manner. Hindu moral code did not attach guilt complexes to sexual matters exhibiting a healthier attitude of mind unlike other religions. Due to the subservience of women in society, it gave rise to curious circumstances. For example, instead of forbidding prostitution, the state extracted tax out of it.<sup>4</sup> The state protected prostitutes from attacks and abuses by the people. They were also recruited as spies by the state.

A lot of women were recruited for the royal palace. Some of them served in the harem,<sup>5</sup> while others worked as caretakers of the king.<sup>6</sup> These caretakers were traded from their families. The *Arthashastra* validates the presence of female personal attendants of the kings in the section where it advises the king to keep an armed female bodyguard.<sup>7</sup> Even during the king's extensive hunting expeditions, armed women surrounded him. Women, as compared to men, were considered more reliable because of their subservience. Men were more likely to betray the king or engage in corruption. Women, however, being aware of their lesser position in society, tried their best to maintain the prestigious role of serving the king.

Weaving was one kind of the occupations from which women were not barred.<sup>8</sup> Even the *Arthashastra* advocates that women, irrespective of age, can be lucratively

hired under the superintendent of weaving. But this occupation is recommended basically for widows, ageing prostitutes, physically deformed women, or women who need to pay fines and are bound to work. Besides these categories of women, the married or unmarried girls, if sought such employment, they had to work within their domestic spheres. When such a weaver woman had to get yarn or send her woven fabric, it is suggested that some maid servant mediated between the woman and the superintendent. In the absence of a mediator, the superintendent was allowed to deal with the woman directly but he must restrict his conversation strictly to the work in question, and to ensure that she is not clearly seen by the superintendent, she had to visit the office only when the light was dim. This paper indirectly discloses the social conventions concerning women. For instance, women are segregated into mainly three types: the women who remain within the limits of their houses (*aniskasinyah*), those who have their husbands living abroad, and those who are physically incapacitated and are compelled to work for a living.

The chapters of *Arthashastra* about marriage and relationship between husband and wife, further elaborate the position of women.<sup>9</sup> Married women of that age still had a less rigid social role than that of the later centuries. A widow with the permission of her father-in-law could commonly remarry outside the family of her in-laws. With the consent of both husband and wife, under certain conditions, even divorce was acceptable. But this was applicable to only those marriages that were either voluntary unions or abductions, or sealed with a high bride-price. The most respectable and well-established marriages were the ones which complied completely with the social customs. Now again we must remind ourselves that the given section of work is a theoretical discussion of possible situations. It cannot be specified for certain to what extent the above usages are true, whether in practice or social convention. Surely, public opinion must also have played a role in influencing the daily working of such laws.

According to Megasthenes, India never had slaves or a slavery system.<sup>10</sup> This is a disputed argument, since the Indian sources clearly mention slaves and hired labourers who provided physical labour power. Megasthenes might have had a Greek idea of slavery in mind that did not match with the Indian system and therefore he could not recognize it. However, Megasthenes would be right if Mauryan slavery was planned according to the

structure mentioned in the *Arthashastra*. Unlike the Indian *dasa*, the Greek *doulos* could not earn profit or own property.

Both the hired labourers and slaves provided labour power but the hired labourers were on a higher position than the slaves. Mostly employed by artisans, hired labourers were paid a certain wage according to their work and were not owned by the employer. Their work varied from domestic to agricultural, and they even had duty on ships.<sup>11</sup> These labourers were almost outcasts with an extremely low position in the social hierarchy. The *Arthashastra* simply covers all the details about their wages and gives no suggestion on how their condition could improve. A standard wage of one tenth of the produce was fixed but it also varied according to the work they did.<sup>12</sup> The system of *visti* labour, practiced in Mauryan times, is quite different from the hired labour system. It is mentioned by Megasthenes that in place of paying taxes, artists worked for the state for a set number of days.<sup>13</sup> For the land cultivators, a similar arrangement existed. There is also a reference about the use of *visti* in the *Arthashastra* warning against the oppressive practice of it. The cultivators are supposed to be guarded by the king from the repressive administration of forced labour by his assistants.<sup>14</sup>

Arrian notes that none of the Indians were slave to anyone, all were free individuals. This view is agreed upon by the Macedonians and Indians alike. For the Macedonians, the servile 'helots' served as slaves who did all the menial labour. However, Indians never treated aliens or even their own countrymen as slaves. As Strabo also confirmed, there are no slaves in India.<sup>15</sup> Diodorus mentions Megasthenes' observation that the law ensured that all people enjoyed freedom, never had to be a slave and received equal respect they deserved.<sup>16</sup> The next passage is about egalitarian laws and inequality of possessions. Later textual amendments made by Zimmer suggested that it is unviable to implement equal laws for all while maintaining unequal status.<sup>17</sup> Zimmer rightly notices that a criticism of the Greek system has been attempted here. According to Megasthenes, Greeks were unable to acknowledge the incompatibility of slavery and egalitarian laws. The mention of slavery was not necessarily about Indian conditions. It might have been Zimmer's deliberate attempt at propaganda opposing slavery in Greece.<sup>18</sup> A rise in opposition to slavery came with the attacks made by Diogenes and Cynics.

Slavery in India was not recognized by Megasthenes or maybe, he used this interpretation to explain the controversial debate around slavery in Greece. It could also be possible that Arrian juxtaposed Sparta and Megasthenes' original idea to emphasise on the statement for his Greek readership. Another possibility could be that Megasthenes mentioned it in his original text but later editors obliterated it and included their own remarks. Buddhist literature discusses three types of slaves: those inherited, those bought or gifted, and those born in the house. The practice of making the war prisoners as slaves could also be a possibility. The 13<sup>th</sup> Rock-Edict refers to the banishment of 1,50,000 people from Kalinga and while it is improbable that all of them were enslaved, some of them must have been put to slavery. The *Arthashastra* points out that a majority of them could have been sent to settle in the newly cleared areas.<sup>19</sup> This practice of settlement had evidently become regular during the early centuries.<sup>20</sup> The *Arthashastra* and *Jatakas* also refer to slavery as a punishment (*dandadasa*).<sup>21</sup>

Slaves were most commonly engaged in domestic services, used as personal attendants. While some served as agricultural labourers, others worked as artisans. A person owning many slaves could have also hired them for other general purposes.

The *Arthashastra* upholds that in India, slavery was not as severe as in Greece. While Aryas did not usually become slaves, harsh circumstances such as family troubles or monetary needs forced them into slavery. However, they could still buy their freedom back after the term of their agreement expired, and resume their normal lives. Moreover, the outcastes were at a lower order of hierarchy than the slaves in Mauryan society. Thus, being a slave in India was not as degrading as being one in Greece. To any Greek visitor in India, visiting in that period, slavery appeared to be less severe than in Greece. But at the same time, he would fail to understand the condemnation faced by the outcastes at the hands of the rest of Indian society.

A humane attitude towards the slaves has been depicted in both the *Jatakas* and the *Arthashastra*, the latter of which refers to a number of rules to protect the slaves.<sup>22</sup> For instance, if a man becomes a slave by his own violation, his children would not be considered slaves. Also, a slave is not prohibited from maintaining an ownership over what he has earned and what he has inherited, and then later bequeath these to his kinsmen. Furthermore, there is an insistence to treat female slaves properly. In case a female slave

conceived a child from her owner, both the mother and child had to be set free. If the claims of slave were ignored then it was the duty of the king to reprimand the violator.<sup>23</sup> These kinds of rules and regulations were followed in the slavery. However, such regulations may also have had flaws that become visible in the *Jatakastories* about misery of slaves, their imprisonment, the brutal punishments faced by them and episodes of malnourishment.<sup>24</sup> King Asoka through his edicts often talked about mistreatment of slaves and appealed his subjects to be kind towards them.

A significant difference between the slaves and the outcastes is highlighted from the fact that outcastes were considered as impure unlike the slaves who maintained a close proximity to their masters.<sup>25</sup> Slaves were allowed to stay in the town with their families but this was not the case for the outcastes. The members of the shunned classes called the *hinajati* were mainly those who did the jobs considered unclean. They were totally segregated from the rest of the society with no scope of joining the mainstream. One such outcastes were the Chandalas who were offspring of a Brahman and a Sudra.<sup>26</sup> A *Jataka* tale mentions to Chandabhasa indicating an aboriginal tongue. They were allowed a very limited number of occupations like hunting, performing public executions, cleaning the cremation grounds and entertain the public with juggling or acrobats. Another degraded caste was that of leather workers and since the Rathakaras (chariot makers) also worked with leather, they were considered degraded. The people of Vena caste possibly belonged to the aboriginal origins, engaged in the occupation of basket weaving and flute making. The Nishada caste who probably occupied the margins of cultivated lands did fishing and hunting for a living. The settled cultivators saw Nishadas and their occupation as inferior. Other than these, barbers, weavers, snake-charmers, beggars and potters interestingly had their professions as their caste names and were also considered to be of the lower castes.

Being a minority, the outcastes could not resist the social ostracism. Staying outside the mainstream settlements put them at a disadvantage as compared to the rest of the city dwellers. Moreover, they were not organized into guilds. Since they were not allowed to obtain an education, their situation degraded. The portrayal of these shunned classes in the *Jatakashas* has been inspired by the *Arthashastra*, predominantly relating to the Chandalas. These clearly state that the Chandalas and heretics were supposed to live outside the city, beyond the burial grounds.

Even archaeological evidences indicate the existence of slavery. The towns were definitely pre-planned and the houses were built accordingly. A common house plan included rooms surrounding a courtyard in the centre. Since the servants and slaves lived on the ground floor, the rooms on this floor were smaller than the family rooms on the upper floors.

Despite the absence of typical chattle slavery of Greek society, Indians devised their own system of enslaving people. Women and outcastes were most vulnerable section of society for slave like oppression. The sale and purchase of slaves were uncommon but not unheard of. The presence of a vast pool of Shudras was an important factor for the absence of slaves in the task of food production and handicrafts. Indian society was not untouched by the elements of slavery during the Mauryan times.

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