



# The Enslaved: A Historical Scrutinization of Slavery in India

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**Abstract:** Slavery can be seen in almost all customs and civilisations throughout the Indian history. History of slavery in India is contested, Megasthenes a Greek writer stated that Slavery did not exist in the Mauryan Empire however Ashoka's rock edicts clearly identifies slaves within the same empire. Slavery continued during the colonial era in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century where they were taken to different parts of the world by European merchant companies. According to an eminent historian Dr. Upinder Singh the earliest references of slavery can be seen in Rig Veda Samhita composed during 1500-1000 BC. Global Slavery Index records that India has the highest number of people living in modern slavery which suggests that even after constant struggle of the reformers to pull people out from the yoke of slavery this social evil still exists in our society in many forms. To unlock the secrets of our past and pave the way for a more equitable future, we must delve deeper into the complex roots of slavery and its enduring impact on the society. The aim of this research paper is to analyse the historical context of slavery in India highlighting the interplay of caste and gender in this system. The study intends to investigate on how these social structures have shaped the experiences of the enslaved. A slave is a person who is treated as a property and is compelled to work beyond their limits. This paper throws light on its Origin, History as well as various sections of our society who remain trapped in this inhumane activity.

**Key Words:** Slavery, Sex Slavery, Bondage Labour, Caste, Gender.

## 1. INTRODUCTION :

In Dr Bheem Rao Ambedkar's writing "Which is worse? Slavery or Untouchability?" he states that slavery is an ancient institution in the history of Indian culture, if we delve deeper into its title we can understand the core reason behind it. Let us first understand the generalised definition of the word "Slavery", according to the United Nations "The status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised" is defined as slavery. In easy words a person becomes a slave when he is under complete domination of his/her "Master". Coming back to the title "Which is worst? Slavery or Untouchability?" slaves (including the untouchables) work according to the will of his master he can be killed, sold, leased and is compelled to engage in work even against his will therefore both slavery and the practise of untouchability is a social evil in our society. A slave is not a freeman, However Dr Ambedkar argues that while a slave can be skilled, can visit a religious place and can get access to medicines an untouchable is not even considered as seen in our society. According to government statistics about 1 million Dalits are bonded labourers mostly seen working as manual scavengers, unofficial estimates are even higher. What we can configure out of this data is that caste and slavery has a deep connection. One possible explanation of this could be that caste discrimination led to unequal distribution of wealth or income compelling the lower castes to engage in manual labour or slavery. The Indian Human Development Survey reveals that lower caste individuals income is still lower than that of their upper caste counterparts the following data could justify that caste did and still does play a major role in



determining a person's financial standing. Similarly Savitribai Phule the pioneer of India's feminist movement strived to abolish discrimination based on gender and caste. Her struggle itself reveals the underlying problem in our society when she had to face many obstacles to acquire education as a Dalit Women. While she was reading the biography of British anti-slavery campaigner who wrote about the struggles of African slaves in America she came to the realisation that women and Dalits were also slaves in the Indian society. She made education their power to break them free from the shackles of slavery. Fatima Sheikh another social reformer who is the first Muslim woman teacher overcame severe opposition from the conservatives and started educating *Bahujans* (OBC, SC and ST) along with Savitribai Phule and strived towards the emancipation of women and lower castes in order to break them free from this never ending cycle of slavery. Another woman reformer Dr. Anne Besant a British socialist and a women's right activist was one amongst the founders of the prestigious Banaras Hindu University along with Madan Mohan Malviya who dedicated themselves towards the upliftment of women. She established central Hindu School in 1898 and has several women colleges which runs under her name for her contributions in their establishment namely "Vasant Kanya Mahavidyalaya"(1954), "Vasanta College for Women"(1913) as well as "Mahila Mahavidyalaya"(1929) all of these institutions affiliated and supervised by Banaras Hindu University throws light on how the reformer's efforts to shatter the stereotype and these institutions still educates thousands of students with different backgrounds, status, gender and caste under the same roof. Despite the relentless efforts to uplift the oppressed India still faces challenges in eradicating bonded slavery especially in context of caste and gender. The Global Slavery Index in 2018 ranked India in the first position with highest number of slaves in the world. Out of the global number of 45 million slaves 18 million resides in India and as of 2021 GSI reports that 11 million people in India were living in modern slavery. Further Anti Slavery International reports that around 90% of Bonded Labourers are Schedule caste and minority groups. The percentage of lower caste females in informal sector in India is about 41.8% which raises concerns about the appalling violence including sexual assaults with them since the informal sectors is not monitored by the Government. The aim of this research is to analyse the historical context of slavery in India highlighting the interplay of caste and gender in this system. The study intends to investigate on how these social structures have shaped the experiences of the enslaved.

## 2. Origin, History and Elucidation :

Slavery as a practise can be traced back to about 11,000 years, captivity and trade of humans is sourced by an ancient text "The Code of Hammurabi" composed in 1754 BCE found in Mesopotamia, it comprises of 282 laws that was applied based on social standing (slaves, free men, privileged etc). The ancient text refers to slavery as a customary and widely followed practice that has been into existence even 1000 years till the book was compiled. According to the text Summer in Mesopotamia is known to be as the birth place of slavery however in ancient India slavery was adopted much later in 221 BC. However historian Megasthenes in his work "Indika" composed in 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE mentions that slavery was banned in India however Mahabharata suggests otherwise it mentions that Snataka Brahmanas were youngsters who were seeking education in vedic studies. Yudhishtira supported eighty-eight thousand Snataka Brahmanas leading domestic lives, giving unto each of them thirty slave-girls. Beside this, thousand other Brahmanas daily eat at his palace the best of food on golden plates similarly ancient Indian scriptures like Manusmriti 10 highlights the following kinds of slaves—(1) *Dwajahrita* – The person who is kept captive under a standard applicable to him, (2) *Udradasa*- a person who serves for getting food from the upper caste, (3) *Grhajatab*- someone born in the house, (4) *Krita*- To person who has been bought, (5) *Dayab agatah*- The person who is inherited from his ancestors, (6) *Dandapreneet*- slave by punishment. Kautilya's Arthshastra brings up that if a female slave bears a boy child of her master the female slave will be set free further the boy child will get the same entitlement as a legal child. One question which arises out of it is the fate of female slaves giving birth to a girl child. Similarly contrary to Megasthenes claim slavery was prevalent during Mauryan emperor Ashoka's reign (304 BCE-232 BCE), in Ashoka's Rock Edict XI he deliberated concerns about the policies towards the slaves evidences the practise of slavery throughout one of ancient India's largest empire. The existence of slavery even existed in the mid 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, according to the Puranas Mahapadma Nanda (345BC-329 BC) who was the first Nanda emperor was the son of Shaishunaga King Mahanandin (355BC-345BC) and a Shudra women. A unified body of women called Devadasi appeared from 9<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> century they were devotees of Gods of the great temple in eastern and southern India and graced the temples with aarti, dances and singing songs of devotion as well as performed for the kings who ordered them to provide sexual favours, In Kanchipuram a city in Tamil Nadu had about 100 Devadasi and according to National Commission for Women there were about 48,358 Devadasi in India although the system was discontinued in 1988 after the British government however the institution remained strong and till date can be seen as the beginning of sex slavery and trafficking of young adolescent women for sexual pleasures. If we delve into medieval era we come across the fact that slave trade increased



on a large scale. Preceding to the Sultanate era a very well known case of slavery of Surya Devi and her sister Parimal Devi who were the daughter of Sindh's ruler Dahir Sen were sent on as presents to the Caliph Sulayman ibn Abd al-Malik which is explicitly mentioned in historical texts during the Ummayyad invasion of Sindh. Al-Utbi an Arab historian records that after the Battle of Peshawar Mahmud of Ghazni returned with large number of enslaved Indians so much so that their prices were reduced to as low as two to ten dirhams each these slaves were estimated to be around 200,000 in number and were sold in Central Asian slave market. In 12<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century during the period of Delhi Sultanate many Muslim nobility used Indian slaves out of them many were also sold in the international market. Ziauddin Barani a historian in the court of Muhammad Bin Tughlaq records the enslavement of defaulters of tax revenue under the Delhi sultanate, sultan Allauddin Khilji took one step ahead by legalising the enslavement of the tax defaulters. Delhi Sultan's efforts to expand their own territories also enslaved a large number of people for example Qutub-uddin-Aibak although a slave himself under Delhi Sultanate, enslaved a total of about 60,000 war prisoners after the conquest of Gujrat and Kalinjar he is also known as the first slave king of Delhi Sultanate and established the Slave Dynasty (Mamluk Dynasty) from 1206-1290. Arthashastra also throws light on the employment of children in ancient India. Children in every type of society has been a part of slavery, participation of children in laborious activities can be seen since ages and has persisted in the course of Indian history. The Dutch factories established in India in the late 17<sup>th</sup> centuries employed about 700-800 weavers, which also included children as trainees under artisans and craftsman, in agrarian society children were engaged in intensive laborious activities which included cultivating and harvesting of fields along with their parents in order to learn from a younger age and to start contributing in the family income. Families working for landlords in the early ages used to engage their children as young as 8 year old in domestic chores for extra income. This practise was adopted as it is easier to train children and get them used to the working environment rather than training them in the adulthood even Kautilya's Arthshastra mentions the existence of child domestic slaves. Child slavery in India began to be practised in extreme during the Zamindari system where in case of pending loan farmers had to handover their sons to the zamindars in order to repay the perpetual debt bonding them and their generation into a never ending cycle of labour and exploitation depriving them of their innocence and childhood. Slavery in India heavily depended on caste system where families of lower caste served to the upper caste which soon became a custom in the society and began to be carried out till date even after the abolishment of such practices after independence.

### **3. Caste and Gender-based slavery in India :**

Hindu scriptures such as Rig Vedas, Arthashastra and Manusmriti provides details about the emergence of caste system and how people are divided on the following basis, The tenth book of Rig Veda, Purusha Sukta "The creation of Hymn" explains the creation of Brahmanas, Kshatriya, Vaishnav and Shudra it mentions that Brahmanas were born out of the mouth of Purusha, Kshatriyas out of his arms, Vaishya originated out of his thighs and Shudras emanated from Purusha's feet. Manusmriti discusses in chapter 8 shloka 129 that even a deserving Sudra must not accumulate wealth as he may harass Brahmanas which throws light on how caste played a major role in determining financial independence and occupation according to Manusmriti following work were divided between people of different caste such as for Brahmans they were expected to become vedic scholars, teachers and priests, for people who were born Kshatriya were destined to become rulers administrators and warriors and Sudras were supposed to do menial work such as scavenging labour and servants in contrast to this we also find information from vedas where we find references that sudras were warriors and kings aswell according to many theories Shivaji was of Sudra caste and many Brahmans opposed his coronation as according to the system of Chaturvarnya only Brahmans and Kshatriyas were entitled to this position however we know him as the greatest warrior in the Indian history key point which arises from this is that a person's deed, conduct and behaviour determines his varna/caste and is not based on birth for example Ashwatthama a mythological character being a king by profession was a Brahman similarly Vyasa being a son of fisherwoman is deemed to be a Brahman it is a classification based on functional specialization that exists in every society, this verse from Mahabharata suggests that caste or varna is not a birth based privilege but rather a character "By origin everyone is a Sudra, by performing the necessary transformative rituals one becomes twice born, by knowledge of Vedas one becomes vipra and by understanding the supreme being one becomes a Brahmana" although an arduous task to decipher the texts and its meaning a question which arises out of it is the modern theory of caste based on birth a misinterpretation of Hinduism created in order to prevail undue advantage? Casteism has played a major role in determining occupation or work force in India since ages, well known caste-based occupation in India is manual labour and forced prostitution a Human Rights Watch Report from 2003 reveals about 350,000 children working as bonded labourers in Karnataka's and Varanasi's silk factories most of these children belonging from Dalit and SC/ST caste, these children were forced to work for 12 hours per day in hazardous conditions. Forced labour and slavery mostly exists in rural areas as caste is



deeply entrenched in Agricultural labour according to Human Right Watch Report bonded labourers are mostly of lower caste and that caste hierarchies in workforce remains rooted in society. Anti-Slavery International report in 2008 disclose that Dalit labourers are made to carry out the most physically and mentally draining work followed by abuse and low wages recently a Lucknow man urinated on sleeping Dalit labourer's face to wake him up according to India today report and according to economic times report a Dalit man was abused for demanding his salary in Gujrat which suggests the prevalence of caste based slavery not only during the ancient times but also in the modern era even after multiple legislative actions taken to condemn such atrocities on lower caste communities. Many lower caste women are also a victim of sex slavery, prostitution and trafficking they suffer from multiple discrimination at the intersection of gender and caste discrimination as per the National Crime Records Bureau's data of 2022, there was 45% increase in reported rapes of Dalit women between 2015- 2020. Similarly National Family Health Survey 2015-16 records that sexual violence were highest among Scheduled Tribe and Schedule caste women at 7.8% for Schedule caste and 7.8% for Schedule Tribe females. According Directorate General of Employment report 39.3% of females in rural areas between the age of 15-59 years were in labour force which has significantly increased by 12.7% from the year 2017-18. Approximately 82% of women workforce in India is concentrated in the informal sectors as per 2018 International Labour Organisation report. Informal sectors are economic activities which is not monitored by the government. In India there are over four million domestic workers in India most of them are females they are not recognised as workers but rather "informal help" in private households where they are paid less than fourth of those in formal sectors. Many domestic female workers are migrants, they belong from highly marginalised population of India and are compelled to move to cities because of poverty and are often victims of exploitation, abuse, slavery and sometimes prostitution under informal sectors. A recent case surfaced from the Shivpuri District of Madhya Pradesh where in a practice of Dhadeecha Pratha a village market is set up where the families rent out their wives and daughters for 500 Indian rupees and the practice primarily attack young adolescent women between the age of 8-15 years. These young females are drugged in order to stimulate the growth of their organs, these females are also bought by rich men and are referred as "Paro" or "Molki" brides meaning someone with a price. Such practises are often performed by families under abject poverty with no source of income and has been followed around since decades despite of many researches the police authority has not probed into the matter as of now. Indian law prohibits the trafficking of brides, sexual exploitation and child labour is debarred under immoral trafficking prevention act, child labour act and Indian Penal code however even after coming to light such practices are not paid enough attention at which makes us understand about the underlying gap in our laws which addresses trafficking and bonded slavery.

#### 4. War's Captive Shadows :

Outcome of a war is similar to that of a volcano which is destruction. Lekhapaddhati is a Sanskrit script written in 8<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century BCE composed during the Chalukyan Empire in Gujrat. It is a set of documents consisting of rules of administration, land grants and treaties between rulers. The Lekhapadati talks about the practice of women slavery where they were captured during wars or other conflicts and enslaved. These women would be incorporated in household chores as slaves or concubines. Similarly in Ramayana an epic illustrates the act of slavery of women during war for example Ravana abducted Sita however it is not an act of slavery but still depicts the fate of people who were conquered upon during wars. Moving forward to the medieval India during the Mughal rule there were two categories of slaves "Ghulams" were military slaves who were either captured during wars or purchased, they were mostly men and the second category was household slaves comprising of both men and women captured during wars or purchased. Later in the 18<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century during the course of rule of Britishers in India slave ownership was permitted and number of slave markets were seen operating near Calcutta. A sub total of 11,21,585 slaves were held by the East India Company in the year 1830 in its territories. No census for slave population was conducted during British India however Mr Peggs gives us an estimated data as follows;

Fig.1

Provinces	No. of slaves
Canara, Coorg, Wynad, Cochin and Travancore	2,54,000
Malabar	1,47,000
Assam	11,300



<b>Surat</b>	3000
<b>Ceylon</b>	27,397
<b>Penang</b>	3000
<b>Tinnevelly</b>	3,24,000
<b>Trichinopoly</b>	10,600

Judge Baber estimated the prevalence of 15000 slaves in Bombay. Mr. A D Campbell throws light on the slavery in Madras. He explained that the primary group of people subjected to slavery were called “*Pariar*” which might be a misspelling of “*Pariah*” which denotes a marginalised person who is oppressed in a society. Slavery increased in India during British rule it is estimated to have increased by 65% from 1806-1842. Dr. Francis Buchanan reports that about 41,367 people were slaves in almost the entire region of Malabar and Kerela had about 4.25 Lakh slaves. Stigma and social oppression surrounded slavery, they were expected to maintain distance from their masters and were often abandoned when infected with diseases. The slaves usually belonged from a lower caste and were mostly supervised from a distance and were soon categorized as untouchables or “*Achhuts*”.

## 5. Solution;

Quoting Indian Nobel Laureate Kailash Satyarthi “*Caste, Religion, The Political System, The Economic System- All are helping bonded labour owners.. I believe in Gandhi’s philosophy of the last man, that is, the bonded labourer is the last man in the Indian society, that we are here to liberate the last man*” inspires us to uphold the rights of marginalised and victimised. In order to eradicate slavery we propound the following recommendations;

**Policy Reforms:** Strengthen laws and policies aimed at removing modern forms of slavery, such as the Schedule Caste and Schedule Tribes Act, 1989, and the Bonded Labour System Act, 1976. Bringing about such a policy where labourers working in informal sectors should also be in the official records of the Government. Such records should include the working conditions and the wages they are drawing further government can establish grievance centre for the labourers working in the unorganised sectors.

**Educational Inclusivity:** Revise and incorporate the history of slavery and its intersection with caste and gender into school curricula, as well as stimulate critical thinking on relevant themes, to instil empathy and awareness in future generations

**Community Engagement:** Conducting joint seminars with Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and civil society organisation through which we can highlight issues encountered by Dalits, Adivasis and women thus aiming at ensuring they receive justice alongside equal representation in our societies.

**Economic Empowerment:** Economic empowerment programs like microfinance should be implemented so as to enable an increased social standing and economic improvement for communities that are generally deprived, through these initiatives concentrating more on skill development and entrepreneurship aspects thereby helping them gain a better socio-economic status

**International Collaboration:** Collaborate with international organizations to exchange knowledge and develop joint strategies to combat slavery globally.

**Caste Census:** A caste census with new data is important in order to identify the issues faced by the democratic countries and to study the progress of those marginalised sections in order to address their needs or requirements as well as understand gaps in our system which is hindering their upliftment such as education, health and economic status. This can help policy makers to ensure proper help is delivered to that deserving caste.

## 6. Conclusion :

This research paper has highlighted a comprehensive historical scrutiny of slavery in India, delving into the complex and multi-faceted nature of this prevalent social evil. Through a careful examination of various primary and secondary



sources this research paper demonstrates the entrenched presence of slavery throughout the Indian history with special focus on ancient times. The study highlights the role of caste and gender in slavery and its various forms and also underscores the need for an understanding of the historical roots of slavery in India recognizing the intersections of caste, gender and class penetrated in this system of oppression. It is important to acknowledge that slavery continues to manifest in form of bonded labour, human trafficking and discrimination based on caste and gender. As India is aspiring to become a developed nation by 2047, social evils like slavery that still exists despite India being a 5<sup>th</sup> largest economy needs to be addressed with special focus on informal sector where the exploitation of labourers is highly reported. Eradicating slavery will require dedicated commitment to social justice, human rights and inclusive development. By learning the historical roots of Slavery we can develop an understanding about how it emerged and the factors that push people towards it so that we can work towards creating a more equitable and just society. A society where everyone is treated with dignity and respect irrespective of their social standing.

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