

A GLIMPSE AT THE SYSTEM OF SLAVERY

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ABSTRACT

Slavery ingrained into human life in such way that it never came to the minds of slaves that their condition was unjust or brutal. Both the slaves and their masters accepted their status of birth without undue question. Anthropological and sociological changes coloured slavery with tints and shades of human desires. Slaves in most societies were despised. For an insightful comprehension of the system of slavery it is essential to trace out the attitudes of the world's great religions and civilizations towards it. In the passing of time slavery got faded as an institution but not yet uprooted from human psyche. It is still playing its dice in the form of class, caste, race and gender exploitation. Without proper check in the present times if we continue exploding science and stripping off the dignity of the weak, soon we might pay a heavy price for that.

KEYWORDS: Civilization, Check, Deprivation, Exploitation, Slavery

INTRODUCTION

Slavery is nothing but deprivation of the very basic human rights and degradation of life to that of an animal. It is the worst kind of exploitation a human being can perpetuate on another human being. Ironically, it was entrenched in such a way that it became an accepted feature, often essential to the economy and society, of all ancient civilizations – Mesopotamian, Greco-Roman, Indian and Chinese. The practice of slavery dates to prehistoric times, although its institutionalization first occurred only with the advancement of systematic agriculture.

Early man lived in communion with Nature as a companion to other living beings. In the process of evolution man stood tall and erect as a dominant creature, taking pride in killing wild animals for food and self protection. Man's dependency on Nature slowly had driven him towards farming. After Neolithic age agrarian culture flourished and agricultural produce became the main source of nourishment. Even nomadic life escalated agrarian culture pushing hunter-gatherers, who managed wild life, also towards agriculture. Relying more on natural resources for irrigation, man has to put back breaking labour to get stomach full. This left no time for other things except –work, eat and sleep. For many years the story remained same. Living together enforced barter system to meet the deficiencies in their basic needs.

Later in some favourable conditions a few produced more than their requirement. Initially the surplus food grains did not appear as an asset to the unsophisticated individual who failed to utilize it effectively and independently. Invariably he turned towards collective will and decision, giving way to politics. In this process the master stroke of political commandeering changed the attitude of the people and gave way to a privileged minority. They were exempted from

involving in strenuous agricultural activities and also trading. Their free time initiated creative thinking, giving birth to human civilization.

Human intelligence prospered human life in myriad directions. Irony was that among the privileged minority, the thoughts of only a few formulated into archeology, art, dance, architecture, poetry, astronomy, medicine etc. engaging and facilitating human life whereas the rest of the people engaged their free time in crime and folly. The progress of these two dimensions of human society however demanded more and more workers. Tactically the privileged few started exploiting the workers. In exchange for the workers' labor, they gave them their surplus food. To keep the workers more humble they always kept them on the edge of starvation by giving them the bare minimum. For the workers there are only two options – work for the master or perish in starvation.

Slavery ingrained into human life in such way that it never came to the minds of slaves that their condition was unjust or brutal. Both the slaves and the slave masters accepted their status of birth without undue question. Everyday reality of survival, reproduction, work, religious rituals dominated their lives. When one does not have free time to contemplate, notions of freedom, fairness and equality are nonexistent and immediate practical needs dominate. Soon enough slavery became a way of life. Anthropological and sociological changes coloured slavery with tints and shades of human desires. Exploiting the needs of the workers, empires were built. Though the construction of cities reflects scientific temperament, it requires brute human force. Egyptian Pyramids as one of the world wonders stand exemplary to this fact as it involved grueling efforts and deaths of millions and millions of workers.

Progress in architecture made slavery an important part of the economy and society. Status and material wealth were prized and slaves are counted as things that they possessed. By 500BC in Greece each citizen had one or two slaves and rich landowners had hundreds of them. As the kingdom expanded harvesting labour from the local population became difficult and invading neighbourhood increased. On the other hand slavery became an ordinary part of life even with the prevailing religious idea that ruler is the representative of God and opposing him is nothing but opposing God.

With the passing of time, social stratification increased competition in material wealth. This led to conflict and war became inevitable. The primary means of acquiring slaves was through wars. War prisoners, people convicted of serious crimes and also debtors, who sold themselves to pay their debts, became instrumental in the development of human society. Historically the traces of slavery were visible in every age and in every nation. The leading states of Greece - Sparta and Athens - depended entirely upon forced labour, though the system in Sparta was more properly described as serfdom rather than slavery.

Roman slavery differs from that of ancient Greece in many important aspects. Slaves were used for labour as well as amusement – a few as gladiators and a few as sex slaves. They are mere doormats to their master's emotions. If at all a slave tried to run away, the punishment is crucifixion. Slave trade became pillars of commerce in many kingdoms during 6 to 11th century. As slave population increased revolt started cropping up. In 600BC in Sparta there are several slave revolts, the most famous of them led by Spartacus. To mitigate these revolts Spartans restructured their city-state into an authoritarian regime, to control dominant enslaved population.

Slaves in most societies were despised. Throughout history slaves often been considered to be stupid, uneducable, lazy, untruthful, prone to drunkenness, idle, boorish, licentious and cowardly. For an insightful comprehension of the system of slavery it is essential to trace out the attitudes of the world's great religions and civilizations towards it. Frequent

reference to slavery was made in the canonical texts of Judaism and Islam but with no particular attention and significance. They treated it as a natural condition and didn't augment it. Unlike Islamic practice of manumitting an outsider after six years, New Testament Christianity had no prescriptions that slaves be manumitted. Canon law sanctioned slavery. But wherever Christianity prevailed, slave raids ceased as bishops held the belief that a Christian could not morally own another Christian. At the time of the advent of Islam (7th century) slavery was rampant throughout India, Persia, Rome, Greece, Rumania and the Arabian Peninsula. The condition of slaves was similar in all these countries as slaves were deprived of even the basic human rights.

India's first major civilization flourished at the same time as the ancient civilizations of Egypt and Sumer, but managed to outlast them. The Aryan tribes came from central Asia and entered India through Afghanistan and destroyed the earlier and more advanced people inhabited in the Indus Valley and imposed upon them their culture and language. Gradually a systematic society was forged turning tribes into kingdoms and people into different classes according to their mode of work. The elite such as rulers, priests and merchants became the Aryans and the subdued slaves and labourers who are present day 'Shudra' class became Dravidians or AUSTRICS. In time this stratified society crystallized into the present day caste system. And Slavery became a part of social ethos. Any violation against these ethos invited divine wrath.

The worst crime committed on Indian slaves / sudras was by the religious texts such as *Manu Smriti*, *Vishnu Smriti* etc. These texts misconstrued the Indian idea of social gradation which was based on individual's capacity and inner nature and allowed the practice of taking birth as a basis of 'varna.' Thus slavery in India remained as plight and predicament without any protest. The apartheid Indians never thought that they were slaves instead they took it as their fate. In yester years it was Buddha and in modern times it was Gandhi who protested this and genuinely worked to liberate these unfortunate people. But still in the rural heartland of India, feudalism prevailed in the name of political authority and slavery continued in the name of bonded labour.

The social segregation is so perfect in India that any infringement was brutally controlled and contained. People like Baba Saheb Ambedkar, who were born in the system, fought against it, raised to the highest position in the Indian constitution of assembly, created provision for eradication of caste system, gender bias and untouchability, was eventually frustrated at the bottle necks he came across right from Parliament House to village Panchayat, revised Buddhism and became important leader in Neo Buddhist movement.

Coming to the Chinese empire, the institution of hereditary slavery reaches back to as far as the Xia and Shang dynasty. In order to strengthen the economy even Shang China welcomed slavery by permitting debtors to give away women and children as repayment of debts. In this system most slaves were owned by the state instead of belonging to individuals. During Han Dynasty slavery expanded rapidly in China and had an important place in its economy. Like mere animals, slaves were sold and their servitude was hallmarked by a certificate inscribed with the slave's name and date of birth. Arab traders brought East African slaves for the first time during Tang China. Going through the article entitled "Slavery in Imperial China," one can infer that the institution of slavery was prominent in the Chinese Tang Code and in certain aspect stood synonymous to the Mesopotamian Code of Hammurabi and the Indian Laws of Manu. Following the strict hierarchy of Tang society the Code assigns punishments by making comparative status assessment of the culprit and the victim.

When compared to other slave trades the Atlantic Slave Trade played a pivotal role in European and American economics. It was understood that the geographical location and conditions of the Atlantic Ocean augmented enslavement of African people. They were uprooted from their motherland and taken away to the distant colonies of the New World. This slave trade is sometimes addressed as the Maafa or African Holocaust by some scholars. This involved four continents – Africa, Europe, Asia, Americas; four centuries (16-19) and millions of people. The trade made Europe to prosper leaving indelible scars on Africa's psyche, the richest continent on earth. Human beings were torn from their homeland and packed into a savage vessel, destined for a nightmarish existence. The grueling journey often consisted of slaves thrown overboard, whipping, chaining, suffocation, overpowering despair and disease. The unspeakable human savagery was well depicted in Alex Haley's *Roots*. Though it is the author's search for his own roots, the story begins with a boy called Kunte Kinte. He was forced into slavery and progresses through many generations, enduring the worst human tragedies. The book reflects the pain, hurt and humiliation that blacks suffered at the hands of their white master.

The primary resistance to slavery started on a slave ship. The restlessness of slaves caused revolts and slaves broke the tools, committed suicides and mothers even preferred to kill their daughters in order to save them from the clutches of slavery. The rebellious nature of the slaves differed according to the areas which they came from in Africa. Until antislavery publications such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* released in the late 18th century, Europe remained blind against the sufferings and suicides of slaves. Proliferation of various forms of creative writings both fiction and nonfiction works about the immorality and horror of African chattel slavery took place in Britain and the United States. As mentioned in the 'Introduction' of *Literary Criticism* (2001), the African characters started appearing in many fictional writing of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries including the most famous Shakespeare's *Othello*. However, the first literary work specifically about slavery and the slave trade is Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko; Or The Royall Slave*.

Even in the world of letters the attention of readers and critics rested on the whites' responses to the "slavery problem" and for many years the impact of African literary figures on the issue of abolition of slavery remained unacknowledged. But later the very few available accounts about the slave trade and slavery by the former captives became invaluable as they offered unique perspectives on the unspeakable raw happenings in the lives of blacks. *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano* by Equiano was one such source. Equiano was kidnapped as a boy from his homeland Nigeria. He describes in his memoir:

"The first object which saluted my eyes when I arrived on the coast was the sea, and a slave ship . . . filled me with astonishment which was soon converted to terror when I was carried on board. I was immediately handled and tossed up to see if I were sound by some of the crew; and I was now persuaded that I had gotten into a world of bad spirits and that they were going to kill me. . . . Indeed such were the horrors of my views and fears at the moment, that, if ten thousand worlds had been my own, I would freely parted with them all to have exchanged my condition with that of the meanest slave in my own country." (Costanzo, Angelo 2002)

Unlike their British counterparts white American writers of 17th and 18th century are less inclined to address against slavery. Despite the proliferation of antislavery literature during the Revolutionary years, writers who advocated freedom for blacks, including Thomas Jefferson, stressed on what they thought to be their "natural inferiority."

The real horror comes from black slavery. There are two reasons for this. First we started getting reportage of every horror and second is that whites were forced to behave in such a brutal way because of cultural difference. Blacks' pagan culture was very near to nature which has semblance to animal life. Hence, whites treated them as animals. The

more the blacks are brutalized the more animalistic they became. Thus, we come across Cholly Breedlove in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, who rapes his daughter Pecola and Bigger Thomas in Richard Wright's *Native Son* who smothers his white employer's daughter Mary Dalton to death and rapes his love Bessie to quell the truth. Both Cholly and Bigger were not born criminals. They were native sons, products of American culture and the violence and racism that suffuse it.

In the post slavery period it became difficult for black people to reconcile either with the earned freedom or lost culture. Thus post slavery writings reflect the fact that they are trying to write their past and start their lives anew as if nothing had happened. But the deeper scars invariably create manifestations as it happened in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Like post colonial writers post slavery writers wanted to express their protest by simply ignoring the culture that destroyed them. Every human being believes that it is no crime to steal his own lost things. So the blacks undoubtedly become great artists, writers, musicians, painters and even great criminals. They somehow wanted to get compensation for the suppression they suffered, for the energies they were stolen out of them and the vitality that is being destroyed.

Gender is one of the differentiating aspects in the system of slavery hence, men and women did not experience slavery the same way. For men it was black color and for women it was their gender that made them insignificant and mere objects. Slave women were exploited for their reproductive as well as productive capabilities. They were no more or less lustful than other women but in slavery their bodies did not command respect. Also, the skin of white women bestowed on them piety whereas the skin of black women attributed promiscuity and approved rape of black women. The violence done to the black woman's body was not recognized as a crime. They had to survive with and without the help of men or the female community. And the women did survive generation after generation. The slave system tried to beat them down but African American women survived conditions that were debilitating to body and mind, all the while inventing a 'womanhood' with its own meaning.

Throughout much of history, human bondage has been acceptable institution to a large part of mankind. Governed by greed mankind took too long a period and only around mid 19th century abolition of slavery began as a worldwide movement. Racism particularly that directed towards black Africans is not as ancient as slavery but by the 19th century these two unsavory features of human existence had become so inseparable that understanding one without the other was not possible. Civil Rights Movement, Emancipation Act etc., augmented the process of abolition and with passing of time slavery faded as an institution but not yet uprooted from human psyche. It was still playing its dice in the form of class, caste, race and gender exploitation.

A comprehensive glimpse at the system of slavery evidently shows that slavery is very much part of our progress and civilization. In the present world of science and technology everything is changing rapidly. Yet the basic human instinct of exploiting the weak remains unchanged allowing the presence of slavery and servitude in one form or the other. Refinement in culture, upliftment in human standards, innovation in science, hybridization in language should culminate in the nobility of human soul that can promote solidarity and advocate oneness. As long as we lived in communion with Nature without any kind of exploitation, we lived in peace and ignorance. Once we became intelligent enough to exploit the Nature either by mastering the slaves or digging quarries we started paying the price. Without proper check if we keep going on exploding science and stripping off the dignity of the weak, soon we might pay a heavy price for that. Debates, writings and movements are not sufficient, collective action is the need of the hour. Hence, envisioning forthcoming

cataclysm mankind needs to join hands in putting a check to exploitation and retrace steps to Nature and live with comradeship. This alone saves the species called human beings from an apocalypse.

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