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The Myth of the Golden Age of Equality

-Women Slaves in Ancient India*

“Women in grief”, Sarnath, second century BC

HISTORIANS of ancient India, have not altogether left out women from their accounts. In this they have been unlike most other historians the world over, in whose writings women hardly find a place. However the existing work on women in ancient India has tended to be obsessed with describing the position of women in the family and viewing this as an index of their status in Hindu civilisation. Further, there has been a major preoccupation with examining the religious and legal status of women but once again focusing only on the family setting. Thus there is a considerable body of writing on the woman's right to perform sacrifices along with her husband, on the position of the widow, on the institution of *stridhana*, on the childless widow's right to adopt, and so on. These preoccupations stem from the limited perspective of the writers and their almost exclusive reliance on Brahmanical sources. Consequently the information we have of women in ancient India is confined to women of the upper castes. At best this can be treated as a partial view from above. I have attempted to bring into focus women outside the family situation, and to turn the spotlight on to labouring women. I present here a different perspective on women by analysing the position of *dasis* who were an important section of women in ancient India.

*The Vedic period is generally reckoned to be circa 1100-500 BC, though some portions of the Rig Veda may have been composed prior to 1000BC. Of the other sources referred to in this article, the Arthashastra belongs to approximately the third century BC, the Brahmanas and Upanisads were composed circa 700 BC onwards. The Pali sources which are rich in narrative detail reflect the period circa 600 BC 600 AD

The term *dasi* is the feminine counterpart of the term *dasa* which has conventionally been translated as slave. However it is important to point out that the term *dasa* does not always imply a slave, especially a chattel slave, in the sense in which it appears in the ancient Greek or Roman situation. *Dasa* in the Indian context encompasses all categories of people over whose labour the master has some control. It includes all forms of servitude ranging from absolute control over a person on the one hand to limited, conditional and temporary bondage on the other. The powerful in ancient India did not rely on chattel slavery for performance of basic labour, and it is important to see *dasa* as a term which approximates to slave but which connotes a wider range of labouring categories than is represented by the term slave. This range is in keeping with the fact that the polar opposition between freeman and slave which was characteristic of the Greek and Roman societies did not exist in India.

The absence of freedom provided the basis for the definition of the term *dasa* in the early Buddhist texts. The Digha Nikaya states that the *dasa* was not his own master, was dependent on someone, and could not go where he liked. The term had come to represent these characteristics over a fairly long period of time. However when the term first appeared in Indian literature it was used to indicate a tribe which was hostile to the Aryans. After this tribe was subjugated, the term *dasa* came to be used for all categories of people who were subject to another person's control.

The terms *dasa* and *dasi* both appear in ancient Indian literature from the Rig Veda onwards but I will focus here on the *dasi* and attempt to build a picture of

women in servitude in ancient India. In the early portions of the Rig Veda there is evidence of a small servile class of women called *dasis* and it appears that while the male enemies of the Aryans were either killed or fled, the women were reduced to slavery. The earliest accessible references therefore point to an extremely significant but relatively unrecognised fact—the capture of a large number of women slaves from the subjugated *Dasa* people.¹

These references are doubly significant because men slaves are rarely mentioned in the Rig Veda. Further, women slaves are frequently spoken of in the context of wealth and are listed along with gold, cattle, and other assets in the later Vedic literature.² It appears reasonably certain from these references that there were more women slaves than men slaves in Vedic society and that they were also considered more valuable. The tremendous value that is attached to women slaves in the Vedic literature is borne out by some examples cited below. The Aitereya Brahmana states that 10,000 women slaves were gifted by the king of Anga to his chief priest along with cattle, wealth, and gold.³ One of the Rig Vedic hymns mentions the gift of 50 *dasis* to a priest.⁴ Elsewhere 10 chariots carrying abducted *dasis* are said to constitute a part of *daksina*.⁵ The Chandogya Upanisad (24.2) lists female slaves along with cattle, horses, gold, fields and houses to demonstrate the grandeur of their owners.⁶ Particularly significant for us is the fact that in the early Vedic literature cattle and women slaves constitute the only forms of movable property and are transferable unlike land.⁷

The predominance of women slaves over men slaves and the value attached to them requires some explanation both from the point of view of the history of

slavery as well as of the study of women in history. Sharma has suggested that women were important objects for which the wars between the Aryans and the Dasa people were fought.⁸ He argues that women are highly valued in a tribal context since they are “the producers of producers.”⁹ It is possible that the Aryans, whose numbers decreased during their long trek into India, required to replenish their stock for which women would have been needed urgently. We suggest that women slaves, at least in the early stages of Indian history, provided not merely a source of cheap labour but also doubled up as reproducers and replenishers of a declining stock and this explains their numerical preponderance over male slaves in the Vedic literature. The value attached to women slaves can be explained at least in part by their sexual and biological attributes which added to their value as sources of labour, a value that they shared with men.

A significant point to be noted is the association of the brahmana priests with the possession of a large number of *dasis*.¹⁰ The *dasis* are frequently stated to be objects of either *dana* or *daksina* and are handed to the chief priests by the king.¹¹ It is possible that the king represents the conqueror who has captured the *dasis* from the subjugated *Dasa* people here. The fact that the *dasis* are handed over to the brahmana priests in such large numbers (running into thousands in one reference) may actually signify a more fundamental process than would appear at first glance.¹² If the *dasis* were functioning even partially as replenishers of the declining stock of the Aryans then it would be necessary for them to go through a process of acculturation or Aryanisation and it is possible that the agency for this diffusion was the priest. The association of the brahmanas with a large number of women survived into later times. The post Vedic Buddhist literature frequently alludes to the association negatively when it attacks the brahmanas for leading a degenerate existence.¹³

Apart from their biological function the *dasis* are also likely to have contributed to the domestic production centering round cattle in the predominantly pastoral early Vedic society. Subsequently when agriculture began to replace pastoralism we begin to get occasional references to *dasis* in the

context of agriculture, The Atharva Veda refers to *dasis* being engaged in agricultural operations.¹⁴ However the earlier predominance of *dasis* over *dasas* gradually began to give way with the emergence of fullscale agricultural economy. Both *dasis* and *dasas* were now mentioned together working within the household of the master as well as outside it. References to *dasas* and *dasis* working the land are usually of a general kind and may represent family units which jointly worked the land in much the same way as family teams labour on the land even in contemporary times. Occasionally *dasis* alone are mentioned as for example the *dasi* who watched over her master’s field in one of the Jataka stories,¹⁵ but on the whole the *dasis* now began to be closely associated with domestic labour and it is in this context that they are more commonly mentioned. In fact all specific references to *dasis* in the Buddhist narrative literature are in the context of domestic service. *Dasis* also predominate over *dasas* in domestic service and it is clear that the real burden of domestic labour fell upon them.

A very pertinent reference in the Buddhist literature distinguishes between the work of the *dasis* and the work of the wives within the household. Buddhaghosha describes the work of the

slave girl (*dasi bhoga*) as that of working in the fields, removing filth, fetching water and doing other menial and drudge jobs. *Dasi bhoga* is opposed to *sunisaa bhoga* which designates the work of the daughter-in-law.¹⁶ It was this existing distinction within domestic service between the *dasis* and the womenfolk of the family (which obviously had its own gradation with the daughter-in-law only one step above the slave girls) that was invoked by one spirited daughter-in-law when she refused to be cawed down by her father-in-law’s authority and protested to him that she was not a *kumbhadasi*, a slave girl who carried water.¹⁷ It is also interesting that the heavy burden of domestic labour was strongly resented by some women who then shifted the burden on to their slave women. This is clear from the example of a young wife of an old brahmana in the Vessantara Jataka who repeatedly pestered her husband to get her at least one *dasi* to take over the domestic chores.¹⁸

Among the most strenuous and burdensome tasks of domestic labour performed by the *dasis* was the drawing and fetching of water. The *kumbhadasi* is described as having to get up early in the morning in order to fetch water which had often to be carried over vast



-Sketch by Jolly, based on Ajanta cave 1, early sixth century BC

Wailing women



Fainting queen waited upon by slaves

distances.¹⁹ It was considered particularly arduous because of the perennial nature of the task. Also the quantity of water required in a hot country like India would have placed a heavy burden on the *kumbhadasis*. Husking the rice was also considered to be a heavy task. One of the *dasis* is described as collapsing with exhaustion and then attempting to revive by seeding a breath of fresh air.²⁰ Another *dasi* is depicted as continuing to pound the rice well after sunset. The work of a *dasi* included cooking, making the beds, lighting the lamps, milking the cows and all the drudgery of domestic labour.²¹ Even the brahmana gurus made use of slave women to labour for them. One reference describes the young and able bodied disciples of a brahmana guru waking up the *dasi* early in the morning and asking her to prepare food for them.²² Significantly none of the *dasis* working in domestic service or in subsidiary agricultural operations appeared to envisage the possibility of a less burdensome existence. One *dasi*, when offered a gift to be obtained from the king, asked for a new pestle and mortar.²³ She was clearly limiting herself to the realm of the possible.

There are some references in ancient literature to suggest other functions for

the *dasis* apart from domestic service. Occasional references are made to slave women as guards.²⁴ More often *dasis* appear in the retinue of their well to do masters.²⁵ Sometimes there are hundreds of slave girls who are described as accompanying rich brides to their new homes as part of their dowry.²⁶ As early as the Rig Veda we get a reference to a *dasi* who accompanied her newly married mistress to the bride's new home in order to entertain her there.²⁷ A special category of *dasis* were the *dhatris* or wet nurses. Chanana is not quite certain whether the *dhatris* were slave women but from the general description it does not appear that they had much freedom.²⁸ The *dhati dasi* accompanied their mistresses to their new homes after marriage and lived with them for the rest of their lives.²⁹ Kautilya also refers to *dasis* among nurses and provides special rules for them.³⁰ Although the relationship between the nurse mothers and their mistresses was often characterised by great intimacy the function of the *dhatris* was nevertheless regarded as unclean. Metaphorical similarities are often drawn between the *dhatris* and things that are unclean since their garments were invariably soiled with various kinds of unpleasant discharges.³¹

Considerably higher in terms of

prestige were the *nataka itthis* who were women in the harems of princes and monarchs.* Although the *nataka itthis* did not have the status of wives, since they could be disposed of, sold or even inherited,³² they had some years of comparative comfort. The *dasis* in the royal entourage did not have to labour physically. They merely had to entertain their masters and generally please them. More privileged as they were because of their physical appeal, they were totally dependent upon assets which were unfortunately and necessarily of a temporary nature. The literature clearly gives evidence that in their old age the distinction between them and other *dasis* virtually disappeared. For example some of them might become nursemaids and stay on in royal service. The ever pragmatic Arthashastra with its comprehensive control over all available sources of labour suggests that old *devadasis* and old *dasis* of the king should be employed usefully to cut wool, fibre, cotton, and flax.³³ Weaving was under state supervision and according to the Arthashastra a large number of women were employed in these state workshops. The work of carrying raw material to and from other women who worked at home but would not themselves venture out of their houses also fell upon the ex *dasi* inmates of the royal harem.³⁴

According to the Arthashastra brothels were run by the state and a prostitute slave when past enjoyment could be put to work in the store or the kitchen.³⁵ Other less fortunate ones might even end up as wandering spies who had to pick up information and pass it on to the institute of espionage.³⁶ In mature years, therefore, the women in the king's service lost some of their comfort while regaining no real freedom. They were merely reduced to the status of the other labouring *dasis*.

It is fairly evident from numerous references in the Jatakas that the *dasis* were often subjected to threats and abuses by their masters. The slave girl Punika for example was required to fetch water all day from early dawn right into

*A late reference in the *Agni Purana* suggests the possibility of a flourishing slave trade in exotic women for the entertainment and sexual pleasure of the wealthy sections. The reference in the *Agni Purana* provides for the imposition of import duties on *dasis* according to the country of their origin.

the night.³⁷ This was an arduous job, especially in winter, but Punika had no respite because of the threats and abuses showered upon her. The fact that her master was a devoted Buddhist did not in any way alleviate her suffering. The threat of physical violence probably reduced the slave girls to a situation in which they were completely under the control of their masters. The Buddhist literature frequently uses the expression “meek as a hundred piece slave girl”³⁸ and it is evident from this that the *dasīs* had been so completely suppressed that they became synonymous with meekness.

Meekness, however, was no guarantee against violence. We have the example of a *dasi* who was beaten by her master because she had not handed over to him the wages she had earned by working for someone other than her master.³⁹ There is another heart rending account of a *dasi* called Rajjumala who had been badly abused from childhood. The mistress often caught hold of her hair and slapped and kicked her. To escape her torture the girl had her head shaved by the barber but her mistress then tied her head with a rope and beat her. Unable to bear the torture any further, Rajjumala escaped to the forest and attempted to commit suicide.⁴⁰

Notwithstanding all the incidents of physical violence against *dasīs* that we have cited, by far the most vulnerable area of a slave girl’s existence was the sexual abuse and the sexual violence to which she could be subjected. This was a special burden which slave women had to bear—not only did they labour like the *dasas* but they were also exposed to sexual exploitation. The Buddhist literature gives us an example of a slave girl who was forced to sleep with her master. This was not all—when the mistress found out about the incident she cut off the slave girl’s nose in a fit of jealous rage.⁴¹ Of course, as is usual even today, the action was directed against the victim and not the violator.

The fact that the sexual exploitation of *dasīs* was a common reality was taken note of by the Arthashastra which attempted to contain the sexual abuse of *dasīs*. Kautilya ruled that no master should have the pledged *ahitaka dasi* attending on him while he bathed.⁴² The violation of a pledged *dasi* would cause the master to forfeit the value of the pledged amount.⁴³ Sexual violence against a

pledged *dasi* who was a nursemaid or a cook in domestic service would result in the freeing of the *dasi* concerned. The master was also liable to receive punishment.⁴⁴ If a master raped a *dasi* who was pledged to him and was under his protection, or helped another to do so, he was not only to forfeit the purchase value but also to compensate her with money.⁴⁵ Similarly the daughter of a pledged *dasa* or *dasi* who was violated by the master was to be compensated with jewellery

bondswomen, over whom the master had only partial control. The protective rules for *ahitaka dasīs* are in keeping with similar protection to the *ahitaka dasas* in terms of the kind of work that could be allotted to them. They enjoyed immunity from impure work and from being subjected to physical violence. For the older categories of *dasīs*, over whom the master had absolute control, and who could not look forward to possible redemption, no such protective



Sketch based on Ajanta cave 1, second half of sixth century BC

Slaves at work

and money as a contribution towards her *sulka* or nuptial fee.⁴⁶ Apart from this the man had to pay a fine to the ever vigilant state. If the master produced children through his *dasi* the *dasi* and the offspring would be freed.⁴⁷ The Arthashastra also provided for the protection and maintenance of the *dasi* during pregnancy.⁴⁸

It is difficult to estimate what effect Kautilya’s injunctions may have had in reducing the sexual exploitation of the *dasi* women, especially since their vulnerability was an outcome of their position as *dasīs*, as women who were partially or completely under the control of their masters. Most significant is the distinction that Kautilya makes between the ordinary *dasi* and the *ahitaka dasi* since almost all his injunctions apply to the *ahitaka dasi*, that is to the

legislation is provided. It is reasonably clear that other categories of *dasīs* continued to be treated as sexually exploitable, even legally. The Arthashastra seems to have succeeded only in establishing the superior control of the state over the masters, and in utilising the widely prevalent sexual exploitation to the advantage of the state. This was achieved by making many of the offences punishable, but by imposing fines payable to the state as punishment rather than providing for imprisonment.

According to Chinese accounts of the sixth and seventh centuries, there were no female slaves in India.⁴⁹ It is important to note that the statement implies that there were a few male slaves and that the situation is exactly the reverse of the position with which we began this discussion. At the beginning of the period

female slaves outnumbered male slaves. At the end of the period one can see a decline in the institution of slavery generally and the virtual disappearance of *dasis* more specifically. What meaning can one derive from these twin references? Is it possible that women slaves were now hardly required for their labour and also that they were unnecessary now for purposes of mass reproduction? Society and the economy in the sixth and seventh centuries were relatively more stable than they had been in early Vedic times, and this may account for the comparative absence of *dasis* during this period. It is also possible that female slave labour was being replaced by *visti* or forced labour rendered by women in rural India. The *Kamasutra*, for example, contains an interesting reference which indicates that *visti* was imposed on the womenfolk by the headman of the village.⁵⁰ According to Vatsyayana unpaid work of various kinds such as filling up his granaries, working on his field, decorating his residence, was rendered by the womenfolk of the village to the headman.⁵¹ The burden of *visti* was usually shifted on to the poorest sections of the village, and we have no reason to think that it was otherwise in the case of women. Further, while this reference might suggest the reduced need for slave labour in early medieval times, the vulnerability of women to sexual exploitation survived even in *visti*. Vatsyayana concludes his statement on women performing *visti* for the headman by pointing out that these are occasions when sexual intercourse may be had with such women.

While women, like men, were included in debt bondage, Narada and Visnu suggest that women, like cattle, could be lent out to others.⁵² Featuring in a list of items along with gold and grain but especially associated with cattle are women (men are missing from the list) who can not only be lent out but upon whom it is normal to levy interest. In the case both of women and of cattle the interest that is prescribed is the same - one issue.⁵³ This means that when a woman was borrowed and subsequently returned to the original owner she would have to be returned along with one of the issues that she had produced during the period of loan. If she had had more than one issue the borrower would be entitled to keep the others. Even as a theoretical exercise the provision smacks of crass materialism

and a peculiarly insensitive form of exploitation. Quite obviously women were treated as mere objects and there was no notion of a family unit in the case of debt bondswomen.

In the light of the material compiled here, it is clear that many women in ancient India were perceived outside the familiar contours of the family, property, and religion. In fact there were innumerable women who had no property and whose place in the family or whose



Dancing girl with musicians

role as wives and mothers were irrelevant to the wider society which viewed them merely as sources of cheap labour. Their labouring characteristics, which they shared with male *dasas*, were compounded by their vulnerability to sexual exploitation. Women in servitude who laboured outside the family were as much a part of ancient India as they are a part of modern India. Their situation may have changed marginally in form, but the basic characteristics of their existence remain virtually the same. □

References for "The Myth of The Golden Age of Equality—Women Slaves in Ancient India"

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