

From Bondage To Bureaucracy: The Evolution Of Slavery In India From Ancient Servitude To The Centralised Political Order Of The Delhi Sultanate

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Abstract: This research paper examines the institution of slavery in medieval India by analysing its functional role and evolving character. When we discuss slavery in the context of ancient India, we get references from early Dharmashastra texts, Buddhist scriptures, and the Jatakas. To address these institutional changes and the evolving character, this paper explores the different forms of bondage that existed before the coming of the Sultanate rule. The paper examines continuity and transition of slavery from a socially embedded institution to a centralised form. It reassesses the transformed nature, social status, and broader socio-political significance of slavery as an institution.

Keywords: Slavery in Indian context, Servitude, Social mobility, Transformation in Polity, Continuity in State craft

I. INTRODUCTION

According to Gerda Lerner slavery is “the first institutionalized form of hierarchical dominance in human history.” Since its inception it has evolved over time. Similarly, the study of the institution of slavery in India has been shaped by different interpretations about its emergence and even its evolving character structure one of which was about its emergence as an institution after the advent of Turkish rule in India. Classical accounts of Megasthenes, which also suggest that absence of slavery in India, have further reinforced this misconception. However, considering the lack of sources at a certain period as its full absence, but rather than a limitation because of the changing nature of the institution. Before the emergence of sultanate rule in India, slavery persisted in decentralized and socially embedded forms. A transformative period was marked by the coming of Turks, slavery being increasingly centralized, militarized, and being integrated as a rising role in the society by redefining its socio-political role.

II. OBJECTIVE

To what extent was slavery in ancient and early medieval India a socially embedded institution, and how did its nature and socio-political status transform with the advent of Turkish rule?

This research aims to reframe the narratives of slavery as a Turkish import with the help of qualitative analysis, and an understanding of the historical gaps created due to the lack of resources. Interpretations upon it were deeply analysed by historians like Sunil Kumar, Ali Anooshahr, K. A. Nizami, helps in understanding how slavery as a concept has evolved from a period.

After understanding these narratives, this research aims to reinterpret them by understanding the gaps as limitation rather than complete absence. Early observers such as Megasthenes in the 3rd century BCE spoke about the absence of the concept of slavery in India. However, such statements require critical assessment with the help of Indigenous accounts, which suggest the existence of labor and servitude embedded within social and economic structures. The study also aims to fill these knowledge gaps in the understanding of slavery in the Indian context.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study is based on a qualitative method of both primary and secondary sources. To set up the historical context, a range of secondary works by historians such as O. P. Srivastava, Sunil Kumar, Peter Jackson, and Indrani Chatterjee were looked at closely, providing critical historiographical perspectives on the nature and transformation of slavery in India.

Primary insights were taken from the accounts of foreign travellers such as Al-Biruni, Ibn Battuta, and Ibn Khaldun, which offer valuable observations on social structures and practices of everyday life.

In addition, as a part of my Data collection process I also visited the National Archives of India and the National Museum Library, where relevant books and scholarly materials were examined to various sources, which also helped in reconstruction and interpretation of the institution of slavery across different historical periods.

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of slavery in India has been viewed from different historiographical perspectives, highlighting its aspects of its nature and development during different periods.

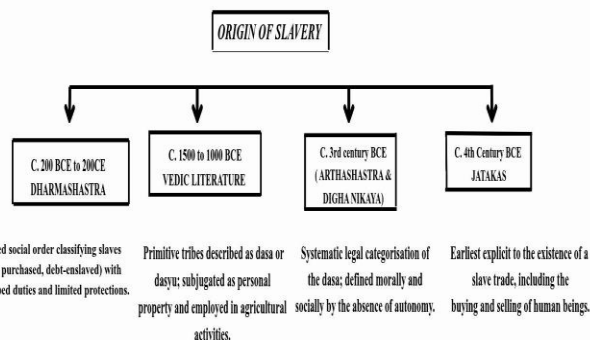
Dev raj Channa to disprove the myth they slavery did not exist in ancient India, talks about the reference of slavery in ancient texts from the period of Harappa till the end of the Vedic period. He also emphasizes the foreign sources of the earliest period, the 3rd century BC, from the text of the Greek philosopher Megasthenes, which was later translated by Arian and Stardo.

Sharad Patil connects the origins of slavery to the growth of social stratification and early feudal structures. It explores several core Marxist and subaltern's themes on the subcontinent's social structure. In. In

I O. P. Srivastava, in an equivalent way points at the presence of slave trade networks in Ancient and Early Medieval India, showing that slavery was not marginal but embedded within the domestic fields and agrarian economy.

L. K. P. Dwivedi further illustrates how slavery between c. 600–1200 CE was practised through everyday practices such as war captivity, ritual gifting, and economic dependency. At the same time, accounts by A. K. Srivastava from Arab travellers offer an outsider's view and critique these indigenous forms of servitude.

A distinct perspective emerges in the works of Sunil Kumar and Indrani Chatterjee, who show how slavery under the Delhi Sultanate became more organized and intricately linked to political power. Similarly, Ali Anooshahr places military slavery within a broader comparative context, highlighting its importance in state formation process. Peter Hardy emphasis on how slavery did not act just as a mere economic institution but also as an instrument of state formation. Peter Jackson talks about the presence of hierarchy within the structure of slavery itself. Together, these studies help trace a shift from locally embedded forms of slavery to a more structured and a centralised form of system.



SLAVERY DURING ANCIENT PERIOD: A SOCIALLY EMBEDDED INSTITUTION

The origin of slavery in Indian society can be traced to its early phases of social stratification and hierarchical organizations. These sources are the earliest from c. 200 BCE–200 CE up to the 4th century BCE signifies the presence of slavery in its indigenous form. Dasas and Sudras were the primary creators of wealth in ancient India. Their ceaseless toil eventually formed the basis of both the slavery system and the caste structure. The evolutionary transition of indigenous society from matriarchy to the patriarchal, state-backed slavery of the Sudras, which was eventually displaced by caste-based feudalism. The socio-economic evolution of the slavery from the 6th century to the beginning of the Christian era has been seen through Pali canonical literature over normative Dharmashastras to provide a more objective, historical view of the slave's daily life and status. Altogether, these sources show that slavery in ancient India evolved as a socially embedded institution, deeply integrated within its economic, legal, and moral frameworks over time.

SLAVERY IN EARLY MEDIEVAL INDIA: WARFARE, TEMPLE ECONOMY, AND FOREIGN ACCOUNTS

The Early Medieval period in India was marked by decentralization and constant warfare among regional kingdoms, such as the Rashtrakutas, Pratiharas, Palas, and Cholas. During these conflicts, war captives were often enslaved. Epigraphic evidence, particularly from the Chola period during the reigns of Rajaraja I and Rajendra II, provides instances of these practices. Daud Ali notes upon The Tamil inscriptional evidence mentions the acquisition of female war captives during the early medieval centuries for the institution of velam. These war captives were sometimes distributed as part of royal largesse or were assigned to temples.

Inscriptions from the Brihadeeswara Temple at Thanjavur (11th century) record the donation of male and female slaves—often referred to as adiyal or dasi—to temples. A 13th century inscription from Tanjore records that a peasant sold himself to the temple for 100 kassu to save his children from starvation, which signifies how debt bondage also produced slaves. BD Chattopadhyaya and Hermann Kulke have shown that, the Chola ideal of kingship envisaged a mode of territorial

conquest that linked the temporal and spiritual domains through temple institutions.

Foreign travellers also provide valuable insights into the existence of slavery in India. Al-Biruni, who wrote extensively about Indian society, noted the presence of servile groups and social hierarchies, which were later interpreted through the lens of caste.

V. EPOCH OF CHANGE: EVOLUTION OF SLAVERY AS AN INSTITUTION

The process of enslavement uprooted individuals from their natal environments and placed them in entirely new sociopolitical settings, where they were stripped of their prior social identities. Ibn Khaldun spoke about how military slaves were valuable subordinates because they were natively alienated and socially dead. Fakhr – i – Mudabbir noted something like Khaldun’s sight. This condition made them highly dependent on their masters, making loyalty and service central to their existence in the society.

The conquest of Delhi in 1192 by the Ghurid ruler Muhammad of Ghor marked the beginning of a new political phase in the Indian subcontinent, eventually leading to the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate. This period signifies a major transformation in the political structure of North India and has still been controversial and widely debated among historians. This era was distinct in which “slaves became nobles,” which highlights, the emergence of slaves as a powerful and influential class within the ruling elite.

One of the significant interpretations is “Slaves as Nobles.” The title not only signifies the social mobility of all slaves but also refers to one category of the bandgan structure which was the Shamsi bandgan who rose during a special period. The term “Nobles” defined for individuals who were politically franchised by the Sultan and given iqta’s were notified as Nobles.

While slave-officials had existed earlier, it was Iltutmish who institutionalized the bandagan system, transforming personally acquired slaves into a loyal administrative and military elite. This system was designed to create a dependable and efficient cadre that was fully subordinate to the Sultan. Under arrangement, the Sultan selected, trained, and promoted a group of slaves known as bandagan (a Persian term meaning dependents or slaves) to key positions, such as governors, military commanders, and high-ranking officials. Unlike the traditional Turkish nobles, who often owned independent power bases and could challenge royal authority, these bandagan remained personally loyal to the Sultan, thereby strengthening the central authority.

VI. LOYALTY, SERVICE AND AUTHORITY: THE BANDGAN STRUCTURE

The Bandagans undergo a structured process of training and socialization before rising through the ranks. Their advancement depended not on a rigid, pre-existing hierarchy but on their demonstrated personal worth and loyalty (khidmat) to their masters. Central to this process was

parwarish (nurturing) and tarbiyat (training), through which masters shaped the character, conduct, and capabilities of their slaves. They were instructed in religion, courtly etiquette, and the administrative norms of their unique environment. For instance, the value of Qutb al-Din Aibak was significantly enhanced because of his religious training which he received under the noted Hanafi jurist Qadi al-Qudat Fakhr al-Din ‘Abd al-Aziz Kufi.’

The Delhi Sultans, 1192-1526. The Delhi sultans ruled over large tracts of north India. This table provides information on three of their five” dynasties" or "regimes." Lineages are listed in chronological order of rule within each "dynasty."

Mamluk Regime (1206-1290)	Khalaji Regime (1290-1320)	Tughlaq Regime (1320-1414)
Qutbi Lineage: 1206-10	Jalali Lineage: 1290-96	Ghiyasi Lineage: 1320-51
Qutb al-Din Aybak: 1206-10	Jalal al-Din Firuz Shah: 1290-96	
Aram Shah: 1210	Rukn al-Din: 1296	Ghiyas al-Din: 1320-24
Shamsi Lineage: 1236-66		Muhammad Shah: 1324-51
Shams al-Din Iltutmish: 1	Alai Lineage: 1296-1320	
Rukn al-Din Firuz Shah: 1236	Ala al-Din Khalaji: 1296-1316	
Raziyya: 1236-40	Qutb al-Din Mubarak Shah: 1316 1320	Firuzi Lineage: 1351-1412
Mu’izz al-Din Bahram Shah: 1240-42	Barwari interregnum	Firuz Shah: 1351-88
Ala al-Din Mas’ud Shah: 1242-44	Nasir al-Din Khusrau Khan Barwari 1320	
Nasir al-Din Mahmud Shah: 1242-66		
Ghiyasi Lineage: 1266-90		
Ghiyas al-Din Balban: 1266-86		
Mu’izz al-Din Kaiqubad: 1286-90		
Kayumarth: 1290		

Source: Lineages are listed in chronological order.

VII. SLAVERY AND NOBLE FORMATION IN THE SHAMSI TRADITION

Among the Bandgan structure, the Shamsi bandgan formed under Iltutmish’s rule were the most favored groups.

While Shamsi's had more privileges in the Bandagan structure, there was also presence of hierarchy amongst this structure as well. Peter Jackson talks about the presence of a three-tier hierarchy amongst the shamsi bandgan: ones with iqta, those in the qalb and the others with domestic pages in the court. Jackson also emphasizes upon an instance which assures the hierarchy amongst the structure. After Iltutmish's death, when "Fratricidal" conflict split the Bandgan cadre, junior shamsi eventually rose to a position of political power.

From the fourteenth century onwards, the new concept of assigning more free slaves termed as "malwal" started to be assigned from the 14th century onwards. This could be seen as a redefinition of the bonds that tied the master to the subordinate, but instead, the period continued to be the 'noble,' selfless conduct and loyalty of the slave to his master. During mid-fourteenth century historian Diya' al-Din Barani recognised the sense of a larger corps of military slaves within which there was an elite cadre privileged by the trust reposed by the Sultan.

VIII. COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS INTO THE MEDIEVAL INDIAN CONTEXT

The institution of slavery in India reveals a marked contrast between the two time periods of Early medieval and Medieval, reflecting shifts in political structures, social hierarchies, and external influences. In the early medieval period, slavery existed as a decentralized institution within regional kingdoms, deeply embedded in the agrarian social order, and functioning as an integral component of the rural economy. Epigraphic evidence indicates that slaves were obtained through warfare, famine-induced distress, ritual gifting to royal households and donations to temples.

The expansion of a more complex feudal structure, along with the growing luxury demands of the aristocracy, contributed to the increase in circulation and use of slaves. Richard M Eaton talks about the commercialized slave market of the Middle East, which formed a major hub in which slaves were sold like commodities. However, the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate marked a qualitative transformation in nature of slavery, significantly shaped by Turko-Afghan political traditions. As K. A. Nizami highlights, Sultanate rulers—particularly Iltutmish—developed a highly organized slave system, exemplified by the *bandagan* institution and elite corps such as the Shamsi slaves, who were systematically trained for military and administrative roles.

Thus, while early medieval slavery remained embedded within localized social hierarchies and customary practices, slavery under the Sultanate evolved into a more centralized, structured, and militarized institution closely tied to state formation and elite politics. Historiographically, this shift is understood as a transition from indigenous, socially embedded forms of servitude to a more formalized and politically instrumental system, marking a significant transformation in the meaning and function of slavery in the Indian subcontinent.

IX. FINDINGS & RESULTS

- ✓ *Debunking the Myth of Absence:* The paper finds that slavery in ancient India was not absent but rather underreported. The long-standing assumption — built on Megasthenes' account — was a result of source limitations and the localised nature of slavery's operation, not its non-existence.
- ✓ *Pre-Sultanate Forms of Bondage:* Slavery existed in diverse, context-specific forms before Turkish rule, referenced across: Early Dharmashastra texts, Buddhist scriptures, and The Jatakas. This confirms that servitude and dependency were deeply embedded in Indian agrarian, domestic, and hierarchical structures.
- ✓ *Continuity Rather Than Rupture:* The arrival of Turkish rule did not introduce slavery but rather transformed it. The paper finds a clear thread of institutional continuity running beneath the structural changes, disproving the idea of slavery as an externally imposed phenomenon.
- ✓ *Centralisation Under the Sultanate:* The most significant finding is the shift from socially embedded to politically centralised slavery, characterised by: Militarisation of enslaved persons, Integration into state formation processes and the emergence of the bandagan system
- ✓ *Social Mobility as a New Dimension:* Under Sultanate rule, slavery acquired a new socio-political dimension where enslaved individuals could rise to positions of military command and political authority — a stark contrast to earlier purely subordinate roles.
- ✓ *A Dynamic, Adaptive Institution:* The paper concludes that Indian slavery was neither static nor marginal but evolved in response to changing political realities, adapting preexisting traditions to new structures of power. These findings collectively challenge Eurocentric and absence-based historiography, repositioning Indian slavery as a central institution in the subcontinent's political and social evolution.

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