

Female Slaves In Early India

Dr. Anita Singh

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Dedicated to My Father

Raj Narain Singh

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Acknowledgement

This book is the result of my observation during my thesis study on 'Economic Condition of Women in Ancient India' that female slaves were a significant section of early Indian society but their role and contribution have not been properly recognized till now. This was a neglected branch of indological studies and an independent study on this topic was called for.

I owe a special debt of gratitude to Professor Laxman Rai, Head of Department of History, B.H.U for his constant motivation and encouragement. I would like to thank Professor Anand Shankar Singh, Professor Sumitra Gupta, and Professor R.P.Singh for their blessings and good wishes for the completion of this book. I am extremely grateful to my sir Professor J.S.Mishra for his valuable suggestions.

My father Raj Narain Singh has always been a source of inspiration for me. This book could see the light only because of my husband Sandeep Kumar Singh. But for his emotional support and wonderful management, this book would not have been possible. Lastly I have a sense of guilt feeling as I have completed this book in a time which I should have otherwise spent on my newly born baby. Words are ill-suited to articulate feelings, more so, when the load of feelings is greater than the words could convey.



Introduction

This book is an effort of searching the identity of the female slaves of early India based on historical perspective to assign them a rightful place in the early Indian history so that they are visible on historical stage. In history reading we often come across such common expressions as the king and queen and their number of dasis.... so on and so forth. We easily recognize the king or queen and talk about them many times but we fail to take notice of the dasis surrounding them. This is our elitist outlook which fails to identify with the masses. The writings of early India have been elite in nature and female slave labour got only a passing reference in the role of assisting their masters. It was a partial representation from above as only women of high birth could find their way in the historical literature. History should be depiction of masses not just the classes and in this light this work would help in restoring the rightful place to lower order women of early India.

The sources relied on for this book are largely textual but with a critical analysis along with the epigraphic corroboration. The literary sources include the secular and non-secular literature e.g Vedic and allied literature, the Sanskrit epics, the Buddhist texts, the Dharmasutras, the Arthasastras etc. There are some limitations of these sources as early Indian literatures are didactic and normative in nature with respect to women. These literature

project an ideal concept of womanhood. On the otherhand the epigraphic records offer us variations and even deviations from the norms of literature. The historical investigation of epigraphic records speaks of real women in place of ideal women, those figuring in epigraphic records are real women in flesh and blood, who once walked on the stage of history. The actual history is interplay between the two, one is incomplete without the other. The early socio-philosophical texts needs to be re-emphasized and reinterpreted to recover and restore the lost Indian tradition and assigning a rightful place to real Indian women.

The reasons for choosing the 'dasis' as the subject matter of the study is to make a complete study of dasis as an independent identity of early India. The emergence of dasis had brought significant changes in the socio-economic and religious rights and status of Arya women and had left a deep impact on the early Indian society. In the Vedic age dasis outnumbered the dasas in strength and gradually they had a distinct economic role to play in early societies. It was a huge section of working class which was earning its livelihood on its own and was not dependent on the male counterpart. The dasis were given in large numbers as gift to brahmanas in dana and dakshina as it was necessary for them to go thorough the process of aryanisation or acculturation and it is possible that the agency for this diffusion was the priests. The fact that the dasis were a significant section of the society becomes obvious as ancient lawgivers had to frame special laws for them to safeguard their interests as they were conscious about the vulnerability of the dasis position. The concern of the ancient smrtikaras is commendable as they were quite affectionate towards the dasis.

The objective of writing this book is for the removal of invisibility of women labour force and identifying the problems specific to them. Either the female slave labour was invisible in the academic writings or if at all visible it wasn't recognized by the scholars and if recognized then it was undervalued when compared to men's work. The early writings were endocentric in

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approach. The economic theories and methodologies kept women's work out of its domain largely because it couldn't be measured in monetary terms and it was not strictly based on the laws of conventional principle of demand and supply. Identifying and recognizing the household tasks are still beyond the preview of the research models and methodologies. The tool of research needs to be modified and changed as these are woefully inadequate to incorporate the female slave labour. There is need to change the paradigm to study the lower order women labour of early Indian societies.

Historically speaking women were always the equal partners with men in the production-distribution processes. In early Indian societies the women labour force was caste and class bound. With the emergence of class societies and stratification women economic role didn't disappear but under went a change. The creation of patriarchy did have some amount of community and clan control over women and their sexuality but not on all women in general e.g. Rgvedic society was divided in women of conquering tribes i.e Aryan women and women of conquered tribes i.e dasis. Aryan women of high birth came to withdraw from the public production processes and their place in the economy was taken over by the dasis who were free to engage in any kind of economic activities. The labour and sex of dasis was under the control of Aryans which replaced the Aryan women labour and consequently the Aryan women receded to domestic chores upholding the ideal concept of womanhood. The dasis couldn't afford to follow this Aryan model of womanhood as they had to labour out for their livelihood. The increasing dependence on agriculture as the major source of food, shifted the scene of food production from outside the households to the fields, the labour of the subjugated people including the dasis was extracted to work in the land and this enabled the Aryan women to be restricted to the households.

Historians have generally associated the dasis with the domestic and low kind of tasks which didn't require necessary

skill and thus their economic activities hardly found place in historical records. But in present globalized world the outlook has changed towards these jobs of household. My contention is that the dasis household duties were equally valuable as any other economic activity and that they were not just confined to household domestic chores but they were engaged in many other open field tasks too. Dasi labour was available for agriculture sector and they were employed in royal establishments in different roles, engaged with the dasas in different manufacturing sectors of early Indian society.

There is a need to change the perception and outlook while studying lower class women at work in order to give a reasoned account of their role in early Indian societies. It's often difficult to draw a line of demarcation between the female slave or a maid servant or a social class (sudras) as they overlap each other in the early Indian society.

Even in the globalized world the domestic work is not seen as a real occupation even when domestic work absorbs a significant proportion of the total workforce. In India of the total domestic workers population nearly 90% of them are women. They account for more than 12% of the women workers in urban India. Even today the domestic workers are not covered under any legislation. The society must be encouraged to recognize their importance and contribution to the economy. In India even to this day the domestic workers are not covered in any of the labour laws, a legislation that addresses the rights of the domestic workers is indispensable and for this the mindset of the society needs to be changed.



Historiographical Shifts in the Studies of Female Slaves in Early India

Dasi (female slaves) performing servile labour is a common expression of our ancient texts which drew my attention to delineate the historiographical shifts in the studies made so far on female slaves of early India. Scholars have been writing on the status and position of slaves in early Indian societies and quite a number of articles in different journals and chapters on slavery have been coming forth hither to. In this chapter an attempt has been made to put forward the trends of history writing on female slaves in ancient India.

The institution of slavery was universally prevailing in societies across the world in different modes and forms. Dasis in India were a working section carrying out different functions of the society. Early lawgivers were conscious about the vulnerability of this working class and made enough provisions to safeguard their rights and interests. The legal protection extended to female slaves is elaborately dealt with by ancient smrtikaras which also reveals that they must have been in great number that drew attention of the early thinkers. Female slaves were engaged in different tasks and based on their nature of work they had different nomenclatures. Historians have till now looked upon the dasis work as works of low nature which didn't demand any skill and proficiency, but on the basis of this very work being performed

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by the present day women they are considered emancipated and empowered. If this is the case then early women slaves were equally empowered as the women of contemporary society. In the recent years scholars have come to recognize the domestic tasks of women in the role of wives and mothers as their labour contribution. There is a need to change the paradigm of research studies to incorporate the women labour within the four walls of the household as this could not be measured in monetary terms and did not fit in the conventional laws of demand and supply of economic discipline. In this light the dasis performing many of the domestic chores assumes greater significance.

There is a need to change the outlook towards the dasis and accord them their rightful place in early historical writings. Although in recent decades there is a trend of subaltern studies of historical writing (from below) but this seems to have had least impact on the studies being made on the dasis of early India. We need to study dasis both on gender lines and as labour class of the early society. The early history writing was elite in nature and dasis as servile labour class got only a passing reference in the role of assisting their overlords. If they were to be looked upon from gender point even then 'women studies' as a stream of studies has appeared relatively late in the decade of 80's and 90's. It was only daughters, wives and widow with whom early writers were obsessed with i.e., women in family institution and viewing this as an index of their status in Hindu civilization broad generalizations have been made so far about the women's condition in early India. The reason for this is that early historians were chiefly preoccupied with brahmanical sources as a result only women of high birth could find their way into the history books. It was a partial view from the above, for them society constituted of only daughters, wives and widows. Of late limited attempts are made to focus on women outside the domesticity, women other than the royalty i.e the female labour class of early societies. Dasis were a significant section of ancient India and only an analytical microscopic study of this subordinate and

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marginal section would do justice to them in understanding their psychology and their socio-economic position in early India.

‘Slavery’ became the point of attraction because of industrialization in Europe where slavery was abolished by adopting legislative measures and colonial India followed the suit. An attempt to trace the historicity of slavery was made then on. Another factor that gave encouragement to studies of slaves was the emergence of the industrial working class including women workers. Prior to independence, women workers in ancient India didn’t find a place for exclusive study among Indian scholars, who were generally influenced by nationalism. Even the British imperialist and colonial outlook didn’t allow western scholars and British historians to work on the working class of ancient India, but the emergence of trade unions, organizations and the freedom struggle motivated some Indian scholars such as N.C.Bandopadhyaya¹, Prannath² who have thrown light to some extent on female labourers along with dasis. Bandopadhyaya has opined that most of the dasa and dasis were domestic servants and were probably well treated, though violence to them was not illegal. S.N.Basu³ in his article has put emphasis on domestic slavery at the time of Jatakas. Female slaves were mostly studied in the light of modern maid servants; a parallel of them was sought in the dasis of early India. They failed to recognize that female slaves had numerous duties outside the domesticity. Right from the Vedic age onwards female slaves can be noticed labouring out in agriculture fields and participated in the productive processes of the society. In 1940, A.N.Bose⁴ made the first attempt to make an independent study and according to him female slaves were often kept for enjoyment and sometimes it is difficult to demarcate them from prostitutes or concubines. So far as the treatment is concerned, he opined that the horrible and inhumane treatment meted out to female slaves by their masters⁵. Even Bose’s study doesn’t reflect scientific vigour as the conclusions drawn are inadequate as this was not the general feature but some instances quoted out of proportion because there

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are numerous instances of dasis being well cared for and treated by their masters. B.C.Law⁶ in his article has thrown ample light on different kinds of slavery based on Vidhurapandita Jataka, Manusamhita, Arthasastra, Jain literature. S.A.Dange's⁷ work is remarkable for he has attempted to depict the role of women and their participation and control of productive processes.

Any study of slaves/female slaves would be incomplete without going through R.S.Sharma's⁸ book 'Sudras in Ancient India' wherein he has raised some basic issues as to whether dasa/dasis always belonged to the sudra caste as very often sudras were reduced to slaves, 'there is evidence to show that the dasas mostly belonged to the sudra varna. This can be deduced from the phrase, suddo va sudda-daso va⁹, which is used by the Buddha to define the position of the sudra after his enumeration of the first three varnas¹⁰. For R.S.Sharma it means the sudra, who is a slave, but not all slaves were sudras as men and women of high birth might be reduced to slavery. K.M.Saran¹¹ in his book fails bitterly to do any kind justice to the title as the author's undue reliance on Arthasastra lacks historical objectivity. The author has covered the entire range of dasis in just a paragraph. On the other hand D.R.Chanana's¹² work is a pioneer step to bring forth a complete picture of the institution of slavery based on pali texts, epic literature and the Arthasastra. He has made a through study of female slaves and their origin, types of slaves, their mode of payment etc. Except for this book only articles and chapters devoted to slavery have been put forward by the early historians. D.D.Kosambi¹³ in his work states that a social formation based on the slave mode of production in the classical European sense never existed in India at any period and the importance of chattel slavery in the relations of production as the supply of labour for production was negligible. Marxist scholars were of the opinion that slavery didn't constitute the main basis of production at any stage.

P.C.Jain¹⁴ seems to throw significant light on dasis as a labour class in ancient India. L.Gopal¹⁵ discusses that there is

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nothing to show that the slaves (dasi-dasi) were exclusively used for economic enterprises or that upon them depended the economic life of the times. Rekha Rani Sharma¹⁶ has presented Kautilya as a very liberal lawgiver who took a bold step to abolish this institution of slavery, “Kautilya’s ideas on slavery reflect a revolution of the slaves for freedom and a systematic attempt to abolish this institution for all in a secular state.” I disagree with her derivation of Kautilya as his legal provisions are more to provide legal security and protection rather than freedom to slaves. Saroj Gulati¹⁷ has dealt women slaves with an analytical approach.

By the mid eighties the women’s liberation movement had gained momentum and the current phase of debate on women empowerment is a by product of an urbanized middle class in academic circles and as a consequence of it the women working class was recognized gradually as a subject of women studies. The article of Uma Chakaravarty¹⁸ was an attempt in this direction; she draws our attention to a host of problems associated with early dasis. She talks about the predominance of women slaves over male slaves in Vedic period. According to her the dana (gift) of dasis in huge numbers to the brahmanas was made because dasis provided cheap labour, they were producers and replenishers of the declining stock of the Aryans, thus it was necessary for them to go through a process of acculturation and aryanisation. The article of Lavkush Dwivedi¹⁹ extends an exhaustive list of dasis in premedieval age and throws enough light on their status in the society, master and dasi relationship, functions performed by them, different kind of dasis found in the premedieval age and a comparison with the female slaves of the west. Another crucial work is that of A.K. Tyagi²⁰ which while providing a detailed list of women workers is actually talking about the female slaves in ancient India. The line of demarcation between the dasis and labouring class is not very clear. If his callousness in putting up the reference is to be ignored then it is an extremely useful piece of literature for the study of female slaves in early India.

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With this review of literature of the studies of female slaves in early India we can derive that the history written so far was the history of classes no matter whether it was imperialist, nationalist or Marxist. They all did not do any justice to female slave labour in early societies. The history writing should be the depiction of masses and not just the classes as the classes who were the insignificant section of the early society hardly reflected the psyche of the common people. The real picture of any society is carried by the common people and the study of this kind would go a long way in restoring a rightful place to women of early India.

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Evolution and Development of Slavery in Ancient India

Existence of slavery in any society presupposes the surplus production in the economy to support the servile section, a distinguished upper-class who masters over the labour of subjugated section. An objective observation of slavery in early India has to be made by analyzing it in the historical conditions of it. Slavery institution was a natural phenomenon in an epoch when it represented a necessary form of the socio-economic evolution. Slavery was one of the oldest social evils in the modern sense but it was a necessary and legitimate evil for the socio-economic development of early India. Slavery was prevalent till there was not any alternate source of supply of labour available for the economy, when paid workers on wages and hired labourers were easily available, the institution of slavery came to be discouraged by the society. It became weakened by the kali age for different reasons.

For a reasoned and objective account of female slavery in early India, modern wisdom shouldn't be imposed on our ancestors, but to study slavery in its historical setup and to trace its evolution in historical processes. Slavery was widely prevalent in plain regions of high fertility which could support a large section of servile labour. Slavery evolves in a society where there is class difference, existence of an elite class who have control over the means of production and who looks down upon the manual labour

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and can replace it with servile labour. In India, slavery worked in its early growth under the patriarchal form, attached to the household community. Under the vigilance and watchful eye of the grihapati (father of the family) the slaves worked along with the men and women, sons and daughters of the household. But, in course of time, with the development and growth of production for exchange, slavery lost its patriarchal form and became “an excruciating tyranny for the slave”, and “greed and accumulation of wealth for the slave owner”¹.

The institution of slavery can be historically traced back to the Indus valley civilization. Marshall² admits the existence when he assigns the small rooms in the big houses of Mohenjo-daro to ‘slaves or dependent people’. Even the discovery of two rows of living quarters resembling a barrack is also supposed to have been occupied by slave population. Wheeler³ also holds a similar opinion, he regards their occupants as having the servile or semi-servile status. Mackay⁴ had found at Mohen-jo-daro, ‘a wealthy administrative and merchant class, a large artisan class and many slaves’. According to D.R.Chanana,⁵ ‘slave labour could have existed both in the country and the towns of the Indus civilization. This impression is based on the similarity of the remains of this civilization (or more exactly of the two towns) with that of the river-valley civilizations of the same epoch. However, contrary to these, the Indus civilization has not furnished any written documents (the seals have remained undeciphered), and consequently this hypothesis about the existence of slavery must be made with a certain amount of reserve.’ Harappan culture was an urban civilization beyond any doubt and an urban culture generally has a community of servile labour who supplies its labour to the upperclass section of the society. But any meaningful study of female slaves in early India has to begin with Vedic age as for the availability of literary sources.

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Vedic Society

The terms *dasa*/*dasi* has its origin from vedic times⁶. The use of the word *dasa* in the sense of slave is to be found mostly in the later portions of the *Rgveda*. Earlier *dasa* stood not for servile section of early Vedic age rather for a community that was in perpetual enmity with the Aryans. Aryans had superiority over their enemies the *dasas* and the *dasyus*, and it made it easy for them to defeat their inferior foes and accept them as slaves. Since then, the word *dasa* began to denote a slave which has continued to this day. The women of the *dasas* came to be denoted as *dasis* or slave woman. For R.S.Sharma⁷, we always hear of women slaves, men slaves being rare in *Rgveda* captured from the subjugated *dasas*. Gradually the mixing of the immigrant and the native population took place which led to the disappearance of the ethnic distinction. Aryans had accepted *dasis* as their concubines and wives for they had not brought their womenfolk with them. There are frequent references of *dasis* being items of gifts (*dana* and *dakshina*) in vedic literature. *Trasadasyu*, the son of *Purukutsa*, a mighty and benevolent king in peace and a turbulent leader in war who is credited with having given away fifty women, may have captured them in war from the enemies' camp, perhaps these women were *dasis*⁸. In the *Rgvedic* texts, the female slaves were frequently presented to *rishis* by their patron princes and they are generally spoken of in the context of wealth and are listed along with gold, cattle and other assets in the later Vedic age⁹.

In the early Vedic society the *dasis* had a greater contribution to domestic production centring round cattle and gradually when agriculture began to replace pastoralism, there are occasional references to *dasis* in the context of agriculture. The *Atharva Veda* refers to *dasis* being engaged in subsidiary agricultural operations¹⁰. The earlier predominance of *dasis* over *dasas*, however, gradually decreased with the emergence of a full-scale agricultural economy¹¹. Both *dasas* and *dasis* were now mentioned together, working within the household of the master

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as well as outside it¹². The domestic labour entirely depended on the dasis but in agriculture their participation was subsidiary in nature as we find only occasional references of it.

The process of the formation of a servile class was carried forward only in the Later Vedic period when pastoralism gave way to agriculture and semi-nomadism to large scale settlements, as reflected in the Painted Grey Ware (PGW) sites and in the Later Vedic texts¹³. As compared to the Rgvedic age slavery prevailed on a wider scale in the later vedic period. Dasis are said to have been acquired through wars, gifts, debts or are born as such to slave woman employed by a family. The Aitereya Brahmana states that 10,000 women slaves were gifted by the king of Angiras his chief priest along with cattle, wealth and gold¹⁴. Elsewhere 10 chariots carrying abducted dasis are said to constitute a part of dakshina¹⁵. Possessing number of female slaves was a status symbol in Vedic society and it along with cattle constituted a part of the movable property. At one place the pledge of Alopang is remarkable in which he speaks of donating ten thousand dasis and elephants to a brahamana¹⁶. At another place when Aruni and Shetaketu approached Pravahana Jabali, king of Panchal for acquiring knowledge they said that they possessed cows, horse, family, dresses and dasis too¹⁷. In Sathapatha Brahmana, we see four hundred dasis washing the feet of Mahishi (the chief queen) at the time of aswamedha yjana¹⁸. References indicate that sometimes the royal girls and kshatriya daughters were also described as dasis e.g in Sathapatha Brahmana at one place a hundred royal princesses and a hundred kshatriya daughters have been depicted as dasis¹⁹.

According to R.S.Sharma, wars were fought between the dasas and Aryans for the women for in the tribal context women are valued for their role as producer of producers²⁰. Dasis were functioning as replenishers of the declining stock of the Aryans in the continued long drawn out war with dasyus. The value attached to women slaves can be explained at least in part by

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their sexual and biological attributes which added to their value as sources of labour, a value that they shared with men.

There was a custom of giving female slaves in gifts on a large scale. According to a Jataka, a brahmana demanded a hundred slave girls from a king along with other requisites as his gifts and his demands were fulfilled²¹. According to Uma Chakaravarty²² the association of brahmana priests with the possession of a large number of dasis, the dana or dakshina of dasis are handed to the chief priests by the king, signified a more fundamental process than would appear at first glance. "If the dasis were functioning even partially as replenishers of the declining stock of the Aryans then it would have been necessary for them to go through a process of Aryanisation or acculturation and it is possible that the agency for this diffusion was the priests." 'Dasis' were also items of dowry given to brides who accompanied the bride to her new home. The word dasa-pravarga mentioned in the later portion of the Rgveda may mean wealth or assemblage of slaves. Intermingling of dasis with the Aryans, and because of their basic preoccupation with domestic tasks did not allow the emergence of slaves as a separate class in the vedic society. Dasis being accepted as vadhus in the Aryan community and their children called as dasi-putras could rise to the status of priests, warrior chiefs etc.

The use of the word dasi makes it obvious that these were the womenfolk of the conquered dasas. It seems that, when the male members of the enemies of the Aryans were killed, their wives were reduced to slavery. There are more references to female slaves than the male slaves in Vedic literature and they were considered more valuable than male slaves for their domestic labour and reproductive value.

The distinction made on the basis of colour between Aryans and the dasas had disappeared later on thus we find in the epic age Krishna, Draupadi, Rama all of dark complexion. What the term 'dasa' meant in Rgvedic age was not the same as in

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coming ages. In the post vedic age 'dasa' did not stand for a race, which was inferior in position. For R.S.Sharma²³, 'it is difficult to define the position of the sudras in the vedic period in terms of slavery or serfdom. Although the references give the impression of their being the labouring masses, generally they do not seem to have been slaves or serfs owned by individuals. Apparently just as the community exercised some sort of general control over land, so also it exercised similar control over the labouring population". The servile section generally belonged to the sudra varna but all the sudras were not slaves. The Buddha's phrase suddo va sudda-daso va, has been interpreted by R.S.Sharma as the sudra who is a slave. Neither all slaves were sudras or all sudras slaves, even a higher class people could be reduced to servitude but in all cases the reference of the high born reduced to servitude to slavery are scanty e.g. Isidasi, the daughter of a cart driver, was carried off as a slave by a merchant on account of her father's failure to pay his debts. It is, however, to be remembered in this connection that slavery had not assumed the commercial form in the Rgvedic times, as it did after.

Buddhist Society

The remarkable feature of Buddhist literature is that it was the literature for the common people, the masses. Buddhism was catering to the demands of the suffering humanity and it is for this reason that it stands distinct apart from other contemporary literature. It speaks about the servants, slaves, prostitutes and the lay men whereas the brahmanical literature was for the select few of the society i.e the high born of the society. As the audience of Buddhist literature was the lay men and women who were most of the time not well educated and could hardly comprehend the philosophic subtleties and it was for this reason that the mode of communication was simple and easy to understand. Unlike the brahmanical literature where they wrote against the pre-urban social background, the heterodox literature reflects mainly the urban milieu in which the traders, artisans and members of other professional groups figured prominently. As Pali literature is based

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on the commerce dominated urban economic milieu there was a general dislike for manual labour thus we find a frequent reference to *dasis*. In the age of Buddha one can notice that slavery had by now become an established institution. The entire Buddhist literature is replete with such evidences of domestic slavery of females. Employment of slaves appears to be a common practice of those days. The urban commerce dominated economic milieu had furthered the scope of the depiction of female slaves in domestic chores. Although slaves had been engaged in agricultural productions in the Buddhist age but their scanty representation in literature is due to the fact that Buddhist literature was a literature of the urban circle. Slaves were regarded as the property of their masters.

In the Buddhist period the institution of slavery had developed to a considerable extent. 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/dasi* were not their own masters, were dependent on someone, and could not go where they liked. Slaves or bonded-servants were not unfamiliar phenomena in the Indian society of the Buddha's day. A *dasa/dasi* was treated as any other item of property, owned by his master and depending entirely, even for his life, on him. The ethnic distinction of slavery in the vedic age as *dasa* and *arya* had disappeared altogether once and for ever in this period and because of the mixing up of populations and now slavery existed purely for economic reasons. We also know that even the kindest of the emperors, Piyadassi Asoka, did not think of abolishing slavery. Further, it is likely that the state, faced with new expenses of a highly centralized administration, was forced to take recourse to slave labour, by employing war prisoners to reclaim new land for the imperial farms²⁴. Employment of *dasis* appears to be a common practice of which we have numerous references showing that not only kings and nobles, but also simple villagers and farmers kept slaves in their families²⁵. From the *Jatakas*²⁶ we know that male

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and female slaves lived in the house of their masters, and performed all household duties.

Buddhist literature has its own loose ends which fail to meet. There is a great element of exaggeration in the Jataka stories and the depiction of selected incidents in the Tipitikas are made with the maiden objective that centres on human salvation and eulogizing Buddhism e.g. in the Jataka stories it is often found that slaves were inhumanly treated and only after coming to Buddhism could they get rid of their sufferings. The incidents are blown out of proportion to attract more and more common people to the fold of Buddhism. The oft repeated fact needs to be treated objectively as many times it is not in accordance to their real importance. Thus the study of slavery in Buddhism has to be analyzed in this light. Buddha had a different attitude towards slaves than the Buddhist society. Buddhism tended to soften the rigour of slavery, partly under the impact of material conditions and partly owing to religious influence of Buddhism, enslaving an unprotected and refugee was a sinful action.

Mauryan Society

Slavery, with its limited role and regional differences, coexisted here with free labour, and also with some other forms of dependent labour. The sastra's value resides in that they provide a generalized picture of ancient India without regard to the infinite varieties of time and space. A correct notion of the slaves in ancient India must above all, consider the distinction drawn in Sanskrit sources, especially in Kautilya, between "slaves" proper and temporary dependents in a slave position. In Sanskrit texts the term *dasa* occurs both in the broad and the narrow sense and meaning²⁷. Kautilya had a different notion of slavery as for him an *arya* is a free man and could never be reduced to permanent servitude²⁸. He has classified slaves in two categories, the *aryas* (*ahitakas*-the pledged slaves) i.e servitude for a limited period and non-*aryas* i.e the permanent slaves. *Ahitaka* *aryas* could in no circumstance be reduced to do menial jobs. The *aryas* could

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be emancipated of servitude after the payment of their purchase value but it is not clear from Arthashastra whether a non-aryan slave could also attain emancipation in the same manner as of ahitakas. For R.S.Sharma²⁹, failure to this point has led to the wrong inference that Kautilya's laws indirectly abolish slavery. Probably this could be the reason for Megasthenes to notice that there are no slaves in India. One may recall that indology abounds in conflicting notions regarding the slavery in Ancient India and the existence of a whole caste-a varna of slaves, namely the sudras³⁰. In the narrow sense of the word 'dasa' meant a man born in the house of the master of slaves, inherited by the master, purchased by the master, or received as gift or reward. The master has complete control over such dasa/dasis, they are the property of their masters but this does not mean that the slaves had no rights at all. The right of a slave to own property was recognized, among others. The master could, almost without any limitation, sell or pledge his slave but he could not seize or inherit the property of his slave if the latter had relatives³¹. 'Dasa' in a broad sense would mean all those slaves who were in a state of dependence at a given time. This included bondage debtor's dasa/dasis, the "pledged ones" (ahitakas) as well as the whole set of lesser categories. There was a great difference between the temporary slaves and those who were slaves proper. The temporary slaves could not be subject to ill-treatment as they were not the property of the master, and they could be freed after they have served their term. They could not be sold or pledged or made to do impure tasks as the permanent slaves were expected to do. According to Kautilya only the non-aryans, the mlecchas could be permanent slaves. Probably Megasthenes was referring to these conditions where by strict regulations a free Aryan was protected from becoming a slave for life as we find in the Arthashastra. On the whole, the data of the Arthashastra indicates the desire on the part of the state to somehow regulate the status of slaves and to systematize and introduce a clarity into the problem of slavery and to come up with ways of delivering those who had, for a

time, found themselves in the slave status³². In earlier times the political and economic elite depended to some extent on slave labour for basic production, mostly agricultural production.

Smrti Age Society

Buddhism tended to soften the rigour of slavery to some extent but the comparatively loose political control after the downfall of the Mauryan Empire and the rude shock given to the socio-political structure by the foreign invasions of the Indo-Greeks, the Sakas, and the Kushanas etc., created conditions which made it rather difficult to control the slaves. Under these circumstances, Manu (c.200 B.C-A.D.200), who tried to reinforce the traditional social order, attempted to impose greater disabilities³³ and stricter bondage on the slaves as compared with those envisaged in the Arthashastra and to associate slavery mainly with the lower sections of society (mostly the sudras)³⁴. But the Dharmashastra works following the Manusmrti reflect, on the whole, a gradual weakening of slavery³⁵. The slaves were now better organized with their leaders called Vargin i.e nayakas of slaves. Most of the slaves were upgraded to the position of domestic maid-servants. The word dasibham (multitude of female slaves) is used in the Amarkosa as an illustration of words showing multitude³⁶. Jain works of the period show that numerous female slaves and maid servants were recruited from tribal peoples³⁷. Though generally the dasis were from sudra varna but at times the sudras also themselves owned slaves. Manu refers to the son of a sudra by a dasi (female slave)³⁸. According to Manu, if permitted by the father, the son of a sudra by a dasi could take a share of the inheritance³⁹. Manu refers to slave girls who waited upon the king and looked after his comforts⁴⁰. Manu requires the king to fix a daily allowance suited to their rank and position for the women employed in the royal service⁴¹. Manu⁴² is very considerate towards them, he puts them on the same level as the sons in the matter of giving corporal punishments which meant not actual hard treatment of slaves, chastisements could be verbal also and it was more with intention of keeping the slaves in order.

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The earnings of slaves belonged to the masters which were with intention that the slave should not spend his earnings at his own sweet will⁴³. It is only when the master has no property of his own that he incurs no sin by seizing the goods of his slave.

Gupta Society

The slavery which was institutionalized by the Mauryan age had deteriorated by the Gupta and post Gupta age. The position of slaves had undergone change, the coming up of small principalities made it difficult for the overlords to maintain and control the slaves. As a consequence some slaves must have freed themselves from slavery and would have become free labourers.

The injunctions of Narada and Katyayana reveal a general deterioration in the condition of slaves in the Gupta period. As a matter of fact, with the fall of the Mauryan Empire, the whole country was divided into small principalities which struck at the roots of unification and the national economy⁴⁴. It must have become difficult for the impoverished landlords to maintain and control the slaves. Manu tried to have a strict control over the slaves and their functions, according to him a sudra can be forced to work as a slave irrespective of whether he has been purchased as a slave or not. Manu says that God created a sudra for the purpose of doing the work of a slave and even if the slave is set at liberty he should be forced to work, as he is a slave by nature and there is no power on earth that can redeem him from slavery⁴⁵.

It would be incorrect to say that in the Post-Gupta age there was a gradual disappearance of slaves, rather there was a role change of the slaves into sharecroppers and peasants. The line of demarcation between the dasis, sudras, maid-servants and the prostitutes doesn't come clear most of the times. The Kamasutra does not differentiate between the maid servants, kumbhadasis and wives of washer men and weavers from prostitutes⁴⁶. Although earlier the female slaves were engaged both in domestic and agricultural tasks but after the Mauryan age slavery was mostly domestic in nature. The notion that the twice

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born cannot be reduced to slavery lost ground in the smrti age. Yajnavalkya's notion of slavery was different from that of Manu and Kautilya. Yajnavalkya was not in favour of reducing the prisoners of war into slavery nor does he sanction that one should be a slave by the way of state punishment. He also does not favour the slaves to be treated as inherited property. Yajnavalkya was not in favour of life long enslavement (except in case of an apostate) and Yajnavalkya wants the state to intervene in the matter of the redemption of slavery.

Pre-Medieval Society

Gradually we find the weakening of the institution of slavery as other forms of labour were easily available to replace the slaves from the productive and unproductive works. In its description of the main characteristics of the Kali age the Bhagavata purana⁴⁷ clearly refers to the rise of sudras and slaves in social and economic status, while contrasting it with the situation⁴⁸ obtaining in the previous age⁴⁹. Whether, how far and in what way the decline of slavery was a feature representing the transition from the ancient to the Middle Ages needs to be looked into? Hired labourers replaced the slaves in the agricultural works and servants, maids working on wages (either permanently or temporarily) replaced the slaves, although not all together, from the domestic slavery. The larger number of slaves belonged to the sudra varna and with the upliftment of the sudras to the agricultural positions, the institution of slavery started losing hold. Sudras were no longer obliged to serve as slaves. The notion that the twice-born cannot be reduced to slavery lost ground in the smrtis. Yajnavalkya, Narada, Katyayana state that slavery should take place in natural (anuloma) order of the varnas and not in the reverse (pratiloma) order, that is to say that slaves should be of lower varna than his master⁵⁰. According to Katyayana⁵¹, 'slavery should be limited to the three varnas, in no case can a Brahmana become a slave. Slavery of men of the Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudra castes, who gave up their freedom, is to be in the descending order of the castes and not in the reverse order. The wife of a

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slave automatically becomes a slave but if a slave woman bears a child (whether a son or a daughter) to the master, in that case Katyayana says, “one, however, who has sexual intercourse with his female slaves and if thereafter she gives birth to a child— she should not be made to work as a slave for she is with progeny.”⁵²

With the expansion of economy and the development of means of production and the gradual deepening of the caste system made the easy availability of free and hired labour which began to replace the *dasa/dasi*. The fragmentation of landed property further discouraged slavery as it was not profitable to own slaves for the small tracts of land. Probably this could be the reason for the detailed provisions of manumission of slaves given by the later *smrtikaras*⁵³. Forcible enslavement was strongly condemned by Narada⁵⁴, Yajnavalkya⁵⁵ and Brihaspati⁵⁶ and manumission of slave became a common practice in the later period. Many of the manumitted slave had taken up agriculture as their occupation as tenants, share-croppers or agricultural labourers. According to B.N.S. Yadav⁵⁷, “this is borne out by the evidence of the *smrtis* of Narada and Brihaspati that after manumission the freed man should be regarded as nourished or protected by the favour of his former master. This suggests that the masters often provided for the sustenance of their ex-slaves, which could easily have been done by making them dependent peasants and farm-hands.” There was a rise in the social status of the slavery, except for the house born slave (*garbhadasa*)⁵⁸ the slaves were not subject to extreme dependence (*atyanta-paratantratva*) and the property rights were recognized. For example Bharuchi, who reversed the dictum of Manu and made a sweeping statement, “it is impossible to divert from a person what he has himself acquired (*Yad uparjyate*). Consequently, their propertylessness must be understood to be pronounced in a secondary (or figurative) sense (*gauna esam nirdhanatvam*)⁵⁹.

During the Gupta and in the early medieval period, the decline of the participation of the *dasas* in agriculture was clearly discernible. The dictum that impure work should be allotted to

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the dasas is consistent with their involvement with domestic work rather than agriculture. The existence of a large number of dasis in the houses of the wealthy is also evident from the literature.

According to the Chinese accounts of the sixth and seventh centuries, there were no female slaves in India.

The dasas/dasis and kammakaras were almost alike but for the fact that kammakaras did not stay at their masters house, the Jatakas clearly indicate the difference that while the dasas lived in the house of their masters, the kammakaras went to their own lodging in the evening⁶⁰. According to Patanjali, food and clothing was given to both dasas and karmakaras⁶¹. The two categories are often referred together in the Buddhist literature but the dasas/dasis enjoyed more security than the karmakaras. We find references of wage payment to dasas/dasis though very rarely as they were mostly paid not in cash but in kind e.g. gahapati Mendaka's son is described as disbursing money to the dasa-karmakaras⁶². The Arthasastra states that the lowest wage prescribed-one and a quarter panas along with food-was given to watchmen, dasas and karmakaras⁶³. The slaves were provided usually with coarse food, the remnants of the household. Such comments as 'broken grain may be given to the dasa-karmakaras who constitute the visti (those who provide free labour)⁶⁴ or 'bad wine may be supplied to the dasas'⁶⁵.

Later the dasa who were earlier working on food came to be regarded as slaves receiving wages e.g. bhakatadasa who was not a slave in the traditional sense as a slave for food but as a wage-labourer⁶⁶. All this suggest that a number of bhaktsdasas, who were previously slaves for food, may have been transformed into or at least may have become akin to bhaktacchadabhrtas, who are mentioned for the first time in the Brihaspatismrti⁶⁷, as agricultural labourers receiving one-fifth of the production, in addition to food and clothing. Thus, by the time of Medhatithi the approximation of bhaktadasa to wage-labourers appears to have become a fairly marked feature⁶⁸. In the tenth century

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Bhattotpala also explained the terms *dasa*⁶⁹ and *dasi*⁷⁰ as *kamakara* (servant, wage-earner, labourer) and *kamakari* respectively in his commentary on the *Bhatsamhita* of Varahamihira. Thus by the ninth and tenth centuries the class of people who could have been called *dasa* (slave) in the real⁷¹ sense must have considerably thinned out⁷². Even terms like *bhrtidasa* were used in the sense of wage-labourers (*vaitanika*) by Medhatithi⁷³.

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Different Types of Female Slaves and their Functions in Early India.

I - Different Types of Female Slaves in Early India

‘Slavery’ originated from the earliest laws of war¹. The vanquished war prisoners were reduced to slavery in vedic times. Apart from this the major source of slavery that of female slaves were also an object of gifts to priests and sages. Besides these female slaves were freely bought and sold². We also find dasis being inherited like ancestral property, garaha dasi (born)³, self sold dasis⁴, dasis due to non-payment of debt. A born slave meant that the child born of a female slave in the house of a master became a slave to the same master. In the epic age there are numerous references to dasis reduced to servitude by abduction, non-payment of debts, by purchase, by making gifts etc as the abduction of women is a raksasa trait, it is all the more surprising to find female slaves mentioned in connection with the non-raksasa characters, because the raksasa may be supposed to have sold the women they carried off, but such transactions do not go well with the non- raksasa⁵.

With the passage of time and formation of social institutions, slavery became more and more institutionalized and its forms and varieties went on increasing. But, the forms of slaves differ with different writers and periods. This divergence is partly due to recognition of new categories and partly due to a more

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scientific classification⁶. Pali canonical texts, for the first time, give us an idea about the formal classification of slaves. For a comparative view the Buddhist, Kautilya's, Manu's and Narada's classification are drawn in a table to delineate how the categorization went on increasing and the similar and dissimilar categories of them.

Vinaya-Patika And Jataka stories	Kautilya	Manu	Narada
1. Slaves captured captive in war.	1. Slaves captured in battle.	1. Slaves captured in battle.	1. One taken in war.
2. Slaves born of slave mothers.	2. Slaves born in the house	2. Slaves born in the house	2. One born of a female slave in the master's house.
3. Slaves received as gift.	3. Slaves given as gift.	3. Slaves given as gift.	3. One received through gift.
4. Slaves bought with money.	4. Slaves bought.	4. Slaves bought	4. One acquired by purchase.
5. Slaves paying off debts.	5. One enslaved for a debt or pledged.	5. One enslaved for a debt or pledged.	5. One given as pledge.
6. Slaves driven by fear.	6. Slaves for want of food	6. Slaves for want of food	6. One who served for maintenance
7. Slaves as a Punishment for their crimes.	7. Slaves as a result of judicial decree.	7. Slaves as a result of judicial decree.	7. One released from a heavy debt.
8. Slaves of their own will.	8. Slaves who sold themselves .		8. One self – sold.

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9. Slaves inherited as ancestral property.

9. One acquired by inheritance.

10. One maintained during famine.

11. One own in a stake.

12. One who offered their self for a slave

13. One who served for a specific term

14. One who accepted slavery out of desire for a female slave

15. One fallen from monastic life.

Vinaya patika⁷ gives a list of three kinds of slaves-

1. Antojato i.e slaves born in the house of the master
2. Dhanakkito i.e slaves purchased with money
3. Karmaranito i.e slaves captured in war

But the Vidhurapandita Jataka⁸ adds one more and speaks of four kinds of slaves;

1. Antojata – those born of slave parents or begotten on slave women,
2. Dhanakita- those purchased with money,
3. Karamaranita- those reduced to slavery under coercion by bandits,
4. Samamdasabyamupagata –those who took slavery of their own accord.

Different Types of Female Slaves and their Functions in Early India. 29

Even in the Jain canon and canonical commentaries we find reference to six types of slaves⁹ i.e.

1. Slaves by birth
2. Purchased slaves
3. Slaves due to non-payment of debt
4. Those who became slaves during famine.
5. Those who failed to pay fines and are reduced to slavery
6. Those that have been taken prisoner.

According to Manu¹⁰ there are seven kinds of slaves

1. captured under a banner
2. born in the house (born of a slave girl)
3. bought
4. presented
5. hereditary
6. slave on food
7. slave by punishment

According to Kautilya¹¹ however, there are nine kinds of slaves, i.e.

1. Those captured in battle,
2. Those who became slaves for food,
3. Those born in the house,
4. Slaves who are bought,
5. Received slave,
6. Slaves who are inherited,
7. Those who sell themselves as slaves,
8. Those made slaves by judicial decree,
9. Those who are mortgaged.

Narada¹² provides us with a list of fifteen kinds of slaves although the first nine mentioned are identical with those

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mentioned by Manu and Kautilya and the other six are fresh additions which are as follows-

1. Pane jitah – obtained in a bet
2. tavahamitypagatah avasitah- one who accepts slavery by saying, “I am yours”
3. parvrajya avasitah- an apostate from asceticism,
4. kritah- one who stipulates to be a slave for a certain time,
5. bhaktadasah- who is a slave for food,
6. badababhrtah- one who is tempted to be a slave out of love for a female slave.

II- Functions of Dasis in Early India

Dasis were always valuable for their ‘labour’ but their role and functions had undergone certain changes in different ages. Although towards the end of the Rgvedic period slaves were increasing in number, but there is no evidence of their being engaged in productive activities rather they seem to have been in the nature of domestic servants attending on their priestly or warrior masters.

Based on their functions the female slaves were largely of two kinds’ i.e. agricultural slaves and domestic slaves. Other than these two prime functions of early dasis we also come to know about different kinds of duties of female slaves from the Jatakas as paricharika¹³ (attendant), atthacharikaitthi¹⁴ (personal attendant), perana –darika¹⁵ (women doorkeeper), sahayika, dhatis¹⁶ (wet nurses) etc., connected with the domestic and allied works. Although we don’t know if these women were female slaves or women working for wages, but it is certain that the bulk of these women came from the lower castes (sudras)¹⁷. Narada¹⁸ speaks of two kinds of female slaves i.e. Krishidasi and Grihadasi.

Agricultural female slaves (Krishidasi)

In the Rgvedic age dasis were valuable both for their productive and reproductive labour. The nature of slavery in the

Different Types of Female Slaves and their Functions in Early India. 31

Rgvedic age is a debatable question among scholars. It is mentioned that slavery was purely domestic, that slaves, mostly women captured in wars, were used for begetting children and for household chores and the Rgveda doesn't have any term for wage or wage earners¹⁹. For R.S.Sharma²⁰ women were producer of producers to replenish the declining stock of the Aryans. Apart from their biological function the dasis are also likely to have contributed to the domestic production centring round cattle in the predominantly pastoral early Vedic society. In the Atharvaveda a women slave is described as wet-handed, smearing the pestle and mortar²¹. That the slaves were employed in agricultural work is not supported by the Rgvedic references because Vedic society was primarily a pastoral economy and agriculture was basically for subsistence which was not taken up on an extensive scale which would need slave labour. Manual labour was not looked down upon in Vedic society. Subsequently when agriculture began to replace pastoralism we begin to get occasional references to dasis in the context of agriculture. The Atharvaveda²² refers to dasis being engaged in agricultural operations. Slaves working on the land are first heard of in the Sruta Sutra. According to R.S.Sharma²³, 'while some of the slaves, especially women, were employed in domestic service, others were engaged in agriculture. The slaves and hired labourers worked even on smaller holdings, but more often on large plots'. The position of R.S.Sharma is not very clear whether or not the slaves were deployed in agriculture²⁴. Although a servile order had appeared by now but their labour was not yet required for agricultural operation till this age.

According to Suvira Jaiswal²⁵, "slavery could be useful economically only if it could produce a surplus beyond the cost of its own maintenance, and this was not possible in the nomadic pastoral conditions". So, although, captured prisoners of war seem to have been employed in heavy domestic work by some warriors and priestly families which enjoyed a higher rank in the tribal society, they didn't give rise to a separate class of slaves, instead they were integrated in the lineage system of the Vedic Aryans,

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women of the dasa tribes were taken in as vadhus, i.e. brides to meet the shortage of females in the conquering tribes and their children didn't suffer from any disabilities²⁶. With the development of an agricultural economy dasa and dasis are jointly referred as working in fields, they had a significant contribution in productive activities. Women slaves were owned on a large scale by the elite class and the priests. The references in the early pali texts speak not of the sudras as such, but of the dasas (slaves) and kammakaras (hired labourers) as being employed in agricultural operations. While some of the slaves, especially women, were employed in domestic service, others were engaged in agriculture²⁷. These are some of the implied references of female slaves engaged in agriculture with their male counterpart.

The existence of large tracts of farm land and rich land owners could not have managed it without slave labour. The reference to overseers, employed to supervise the work of slaves on agricultural lands, testifies to the cultivation of land by slaves for the rich. Patanjali²⁸ also alludes to an overseer, supervising the work of five ploughmen. The mention of dasa-gama (village of slaves) further confirms the view that the slaves met the needs of farmers²⁹. Even the reference of dowry received by Visakha indicates about the agricultural functions of dasis as the five hundred bullock carts received as dowry were full of agricultural implements and hundreds of slaves. These slaves, it is clear that were meant for work on agricultural farms. The nobles or plutocrats largely depended on the slave labour for their agricultural works. Even the ordinary peasants and farmers are said to have kept slaves in their families³⁰. The work of deforestation to reclaim land for agriculture was generally carried out by slaves. Slave men and women together participated in all the agricultural operations. Even from the Jain canons we come to know about the agricultural slaves attached to land. Kautilya also speaks of engagement of male and female slaves on royal farms by the superintendent of agriculture and to the provisions supplied to them in proportion to the work done.

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Kautilya³¹ formulated some ordinances for safeguarding the interests of male and female slaves. In the Mauryan age we find enough evidence of engagement of the women folk of the agricultural labourers and the female slaves in the field of agriculture, in the sense of dependent labour. Most pali references to slaves and hired labourers working on farms belong to the Mauryan period, and if these are considered along with those found in Kautilya, we can legitimately assume that slavery played a very considerable role in agricultural production under the Mauryas. The comparatively detailed laws of Kautilya regarding slaves are not to be found in the Dharmasutras, show that there were a considerable number of male and female slaves in Mauryan state³².

Domestic Female Slaves (Grihadasi)

Gehadasi or domestic slaves were those female slaves who assisted women of the household and performed the kitchen duties. Female slaves had to fulfill a large number of domestic duties and based on their nature of work done they were called by different names which shows that they must have been in great number that distinct nomenclatures were coined for them. In the Rgvedic age the conquered womenfolk of the dasas were called dasis and these female slaves were largely employed in domestic work. Existence of female slaves is to be found in the earlier portions of the Atharvaveda wherein a dasi is described as wet handed, smearing the pestle and mortar, and also as throwing dye on the droppings of the cow, which shows that she was engaged in domestic work³³.

There is an example of a wife and a daughter who became so dependent upon their Gehadasi that they even refused to cook for a monk. Among the chief domestic duties of a slave women normally included looking after their master's household affairs, attending to his physical needs, and cooking and serving food along with assisting the lady of the household in her domestic works. The female slaves were generally employed in the ordinary

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duties of the household like fetching water, pounding rice, fulfill the physical needs of the master during bath, bathing the feet of the master and the family before they retired to bed at night, entertain the master through musical instruments and dance, spreading the rice out in the sun, handing the plates and dishes, bringing the spittoon and fetching their fans during meals, for sweeping yards and stables and such other duties. Slave women also husked paddy³⁴, and went to market. There is a reference to a slave girl who spread the rice in the sun at the granary door and sat there to watch over it³⁵. The Uraga Jataka refers to a very faithful slave woman carrying food for her master and watching the field³⁶. The Dhammapada commentary refers to another slave girl, Punna by name, who had to pound rice till late at night, and lit a lamp to work. Being utterly tired by her work, she stepped outside the house and stood in the wind with her body moist with sweat³⁷. Kali, a slave woman was expert in household tasks like preparing rice, spreading the beds, and lighting lamps and that no utensil was ever broken by her and she used to get up early in the morning to perform her duties³⁸. The work done by these women slaves is designated by the word 'dasi-bhogha' which according to Buddhaghosa means 'work in the fields; removal of filth, fetching water etc'. Dasi-bhogha is opposed to 'sunsia-bhogha' which designates the work to be done by the daughter-in-law. Housewives used to pester their husbands to get dasis for domestic chores. The statements of Visakha's attendants indicate that female slaves were sometimes instructed by their masters to do very queer jobs³⁹. Fetching water from wells and distant rivers and removing the husk of rice were considered the heavy tasks of dasis⁴⁰. The kumbhadasis who were also called 'ghata dasi'⁴¹ brought water from wells. It is stated that Punnika, the daughter of a female servant in Anathapindika's household, had the duty of bringing water from the river. It was considered a heavy domestic task among all the functions of the dasis. From the Kunala Jataka we come to know about the female slaves of the Koliyas and the Sakiyas who are said to have come to the river to fetch water and

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to have quarreled over cloth⁴². An instance of a slave girl is described in another Jataka as washing the seat polluted by the son of Vasabha Khattiya, a slave, with milk mixed with water.

The condition of female slaves engaged in kitchen duties were often miserable, at times the faces of these slaves became black from the smoke emanating from the kitchen. An example of a wife and her daughters who had become so dependent on their *geha dasi* that they refused to cook food for a monk, reflect the pitiable condition of the domestic female slaves⁴³. But the same was not the case with all the domestic female slaves, in some of the Jatakas one can notice that all the women of the household performed the kitchen duties and female slaves were there only to assist them⁴⁴. Other references in the early Pali texts speak not of the *sudras* as such, but of the *dasas* (slaves) and *kammakaras* (hired labourers) as being employed in agricultural operations. According to Narada and Brihaspati too, the slaves were largely engaged in impure unproductive works like sweeping, removing the leavings of food, attending to masters personal needs etc⁴⁵. The household women used to pass on the heavy burden of the domestic chores to the female slaves of the house. We have an example of a young wife of an old Brahmin in the *Vessantara Jataka* who repeatedly pestered her husband to get her at least one *dasi* to take over the domestic chores⁴⁶. *Dasis* had to do heavy tasks which were at times difficult to carry out, a *dasi* is described to have collapsed while husking the rice and then attempted to revive herself by taking a deep breath of air⁴⁷. Husking of rice was a quite burdensome task as a *dasi* is described as continuing to pound rice well even after sunset. In another Jataka we find a merchant ordering his slaves to get up early in the morning in order to arrange things properly in the room, to cut the firewood, remove the husk of rice and cook the food⁴⁸. Similarly, in the *Varna Jataka*, some *Brahamana* pupils are mentioned as awakening a female slave early in the morning to prepare breakfast for them. The poor lady went on blowing and blowing on the fire to get it to burn till the sun rose but could not

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succeed since the firewood was green⁴⁹. The household domestic labour of dasis was often compared with that of the daughter-in-law's work. According to Uma Chakarvarty, 'this distinction in domestic work 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) was invoked by one spirited daughter-in-law who refused to be cowed down by her father-in-law's authority and protested to him that she was not a kumbhadasi (a slave girl who carried water)⁵⁰.

In Panini's⁵¹ grammar the word kimkara is used for domestic servant. As far as female servants were concerned there were several class mentioned in the Gana-Patha, namely pralepika, vilopika, anulopika, manipali and davarpali etc. Along with the domestic and allied works, female slaves were engaged in other sections too.

Female Slave in Textile Industry

Female slaves were also engaged in craft production, textile industry etc. in early age. The spinning of yarn could provide livelihood even to such helpless women as old female slaves of the royalty (vrddharajadasibhi), devadasis (female slaves of the temple) whose services to the gods were no longer required, and the mothers or matrons (matrka) of prostitutes (rupajiva). Dasis engaged in the textile industry provided their services to the aniskasini women who didn't come out of their homes. The superintendent of yarns and textiles was to give them work by sending his own female slaves to their homes rather than asking them to come to him⁵². Although the position of a huge section of early women workers is not very clear, whether they were slaves or workers on wages. It is certain that the bulk of them came from the lower castes (sudras).

Female Slave Attendants

We get reference of not only domestic female slaves or agricultural female slave but also of female slaves occupied in the royal establishments. Those who were to attend on the person

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of the king giving him a bath, shampoo etc., prepared his bed and laundered his clothes are described as *dasis* (female slaves)⁵³. This may be compared with the statement of Megasthenes that “the care of the king's person is committed to women, who also are purchased from their fathers”⁵⁴. A study of female slaves in the *Arthashastra* reveals that some of them served as *dasi-cum-prostitute* for their masters. We find a huge section of women working in the royal courts as we come to know from the epic literature. Women bearing weapons and employed as guards are also mentioned⁵⁵. Ravana sitting in his court is fanned by women attendants⁵⁶. *Sundarkanda*⁵⁷ mentions a few more female attendants, they are lamp/torch bearer, fan bearer, bearer of a pitcher of water, rug bearer, wine bearer, umbrella-bearer, bearer of golden staff (sceptre). We don't know whether these were paid workers or slaves. Female slaves are referred to in different places in the epic. *Manthara* was *Kaikeyi's Jnatidasi*⁵⁸, a slave from her mother's establishment. *Janaka* presented *Rama* with slaves male and female⁵⁹. Female slaves were also attached with the royal palace and performed various kinds of duties assigned to them. *Manu* was also very considerate towards the female slaves. *Manu* refers to slave girls who waited upon the king and looked after his comforts⁶⁰. According to him when he (king) entered the harem to take his meals he was surrounded by female attendants⁶¹. *Manu* requires the king to fix a daily allowance suited to their rank and position for the women employed in the royal service⁶². The women attendants in royal harems like *betel-bearers*, *chowrie-bearers*, *flower bearers* usually belonged to the lower classes and it was not always easy for them to lead a life of purity. They were employed in the inner circles of the palace, for tasks like giving oil or scented baths to the king, massaging hair and other parts of the body, cleaning grains or such other works in the royal kitchen. Elderly and experienced women appointed superintendents over maid servants in the royal households. Some of the female slaves also participated in military services as *Rajshekaras*⁶³ has talked about female slaves kept as security guards of princesses quarters

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carrying the spears and swords. In the houses of the rich these attendants looked after everything, spread the bed, they brought water for the bath, and looked after the mistress if she was ill, prepared perfumes and bath paste and made garlands⁶⁴.

Paricharikas were the common women of the royal establishments and they were skilled in all types of work, like attending to personnel services, preparing garlands, hair dressing, and preparing sandal pastes etc sitting around the queen with the perfumes and ornaments they served her⁶⁵, they carried the umbrella for the queen. We get many inscriptional examples in support of it. Dasis carry chawar were possibly ganikas e.g the dasi Patala carrying chawar was quite beautiful⁶⁶.

Sancharika or duti were also probably female slaves in early India. Vatsyayana says that female messengers (Pratihari, duti) carried the love letter and replies from them⁶⁷. Duti's were also called Sancharika⁶⁸ and they performed dutya karma i.e carrying the messages (e.g at the time of marriages). Tambulkarak-vahini prepared paan and offered to others.

The slaves were called by different names as ceti⁶⁹, sancharika⁷⁰ or duti⁷¹ based on their nature of work. Ceti⁷² were maids or dasis attached to princesses, prince, queen, courtesans, merchants. For example Radanika, a ceti, working for her master Carudatta⁷³, Madanika,⁷⁴ Caturika⁷⁵, Vicchittika⁷⁶ were cetis of their mistress courtesans Vasantesena. Cetis performed various functions in the rich people's houses, as they gathered flowers, worked as reporters, informers. Cetis accompanied the princesses and queens on their outdoors. But much is not known about the legal status of the cetis. There were other kind of female slaves too. Female slaves who carried the chowrie at the back of kings and queens were called chowrie dharini⁷⁷ and beautiful slaves were sought for this purpose.

In the royal courts of ancient times a large number of singing girls were engaged as chowrie-bearers, betel carriers, fan keepers, guards and hair dressers in royal courts. In Sanskrit

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dramas the female attendants are mentioned as Pancharikas, Uddyanapalika, Bandigriharakshika⁷⁸ etc. From Harivams-hapurana we come to know about the mahattara of the queen, Pratihari, Bhriya, Kanchuki, Dhatri. An attendant Kubja prepared packs for the queen, the one brought water from the wells was called Ghatdasi⁷⁹.

Female Slave Entertainers (or Prostitute-slaves)

Apart from domestic and productive labour, the dasis were also meant for pleasure and entertainment. Slave girls were to dance about the manjaliya sacrificial fire with water pots on their head singing⁸⁰. We see female slaves serving their masters in domestic and allied works, while on the other, we see them learning from fine arts such as singing, acting, playing on musical instruments, shampooing etc., with the prostitutes and actresses under the guidance of teachers employed for such purposes⁸¹.

Female slaves were also engaged in stage shows. Kautilya lays down that the person who gives training in music, dancing and other fine arts to ganikas and female slaves making a living by performing on the stage (dasi rango pajivinisca) should get maintenance from the king's treasury⁸². Some of the female slaves named Rupadasi⁸³ and Ganikadasi⁸⁴ were apparently used as prostitutes by their masters⁸⁵. Beautiful slave-girls were often kept as concubines. According to the primitive social ethics of the time, this was a natural destiny for the wives and daughters of slaves. There are numerous instances of slave-women bearing children to their masters, and this is referred to in post-vedic literature, down to the Mauryan period⁸⁶. Kings are always referred as surrounded with female slaves who were kept as concubines. These concubines were often trained in dancing to entertain their masters⁸⁷. Kautilya too refers to the dancing girls who were trained with the royal prostitutes in feminine wiles and the art of entertaining people. While discussing the duties of the Superintendent of courtesans, Kautilya says that the king should provide maintenance to the teacher who imparts to courtesans

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and female slaves who live by the stage, the knowledge of the arts of singing, playing on musical instruments, reciting, dancing, acting, writing, painting, playing on the flute and the drum, reading the thoughts of others, making perfumes and garlands, entertaining in conversation, shampooing and the courtesan's art⁸⁸.

The nataka itthis, who formed part of the harems of princes and monarchs, were probably also female slaves. Although the nataka itthis were not wives but they had a comparatively better status than other dasis of the royal entourage as they didn't have to labour physically and were only required to entertain and amuse their masters. Although they enjoyed more privileges than the other dasis because of their physical appeal, they were totally dependent upon their physical beauty, assets which were necessarily of a temporary nature⁸⁹. These nataka itthis in their old age when they were no longer in the position of entertaining their master used to take up other tasks in the royal establishments. Kautilya says that such dasis should be employed usefully in the state workshops of weaving to cut wool, fiber, cotton and flax⁹⁰. According to Arthasastra, a prostitute-slave (brothels were run by the state), too old for sexual enjoyment could be put to work in the store or the kitchen⁹¹. Other, less fortunate, became wandering spies who picked up information and passed it on to the institute of espionage⁹².

Female Slaves as Bodyguards

Apart from domestic service occasional reference of dasi bodyguards are there. Slave girls were assigned the duties of guarding the masters' house. No one could enter the room without their permission. According to the Andabhuta Jataka, it was only the women slaves who were exclusively allotted the duty of guarding their master's gate⁹³. It is found that when king Bimbisara went to see the palace of Jotika, a great treasurer, he found all the gates of the palace guarded by slave girls. The slave girls were so charming that when they extended their hands to welcome the king refrained from touching their hands out of modesty, taking

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them to be the wives of the treasurer⁹⁴. Probably these female slaves who guarded the first gate had the duty of sweeping and removing refuse also. These female slave guards used to inform the master/ mistress about all the happenings of the house e.g a female slave guard is said to have informed her mistress about the entry of thieves into the room where copper coins were kept. They kept a strict control on the entry of the visitors and watch over the women of the house who could hardly leave the house unnoticed⁹⁵. There is an example of a female slave guard who was assigned the duty of looking after the young daughter of a treasurer in the seventh storey of a house was so faithful to her mistress that she neither disclosed the latter's pregnancy nor the birth of a child to her, to her parents. She even set adrift in the Ganges the illegitimate son of the mistress⁹⁶.

It is quite probable that the Pratihararakshi or Pratiharis were female slaves. The harem of the palace lay in the secluded part and was well guarded by the organized body of females called Avarodharaksakas⁹⁷. These female bodyguards were directly under the Pratihararakshi or the lady keeper of the royal harem⁹⁸. Pratihari were doorkeepers who guarded the door day and night and were usually decked with ornaments as is obvious from the sculpture of the age⁹⁹. Even from the Bhasa's play we come to know about the duty of female doorkeeper to bolt or unbolt the door. The golden arched gateway was constantly attended by the women servers i.e. pratiharis¹⁰⁰. The Pratihari presented every guest or visitor, who approached the palatial doorway before the king and reported every message to the latter¹⁰¹. At times they went to the inner apartments of the queen to call on her to deliver any news. She always remained at the king's call. Apart from this they did some minor jobs e.g like bringing letters and conveying of messages. Pratiharaksi or Pratihari¹⁰² were the feminine counterpart of the Pratihara of the Gupta administration. She bore a cane staff which was the symbol of her authority¹⁰³. She worked under the Kancuki, the lord chamberlain, the Antarvamsika of the Arthasastra and the Pratihari of the Guptas. Female slaves

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guarding the antahpura at night were called Yamikini, and Paniharin¹⁰⁴, carried water in pots.

Queens had male and female bodyguards and at the door of the queen's palace female doorkeepers were posted¹⁰⁵. Speaking of the ranks of the royal attendants the Kurudhamma Jataka says that the lowest of the courtiers was the doorkeeper, the dvarika, she occupies the last but one place, for she is above the public women, the ganikas.

Female Spy Slaves

From the study of Arthasastra we can surmise that female slaves were used as spies in the espionage system of the state. Female slaves were also engaged as barmaids in the wine shops. Kautilya states that in a wine shop the merchants or traders on their part should find out through their own female slaves of beautiful appearance, the intentions of strangers and natives, who have the outward appearance of Aryas, when they are intoxicated or sleep in a secluded part of the room¹⁰⁶. Strabo stating on the authority of Megasthenes which is probably pertaining to the age of the Mauryan state, which shows that women, from different categories i.e., courtesans, sudra women, slave women, nuns, woman artisans, singers, dancers, maid servants etc., were engaged in the profession of espionage. Probably female slaves were also employed in the espionage system, at least the references of the Mauryan age speaks so.

Female Slave Retinue

Dasis were also the major part of the brides' retinue that accompanied her to her new home in the well to do families¹⁰⁷. The Bhaddasala Jataka alludes to the thirty-two sons of Mallika, each of whom had an escort of thousands of people¹⁰⁸. Princess Ruja is said to have been surrounded by many attendants (including female slaves) who were busy in providing her with garlands, precious sandalwood, gems, shells, pearls and precious garments to decorate her person¹⁰⁹. Sometimes hundreds of dasis are described accompanying rich brides to new homes as a part

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of their dowry. In Visakha's marriage 1500 slave girls were part of her retinue and accompanied her to her new home. Female slaves were also part of the retinue e.g from the Digha Nikaya¹¹⁰ we find that the retinue of a prince is constituted exclusively of women. Mahapajapati Gotami accompanied by five hundred female attendants went to join the order.

Female slaves were also an item of gifts. Rama instructs Lakshmana to present female slaves to Abhirupa, a learned Brahmana¹¹¹. Female slaves figure among the gifts given away in connection with Dasaratha's obsequies¹¹². There was the practice of presenting beautiful female slaves to kings by other kings¹¹³. In the Ramayana¹¹⁴ we find such references of gifts of girls but it tells nothing about the way of life of such employed or enslaved women. Even Janaka (Krti-Janaka), the great philosopher king of Mithila, felt no scruples in offering sudra-slaves as gifts to Brahmanas. The direct or implied exhortations to honour women, which are to be found in several places in the Ramayana accord but ill with the enslavement of women and making gifts of them¹¹⁵.

The Brahadaranyaka-upanishada¹¹⁶ says that Yajnavalkya, the great philosopher, was the recipient of such gifts. The Mahabharata¹¹⁷ records that Yudhishthira gave each of the 8800 snatakas engaged in the sacrifice, thirty female slaves. The Digha and Anguttara Nikayas say that the Buddha had prohibited the bhiksus from accepting the gift of slaves, either male or female¹¹⁸. According to a Jataka a brahmana demanded a hundred slave girls from a king along with other requisites as his gifts, and his demands were fulfilled¹¹⁹. In the Vessantara Jataka an exiled prince gives away his wife and children to a suitor¹²⁰. In the story of Aduna and Paduna, two sisters, at the time of their marriage with Raja Gopichandra are said to have taken with them a hundred dasis as gifts¹²¹.

Dhatri Dasis

The classes of dhatri dasis were also a significant section of female slaves. They used to accompany their mistresses to their new homes after their marriage and lived with them for the rest of their lives¹²². The duties of the dhatri dasis of early India were similar to that of the present nurses but it doesn't become clear whether all the dhatri were dasis or not. Much is not known about the legal status of the dhatri, whether they were slaves or free servants receiving wages¹²³. One thing however is certain that the wet nurses of a princess accompanied her for all her life and followed her to her husband's home¹²⁴. Nurses remain with the girl, they have brought up and accompany her to her new home¹²⁵. The nurse mother looked after all the needs of the daughter. A slave nurse is mentioned as serving food to her mistress and fetching water for washing her head¹²⁶. Cankam literature also refers to the employment of women as wet nurses and foster mothers and the term used was 'civilitai'. Though probably only indignant women took to the profession, the nurse seems to have enjoyed the respect as well as affection of the family she served. The Akananuru¹²⁷ and Peromppanamuppatai list the duties of the nurse which included amusing the child, feeding it and soothing it to sleep etc. Divyavadana¹²⁸ explains the duties of nurses as there were different kinds of dhatri with specific duties like,

Anka dhatri- one who carries the child about seated astride on her hips and looks after its growth and use of its limbs

Mala dhatri- one who bathes the child and keeps its clothes clean

Stanya dhatri- one who gives suck to the child

Kridapanika dhatri- one who provides the child with toys and plays with it.

In Naya Dharamkahao¹²⁹, a Jain text, in place of four, five categories of nurses are mentioned. It shows that it was the duty of nurses to keep their mistresses or masters informed of the important incidents. From the Arthasastra it is clear that some female slaves were engaged in the profession of wet nurses,

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Kautilya has referred to the dhatri dasis and provides special rules for them¹³⁰. The relationship of the dhatri and the mistresses was often characterized by great intimacy but nevertheless the dhatri was regarded unclean. Metaphorical similarities are often drawn between the dhatri and things that are unclean since their garments were invariably soiled with various kinds of unpleasant discharges¹³¹. Asoka's 4th pillar edict indicates that just as one entrusts his child to an experienced nurse, and is confident that the experienced nurse is able to care for the child satisfactorily. Thus it is clear from the edict that the prime duties of the wet nurses or dhatri as they were called had the task of bringing up children¹³². Dhatri dasis were addressed with different names in different ages and society but they continued to enjoy respect and were sometimes even called upmatas. We get much information about them from Bhasa's¹³³ play e.g. *Svapna-Vasavadattam* and *Avimarakama*. In Kalidasa's¹³⁴ play she has been addressed as 'Dhayi'. Some nurses were working as messengers' e.g. Vasundhara, Vasavadatta's nurse delivered the message of the queen to the king of Kausambi and princess Padmavati in Bhasa's play *Svapna-Vasavadattam*¹³⁵. The essential qualities of a nurse were that she should not be too tall or too short and should be free from deformities and should be givers of sweet milk¹³⁶.

Devadasis

Devadasis were maintained in the great temples for the worship of the gods e.g. in the great temple of Mahakali at Ujjayini in Kalidasa's time such girls were kept and at the shrine of the sun god in the city east of Sindh in Hieun Tsang's time, but during the Gupta period this practice was limited. Several puranas¹³⁷ also recommend the enlistment of the singing girls to provide moral and instrumental music at the time of divine services. One purana goes to the extent of saying that the best way to win 'suryaloka' is to dedicate a bevy of prostitutes to a solar temple¹³⁸. They were also a part of the temple establishments as devadasis. Inscriptions reveal some general activities of devadasis like holding the camara in honours of God, pounding rice and turmeric, preparing scented

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powder, carrying hand lamps and burning incenses. Abu-Zaid, an Arab traveller, while giving a graphic picture about the origin and duties of devadasis, states that the devadasi prostituted herself at a certain rate and delivers her gains into the hands of the idol priests, to be by him, disposed of for the use and support of the temple¹³⁹.

The devadasis have been frequently mentioned in the literature of the period. Yuan Chwang saw numerous singing girls in the temple of the Sun at Multan. Rajtrangani¹⁴⁰ attests to the existence of this custom in Kashmir from about the 7th century A.D. I-tsing refers to the girls whose dancing delighted the Buddhist deities. In the Somnatha temple in Saurashtra, 500 dancers were ever ready to please the deity by dancing before him¹⁴¹. Several inscriptions from South India prove the association of dancing girls with temple service from about the 9th century A.D. When king Rajraja built the Tanjore temple in the 10th century A.D, he provided for 400 dancing girls for temple service.

The functions of dasis of early India have also been classified as pure and impure tasks. From the Kautilyan period onwards one can notice the classification of the function of dasis as 'pure' and 'impure' work. For Kautilya the aryas or the pledged slaves could not be made to perform impure tasks and a heavy penalty was imposed upon men who made pledged slaves perform certain kinds of impure work. Impure tasks of a dasis included picking up a corpse, dung, urine, or leavings of food and making a woman slave attend at the bath of a naked person¹⁴². According to Narada, sweeping the gateway, the privy, the road and the place of rubbish, shampooing the secret parts of the body, rubbing the master's limbs when desired, gathering and putting away the leavings of food, ordure, and urine and any other tasks of this nature was regarded as impure work and all other work besides this was pure¹⁴³.

Narada enumerated that the domestic chores which were 'pure' were undertaken by hired or other labourers but the domestic work which was 'impure' was done exclusively by slaves.

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Katyayana¹⁴⁴ further adds that all these impure tasks should be performed by the issue of the female slaves.

Female slavery existed in south India too and people possessed slaves according to their wealth and like ancestral property slaves were inherited, sold or gifted. The progenies of female slaves were also the property of the owner. Apart from private individuals, the temples and mathas also possessed female slaves. There were many cases of hereditary slave families¹⁴⁵. Sometimes destitute women sold themselves to temples in order to escape starvation¹⁴⁶. There were many cases of the gift by private persons of female slaves to temples. Dasis had to perform various kinds of menial jobs like sweeping, mopping, fetching water, bricks, throwing human excreta, attending to personal services of the masters along with fulfilling the debaucheries of the rich class¹⁴⁷.

In view of the above discussions, it can safely be maintained that domestic slavery was largely flourishing at this time. The female slaves were generally employed in the ordinary duties of a household like fetching water, pounding rice and spreading the rice out in the sun, cooking, making beds, lighting lamps, milking the cows, fulfilling the physical needs of the master, going on errands, helping the master and the mistress during their baths, bathing the feet of the master and the family before they retired to bed at night, entertaining the master with musical instruments and dance, washing the plates and dishes, sweeping yards and stables and such other duties.

In the absence of required statistics it is difficult to have an idea of the numerical strength of woman slaves in relation to their employers. But it can be surmised that largely female slaves were engaged in the domestic field, fetching water from wells and distant rivers and removing the husk of rice were the two most difficult domestic duties of the female slaves who worked in the kitchen¹⁴⁸. The task of Kumbhadasi was quite a difficult and burdensome one as they had to fetch water from far off places.

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Kali was a slave woman who is said to have been very clever in performing household duties like preparing rice, spreading the beds and lighting the lamps. She was very energetic and careful in her household tasks, that no utensil was ever broken by her. Every day she used to get up early to milk the cows. Female slaves were mainly employed for doing the menial work of the household but there are references which indicate that some slaves worked in the fields too. Female slaves were essentially domestic servants and they had to perform diverse household tasks. Slaves were the lowest state of social being. 'Dasi-bhava' signified not only the slavery of women but also, at least in this particular context, all that one could do with a woman slave.

Different nomenclatures and terms associated with female slaves

There were numerous terms which designate female slaves in accordance with their activities.

1. **Kula-dasi**, a slave woman of a high family.
2. **Nati-dasi**, a slave woman working in a rich household.
3. **Vanna-dasi**, a slave prostitute
4. **Kumbha-dasi**¹⁴⁹, was a slave woman who brought water from far off places. They were also called '**ghata dais**'¹⁵⁰, one who brought water from the well.
5. **Vihikottika dasi**¹⁵¹ was a woman slave who husked rice. These dasis used to work day and night.
6. **Natakaitthis**¹⁵², they were also sometimes designated by the name nataka or nataks. We learn that the monk Ratthapala had abandoned two principal wives and many "natakaithis". The chaplain who declines an offer of women says, I have forty wives and many natakaitthis. Probably they were slaves enjoying high status and better placed than their other counterparts.
7. **Dhatri dasi**¹⁵³- among all the female slaves she enjoyed much respect and was trusted. She used to nurse the royal

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children and they loved the dhatri and considered her equal to their own mother. The expression dhatri-dasi, 'slave-wet nurse', itself proves that all dhatri were not dasi but only few dasis did the job of wet-nurse were called dhatri-dasi. Kautilya has slave women among the nurses.

8. **Devadasis**¹⁵⁴ were female slaves of God, the girls dedicated in service of the temples which later on turned into temple prostitution. Devadasis are less visible in the texts although inscriptional evidence testifies to the existence of the institution of devadasis in the 3rd century B.C.¹⁵⁵
9. **Rupadasi**¹⁵⁶ was a female slave living by her beauty, the female slave or an attendant of the ganikas. As ganika was an important treasurer of the state, and the safety of her mother (matrka), daughter (duhitraka) and female slave or an attendant (rupadasi) was of great importance, as killing of any these was to be punished with the highest fine of violence.
10. **Ganika dasi**¹⁵⁷, female slave living as a prostitute was apparently used as a prostitute by their masters.

Common terms associated with dasis-

1. **Geha dasi**, a slave woman born in the house, she was also named **amaya dasi** sometimes.
2. **Dasi-putta** was a universal term of abuse for a slave woman's son. It may be noted in the Digha Nikaya the term dasi-putto son of a woman slave is explained as graham dasiya putto.
3. **Dasi-bhoga**, work done by dasis
4. **Jnati-dasi**, a slave from her mothers establishment
5. **Udara dasa**¹⁵⁸, a child born of a female slave in the house of a master became slave to the same master.
6. **Dasi cha bhariya cha**, a slave wife.

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7. **Yakkha-dasi**, a slave yakkhi¹⁵⁹.

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Social Attitude towards Female Slaves and Slavery in Early India

A perceptible shift is noticeable in the societies attitude towards slavery in general and female slaves in particular. The attitude of Rigvedic society was entirely different from that of the Buddhist society. Buddha's attitude towards slaves was not in accord with the society he lived in. Mauryan society had a different notion of slavery than that of the Gupta and post-Gupta age.

There were no clear class divisions in the Rigvedic Aryan society as it was a pastoral economy thus cattle, *dasa* and especially *dasis* were the only valuable assets which were regarded as absolute private property and it could be transferred from one owner to another. The Rigvedic families cultivated the lands themselves, and at best the slaves, mainly the women slaves, were engaged in domestic work by the priest and warriors¹. Sharma points out that there is no word for wages in the Rigvedic literature, nor is there any reference to agricultural slaves or labourers².

We find a remarkable change in the social attitude towards female slaves from the Rigveda onwards. The slaves who were the vanquished people of the wars in the Vedic age were only a social class distinguishing them from aryas. But in the Buddhist age the slaves came to be associated with some hardships and their existence became an indispensable feature of the Buddhist

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society. Even the greatest soul like Lord Buddha and Mahavira are only preaching to ameliorate their lot and nowhere have we come to know that they wanted abolishment of slavery from the society. In the Tipitika, we don't find any injunction providing for the protection of slaves against the ill-treatment by their masters. There wasn't an attitude to give them legal protection or to safeguard their interest by the state. The female slaves were left at the mercy of their masters and mistresses, the power of the master over their slaves was unlimited and there was no law to regulate the behaviour of the masters towards their slaves. Along with female slaves their children also could not get over the stigma of slavery as the *dasiputta* was a universal term of abuse and we find frequent references of it in early literature³. Mahanama, the Sakya could not dine with his daughter Vasabhakhattiya for her mother Nagamunda, was a slave. Bodhisatta, as King's chaplain, disported with a slave but could not give his family name to the bastard born to him⁴. The children of the female slave were also subjected to violence and inhuman treatment from their masters. Vessantara Jataka speaks of an instance where a master tied the hands of a boy and girl with a creeper, and holding it tight, beat them and drove them on and struck them so that they both bled heavily⁵.

In the Kautilyan age there was a great change in the attitude of the *smrtikaras* and *dharmasutrakaras* and slavery came to be established firmly. The state recognized their labour and consequently they came to have legal protection. Kautilya was the first and foremost to grant the female slaves liberal concessions and some privileges. Kautilya not only made provisions to safeguard female slaves but promulgated some other regulations to protect the children of slaves. A slave, who was less than eight years old and had no relations, no matter whether he was house born, inherited, purchased or obtained by other means, could neither be engaged in ignoble work nor sold or mortgaged in a foreign land. In case the law was broken, the masters as well as the witnesses were liable to be punished⁶, whereas, in the Buddhist

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period, slaves were cruelly treated, as is manifested from the story of the Vassantara Jataka⁷.

From Arthasastra it becomes clear that Kautilya had an attitude of discouraging slavery among Aryans, and included sudras among Aryans. Later on there was a change in the attitude of the smrtikaras who deprived the sudras of the concessions and privileges granted to them by Kautilya. The changed socio-political condition forced the smrtikaras to bring a change in their outlook towards the freedom of the slaves and imposed restrictions on them. According to Manu a Brahmana should exact servile work from a Sudra whether he was purchased or not and this was justified by calling it a divine law⁸. Yajnavalkya, Narada and Katyayana also speak in the same spirit, when they enjoined that slavery should be in a descending form (anuloma) and not in an ascending order (pratiloma)⁹. After the post Gupta age slavery came to be formed on caste lines as Katyayana completely excludes a Brahmana from slavery and according to him slaves should be from the other three lower classes¹⁰. The institution of slavery which was earlier based on the nationality or race (Kautilya's Arthasastra) now came to be based on caste. In the Pali text there isn't any mention of emancipation ceremony of slaves as manumission of slaves solely depended on the discretion of the masters but Kautilya has given detailed provisions for their manumission and in all the later texts we find frequent reference of manumission of slaves which proves that slaves could regain their freedom. Even the dharmasastras furnish details about the manumission of slaves and the particular ceremony prescribed for that purpose.

From the post-Gupta age we find the weakening of the institution of slavery. Narada was quite liberal towards the slaves for he conceded that slaves had a right to inherit property on par with the real son. Along with slave girls their progeny were also provided protection by the masters, the masters had to treat and honour the progeny of slave girls as they would like to be treated themselves.

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Gradually there was the beginning of the evolution of the rights of the slave during the life of the Buddha. For Buddha the slaves and the servants constituted the 'low sector of the society', *hetthimaa disaa*, that is to say, in his thought, not exactly 'inferior' but rather of the 'base'. Slavery was not confined to the members of the *sudra* varna, even *gamabhojakas* (village headmen), ministers, *brahmanas*, *kshatriyas* and men of high birth might be reduced to slavery. Even a king could be reduced to slavery along with his mother, if the latter had been born from a slave woman. In the Buddhist period e.g. *Vidudabha*, the son and successor of *Kosala*, was nearly reverted to slavery when the king came to know about the slave origin of his mother¹¹. Slavery was not confined to a particular class or caste but they generally belonged to the lower sections of the society. Female slaves were not only items of gifts, donations, or dowry but they were also items of trade. Varna, age, beauty were the determining factor for fixing the prices of a slave woman. The girls of lower castes often accepted slavery at a very low price than the girls of higher varnas. There was export-import of female slaves on a large scale in the sub-continent.

Relationship between female slaves and their masters

Scholars do not have a common opinion on the question of relationship between female slaves and their lords, they have different conclusions depending upon their social milieu and intellectual heritage. Some of them opined that the masters treated their workers well while on the other hand some of the scholars concluded that the slaves were generally ill-treated by their masters in ancient India. A passage from *Digha Nikaya*¹² enjoins that employees should treat their *dasa-dasi*, *kammakara* / *kammakari* etc decently. It is clear that the working class generally received good or bad treatment from their masters depending upon their performance of work but it can be said that the slaves had a congenial environment for work. In general the food served to the female slaves was definitely inferior to that of their masters.

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A similar claim is made by Buddha, who says that while in the house of the others, the dasas/dasis and kamakaras are fed on rice with sour gruel, in the house of his father they receive rice, meat and milk¹³. That the slave received a fixed type of food is clear from the repeated use of the abusive phrase *dasa-paribhoga*¹⁴. Very often the slave women were obliged to sleep with their masters e.g when a jealous mistress came to know about it, she bound the girl's hand and foot, cut off her nose and ears, threw her into a secret chamber and closed the door¹⁵. There are also example of conjugal relations between a slave and the daughter of the master as we come to know from Therigatha about Patachara who eloped with her slave servant but it was the slave servant who was liable to be punished and not the former. Patachara, nearing the time of her confinement was prepared to go back to her father's home, but her slave-husband, fearing punishment, went on keeping her under false pretexts¹⁶.

Slaves were regarded as the property of their masters. Slavery was most of the times hereditary in nature. Children born of slave parents generally took up the same profession. The male and female slaves lived in the house of their masters and performed all household duties. Some cruel and selfish masters who didn't wish to loose the services of their pregnant slave girls must have tried to bring about abortions and it was perhaps for this reason that Kautilya tried to protect such slave-girls from the lustful masters and prescribed punishment for them¹⁷.

The masters had certain duties towards their dependents i.e slaves. The attitude that a master should have towards their slaves is described by Buddha in a discourse, "instead of sacrificing to the fire everyday and feeling satisfied for having performed the duty of an *agnihotri*, it is much better to consider the satisfaction of one's dependents, including the *dasa-kammakaras*, as the better form of fire sacrifice and to consider that it is these people who constitute the household fire¹⁸. In fact he is even a bit more emphatic, when he says that in a house where among others the *dasa-kammakaras* do not get their food

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on time, work is not done properly and loss is the result of such neglect. On the other hand a satisfied slave or servant is an asset¹⁹. Buddha was probably the first to give labour laws for the slaves of the society. According to Buddha²⁰, a noble master has five duties towards his servants and slaves :

- assigning them with food,
- assigning them with wages,
- by tending them in sickness,
- by sharing with them unusual delicacies,
- and by granting them leave at times.

Often he advised his rich listeners to look after the well being of their slaves and servants. Similar reference is found in Asoka's edict 'dasa-bhatakamhi samya pratipatti'²¹, and this exhortation to his people to treat the slaves well, is only a logical consequence of the teaching begun earlier by Buddha himself. In the Tipitikas the term ariya-vohaara (noble master) stands for a free man as opposed to dasa (slave). To treat her servants with concern was one among the eight duties of laywomen fulfilling her dual role as wife and mother²², elsewhere the desirability of properly treating the serving people is brought out when it is said that a silavati woman behaves correctly towards her slaves and servants. It may not be out of place to repeat here the description of the six quarters given by the Buddha, where he places these people in the lower quarter, the hettimaa disaa²³.

Slave labour was also sublet by masters at times as we have an example of a master who beat her dasi for not handing over her wages she had earned by working for someone else²⁴.

A slave's attitude towards the master

Buddha advised the slaves to bear patiently with their lot and should submit to all sought of treatment at the hands of his master without bearing any grudge against their master and in that case a change of destiny could take place. The slaves should try to secure salvation from the cycle of transmigration i.e., release

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from the slavery of life and death²⁵. Even the servants/slaves had five duties to fulfill towards their masters; they rise before him, they lie down to rest after him, they are content with what is given to them, they do their work well, and they carry about his praise and good fame²⁶.

Asoka made two important announcements about the slaves in his edicts i.e. in R.E IX, he observes that "...the dharma ceremonial (i.e. ceremonial of the law of piety) bears great fruit. In this is included right treatment towards slaves and servants (dasabhatakasi)...." Again in his PE VII he observes that the Law of Piety "will grow...even (by full consideration towards and cooperation with) the slaves and the servants²⁷." Such an instruction was required for the consolidation of the new social formation marked by the appearance of the state, and of clear cut social classes for in a tribal society, wealth is primarily meant for distribution among kinsmen²⁸.

The dasis were bought and sold like commodities in the market. A Jataka states that a Brahmana after collecting seven hundred kahapanas thought that the amount was sufficient for buying some male and female slaves²⁹. Buddha had a different attitude towards slaves than the Buddhist society. Buddhism had tended to soften the rigour of slavery, partly under the impact of material conditions and partly owing to the religious influence of Buddhism enslaving an unprotected and refugee was a sinful action. In the Buddhist period the institution of slavery had developed to a considerable extent. 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. A *dasa/dasi* was treated as any other item of property, owned by his master and depending entirely, even for his life, on him.

The general attitude of the Buddhist society towards the institution of slavery was not in conformity to the Buddha's

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principle as they did not want to abolish it. Although Buddha had forbidden his lay men to be slaves or to accept the slaves but nowhere in his dialogues, does he talk about abolishing slavery. Even the kindest of the emperors, Piyadassi Asoka, didn't think of abolishing slavery. Further slaves were needed to convert the vast tracts of land into cultivable land for the expansion of agriculture to meet the increased expenses of a centralized administration. The word *dasi-bhara* is found in Panini's grammar³⁰. Kashika has interpreted it as *dasyah bhara* i.e. the responsibility of maintenance of the woman slaves rested on the master. Patanjali while commenting on Panini opined that the duty of a master is to maintain a pregnant woman-slave and of not selling her during this time³¹.

On the other hand the attitude of slaves towards their masters\mistresses is one of loyalty but at times the female slaves also used to test the behaviour of their mistress as we find in the *Majjhim Nikaya* a slave Kali of a householder's wife at Sarasvati, was skillful and capable of doing her duties well. Kali in order to test whether the fame of her mistress as a gentle and considerate lady was deserved or not, once rose late in the morning. When her mistress got annoyed she again got up late and got rebuked and on the third day, she rose up still later and was so severely beaten by her mistress that her head was broken and blood began to flow.

“With her broken head, with blood flowing Kali roused the neighborhood with shrieks of ‘See, ladies, what the gentle one has done? See, ladies, what the meek one has done? See, ladies, what the mild one has done? What for? Just because her only maid got up late, she was so angry and displeased that she must be up with the lynch-pin to strike her on the head and break it.”³²

But Kali had no listeners to her angry complaint and this revolt of hers didn't protect her from the oppressive mistress. *Rajjumala* was badly abused and beaten from her childhood, she

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was caught by her hair by her mistress, slapped and kicked. To escape this torture the slave girl Rajjumulla got her head shaved off by a barber. The mistress then tied her head with a rope and beat her and consequently unable to bear the brutality any longer she ran off to the forest to commit suicide³³. We get many other instance of cruel treatment of female slaves e.g. a master is described as so harsh to his female slave that when he got angry he struck her head with a staff and it is also stated that he had every right to cut off the noses of the slaves.³⁴ For the slightest fault, slaves were beaten, imprisoned, branded and tortured³⁵. In the Uraga Jataka, we find asking Sakka a slave girl whether she was happy at the death of her master's son as she must have been abused, beaten and oppressed by him³⁶. Punna the Kumbhadasi, had to bring water from the river in winter, for, she was afraid of abuses and threats of blows from her mistress³⁷. Another slave girl, Punna by name who used to pound rice till late in night has already been referred to³⁸.

But all these instances of maltreatment of slaves should not be taken at face value as most of the times their misery was exaggerated out of proportion to depict how they got rid of this miserable condition after adopting Buddhism. We don't find similar description of their lot in other contemporary literature. Even to this day maid servants are not humanly treated and when we talk about the slaves of early India we cannot expect very benevolent behaviour but the treatment of female slaves was not as bad as it is projected in Buddhist literature.

There was an attitude of disliking manual work unlike the Rigvedic age. The profession of a slave was hereditary in nature. But the influence of the Buddha's dharma had a splendid effect on the character of slaves. A servant being of low birth was naturally uncultured and of low spirits but in Buddhism they got respect and could join the samgha. Buddha described servitude as a most painful state of woe along with debt, imprisonment, illness and a journey through the wilderness³⁹. He completely refrained from accepting male and female slaves⁴⁰. He prohibited

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traffic in human beings or slave trade on the part of the upasakas⁴¹. Apastamba⁴² expresses the noble sentiment that a person should stint himself, his wife and children but not his slave who works for him. Therigatha relates how a master gave his female slaves the status of a daughter-in-law⁴³. The Brahmajala sutta of the Digha Nikaya states that the recluse Gotama refused to accept bonded women⁴⁴.

Kautilya also speaks at length about the laws concerning dasa/dasi and ahitakas, which again proves that it had come to receive the state patronage to meet the labour demands of the society. Even Kautilya lays down in his chapter on the janapadanivesa that the king should compel the people to pay attention to the claims of their dasas and ahitakas⁴⁵. Kautilya was even more kind towards the ahitakas and women slaves. It doesn't become clear whether Kautilya was in favour of complete abolition of slavery or only the emancipation of the Arya slaves.

Generally the attitude of masters and mistresses was good towards the female slaves. Although the dasi was not considered a member of the family still appropriate measures were taken for the dasis maintenance. Taking the right care of dasis was among the chief duties of the householders⁴⁶. It may be recounted here that the position of women slaves was secure enough during the Kautilyan age. Female slaves were specifically guarded against the lustful eyes of the masters and their position was very much secure with respect to maternity condition. They could not be turned out, sold out or given away as gifts if they were carrying and if the master wished to part with them when they were in the family way, he could do it only after making the proper arrangements for their maternity. Failure to do so was a punishable offence⁴⁷.

There were some women slaves who had the privilege of being friends of queens and princesses. They participated with them in funs, games, excursions, tours and princesses confided in them. It is very likely that women employed as servants in the

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king's service were in a majority cases courtesans who are often referred to in the dramatic literature. The Gangadhar stone inscription of Visvavarman ascribed to A.D 423-424 shows how to him obeisance was. In the paintings at Ajanta, wherever the king is represented is usually depicted in the company of women, who brings wine in jugs, bear the royal umbrella, wave the chowrie or the fly flap and sing before him. The paricharikas especially stayed at the antahpura and they were closely attached to the master and his family and looked after their well being⁴⁸. A retinue of paricharikas of the queens were not restricted to the low castes, at the time of social crises women of the higher castes might have adopted this profession to earn their livelihood in some cases. The paricharikas who were clever, talented, skilled in ceremonials were made the head of other paricharikas in the royal families. They were attached to the queen like her shadows⁴⁹. They enjoyed respect and had friendly terms with their mistresses e.g. princesses such as Kurangi and Padmavati had rather friendly relations with their slaves. Sometimes they laid down their lives for their lords. Dasis enjoyed respect and affection from the society, they were trustworthy, dutiful, and quite skilled in understanding the internal emotions and feelings of the queens. Dasis used to live with the queens and princesses, collected their articles of pooja, brought information and carried their messages to the king e.g. in *Mrichakattikam*⁵⁰, Vasantsena's dasi was of this kind. Queen Bhanumati in *Venisahar*⁵¹ used to address her dasi as her sakhi i.e. friend. Female slaves were always concerned about the welfare and prosperity of their princesses. Dutiful and affectionate dasis were like a part of the family member and at times these well behaved and mannered female slaves were educated too. They used to take part in the plays enacted in the antahpura. The female slave, Manorama has been depicted as playing the role of the king in *Triyadarshika*⁵².

In the *Kathasritsagara* of Somadeva we find a reference to female slaves given in dowry. King Karpuraka along with other things gave 300 slave-women to his daughter as part of her dowry.

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There is an example in *Trisastisalapurushcarita* in which queen Candrayasa is found to have many slave-girls who did all kinds of work for her. Only royal and aristocratic families could have so many female slaves.

These slave women were given humane treatment but they were not to own property. In the *Namasiddhi Jataka*, a female slave is said to have been thrown down on the floor and badly beaten by her master and mistress with rope ends, because, she did not bring her wages home⁵³. They had the lowest status in society and were supposed to do everything for their master and provide comforts and pleasure including the bearing of his child. Probably the food and clothing was considered as the wages of slaves. The *Dharmasutras*⁵⁴ provides that the remnants of food are meant for the member of working class i.e. slaves. Panini⁵⁵ refers to the custom of giving food to a domestic servant as part of his/her wages fixed by custom. This practice was so widely prevalent that special terms were used to indicate it e.g. a servant who got cooked rice as his / her food every day was called *odanika / odaniki*. We find from the *Jatakas* that the wages given to a water-carrier were half a silver *masaka* or say, half a copper *pana* a day⁵⁶.

Emancipation of female slaves

Female slaves could be emancipated only in certain circumstances and only with the consent of their masters. Sometimes when the slaves influenced their masters by their virtuous conduct, they were granted freedom⁵⁷. Punna, a slave girl, who after listening to the discourse of Lord Buddha joined the order and she was freed by her master⁵⁸. At times the masters used to wed the female slaves and made them their wives. Although very rarely but sometimes the masters were so impressed by their slaves that they not only freed them but used to give them their daughters in marriage⁵⁹. In another text, there is an instance of a mistress telling her female slave; ‘if what you say is correct, I shall set you free’⁶⁰. The example of Maddi, wife of

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Vessantara, who was set free, can be cited as an example for the same⁶¹.

Arthasastra and the Dharmasastras have discussed the manumission ceremony of slaves in detail. Kautilya has provided detailed provisions regarding the emancipation of the slaves but all the laws regarding the emancipations of female slaves seem to apply to only Aryan women reduced to servile status. Kautilya uses two terms to indicate the emancipation of servile people i.e. in the case of the Aryans, the term 'aryatvam' is used, but when the non-Aryan woman slaves are to be freed, 'adasa or adasi' is used⁶². At the time of giving emancipation from slavery the dasi was given a bath with water by the master. We may note that in early Pali texts the term used for the manumission of the female slaves is 'bujjissa'. A nurse, a female attendant, a female share-cropper or a maid servant earned their freedom as soon as they are violated. It is laid down in Arthasastra that, if a woman slave gave birth to a male child from her master then she along with her child was manumitted and not only she but her mother, sister and brother were also manumitted. But all the provisions for the emancipation of the slaves apply to the Aryas reduced to slavery. It is difficult to say whether the rule of providing for the emancipation through the payment of purchase value applied to the non-Aryan slaves in the same way as it was applicable to Aryans. Kautilya's laws of manumission of slaves generally applied to those who were born of Aryan parents or were Aryan themselves. In certain circumstances Aryan women were also reduced to slavery through domestic distress or the inability to pay fines or debts. A fine of 12 panas was imposed on a person who took an already released slave, man or woman, for sale or mortgage except in the case of voluntary slaves⁶³. It is clear from the above reference that a failure to recognize a dasa or dasi as an arya on the receipt of proper ransom shall be punished with a fine of 12 panas. A person (dasa/dasi) could regain his/her arya hood (aryatyam) by repaying the purchase value and thus could regain his ancestral property⁶⁴. Even the captured slaves could be

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emancipated by paying the ransom (aryaprana). In all such cases the question of regaining arya-hood could arise only in the case of those who had it before and not in the case of the women of the working class. At best the above mentioned provisions could apply to the sons and daughters of the three varnas born from mothers of the working class⁶⁵.

Yajnavalkya, Narada and Katyayana introduced new clauses in the law regarding manumission. Yajnavalkya introduces a very important principle when he asserts that nobody can be reduced to slavery without his consent; such a person has to be emancipated. The notion that the twice born cannot be reduced to slavery lost ground in the smrti literature upto the Gupta period. When Yajnavalkya was writing, the rigours of slavery were gradually melting out and the slaves were in a much better condition⁶⁶. Yajnavalkya makes the redemption of slaves unconditional excepting when one voluntarily becomes a slave for his food, he has to pay the money the masters spent in maintaining him⁶⁷. A slave woman could obtain freedom if she could prove herself worthy of it⁶⁸. Yajnavalkya holds:

“...one who has been enslaved by force or sold by robbers should be released from bondage; one who saves his master’s life, when his life is in danger should also be released; the slave for maintenance by paying up the expenses for maintenance, and also by giving maintenance in time of famine can obtain his freedom.”⁶⁹

Narada has been very liberal towards the slaves and has given a detailed account of the mode of manumission of slaves. According to P.C.Jain⁷⁰, “all fifteen kinds of slaves mentioned by Narada, could secure their freedom by helping their master in danger, but, otherwise, the first four types viz. a slave born in the master’s household of a female slave, one acquired by purchase, one received as a gift, and one acquired by inheritance had no chance of gaining their liberty, for they were born as slaves. Such slaves, of course, could be liberated, if the master showed special

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favour to them⁷¹. According to Narada if one has accepted slavery due to intercourse with a slave girl, is manumitted, if he parts from her⁷². Narada for the first time speaks at length about the special manumission ceremony of a slave. As per the ceremony the slave who was to be manumitted carried a jar full of water on their shoulder and the master broke the jar and sprinkled the water from the vessel, containing rice and flowers, over the head of the slave and thrice declared him\her free. The slave with his face towards the east walked as a free man or woman and was no more a slave and thence onwards taking food or gift from him\her was acceptable⁷³. These emancipated slaves commanded respect from the society and no taboo was associated with them.

Treatment Meted Out to the Female Slaves

When we talk of slavery we cannot expect a benevolent attitude towards the people who have submitted their independence to their masters as no society was egalitarian in nature. Despite this, the treatment meted out to the slaves was not inhuman as such. The female slaves generally depended on the disposition of their master and whims and fancies of their mistress. Buddhist literature frequently uses the expression meek as a hundred piece slave girl⁷⁴, which clearly indicates that the dasis had been so completely suppressed that meekness became a distinguishing feature of this group⁷⁵.

Though the Buddha pleaded for better treatment of servants and slaves and even disapproved of trafficking in men and women, he did not outrightly advocate the abolition of poverty and slavery as social evils⁷⁶. Some masters are said to have treated slaves humanely under the influence of the Buddha's sermons. Slaves who often enjoyed the confidence of their masters, were trusted by them and sometimes were even appointed as the guardian of his property. The consent of the master was necessary for the marriage of slaves. The Kathahaka-Jataka states that Kathahaka the son of a female slave of a rich treasurer of Benares was employed by him as his private secretary.

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The general lot of the female dasis was not very good as Jataka stories often refer to female dasis being subject to violence and maltreatment by their mistresses. The story of a female slave Punna speaks about the miserable conditions of the dasis. Usually the heavy burden of the domestic indoor duties used to befall on them. According to Nana Chhanda Jataka slave Punna when asked by her master to ask for a boon for herself from the king, she desired a mortar, a pestle and a sieve, which were just the instruments for threshing and winnowing rice, the function, performed by domestic female slaves⁷⁷. The dasis were often badly treated and subjected to threats and abuses by their masters. The ladies of the house were irritated by their slave Punika and hurt this girl with harsh words and beat her and being afraid that she had to go to the river even in severe cold to fetch water. The fact that her master was a devoted Buddhist did not in any way alleviate her suffering. The position of female slaves was indeed very pitiful. A slave woman like Roman slave-girls was the property of her master who had every control over her. The treatment of her master or mistress towards her was sometimes most unsatisfactory. She was ill-treated in the majority of cases. It is because of this state of affairs that the lord Buddha and king Asoka had to lay down instructions for the noble householders to ameliorate the condition of slaves both men and women. According to P.C.Jain⁷⁸, 'it is very strange, that Mrs.Rhys.Davids finds only two examples of ill-treatment of slaves in Buddhist literature. The Pali canons, on the contrary, give more examples of cruel masters than kind and generous ones'. But any generalization on the basis of the Buddhist literature needs reconsideration as very often there is an element of exaggeration in depicting the worse situation of the female slaves so as to highlight that only after joining the Buddhist samgha their lot improved.

The dasis were the vulnerable class who were often subjected to not only physical violence but also to sexual exploitation. As they were considered the property of their master,

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they used to exploit them even sexually. Buddhist literature cites the example of a slave girl who was forced to sleep with her master. When the mistress found out about the incident she cut off the slave girl's nose in a fit of jealous rage⁷⁹. Kautilya had provided legal protection to *ahitaka dasis* against this kind of exploitation as no master should have pledged *dasis* attending on him while he bathed⁸⁰. The master was liable for punishment if he violated the *ahitaka dasis* who were either a nurse maid or a cook in domestic service, and *dasis* regained their freedom⁸¹.

On the other hand, one must not forget that the Buddha, anxious to free his monks of material preoccupations, had forbidden almost all manual labour to them. As all manual labour was forbidden to the monks, it was but natural that they looked outside the monasteries for the labour necessary for the upkeep of these buildings. This labour was provided in the form of *aramikas* who used to settle with their families near monasteries to work for the monks. A story from the *Vinaya Patika* gives a glimpse in the origin of the *aramikas* and the way a prince convinced Buddha to accept the gift of *aramikas* for the upkeep of the monasteries. In a later text, the editor includes the *aramikas* as also mats, utensils, medicines etc among gifts made to a monastery. It was therefore, decided to elect a monk called *aramika-pessaka* to supervise the work of the *aramikas*⁸². Besides *aramikas* we also find the term *kappiya-karaka*, 'one who makes arrangements', one who arranges (things), which designates men who have not become monks but who are charged with the execution of certain jobs forbidden to the monks but necessary nevertheless⁸³. In *Vinaya*, when it is a question of accepting an *aramika*, since Buddha has permitted it, mention is also made of accepting a *kappiya-karaka*, the status seems to have been similar to that of *aramikas*. Although Buddha was professing against slavery but slavery had crept into Buddhist monasteries too in some form or the other and the general attitude of the society was not in favour of abolishing slavery.

Legal provisions with regard to female slaves

In the Buddhist period slavery had emerged as a fullfledged institution and the masters had absolute control of the slaves and there were no legal provisions to protect the slaves, the state had no role to play with respect to servitude and labour; the relations between the dasas-karmakaras and the masters had to be worked out by the individual masters. In the Arthasastra on the other hand there was a great change as the masters now had only a conditional control over the slaves and the state provided some kind of protective legislation for at least some categories of dasa/dasis. Tipitika doesn't mention any law protecting the slave, limiting in some manner the absolute power of the master over his persons. In the Tipitika we do not find any punishment for the master accused of maltreating his slaves⁸⁴. No distinction was made between slavery for life and for a fixed period as made by Kautilya in Arthasastra. The slave, being considered as a piece of property, had no right to possess anything. The owners of slaves were strictly prohibited from selling or mortgaging pregnant slave women without making proper arrangements for them during the maternity period. If someone transgressed the law, not only he but even the purchaser and the witness were liable to be punished⁸⁵. In the Buddhist age, a slave girl who was obliged to sleep with her master was deprived of her nose by her mistress and there was no law to protect her from the cruelty of the owner. Kautilya's law, however, made provision for the protection of such girls. Owners who tried to violate the chastity of the daughter of a male or female slave were fined 24 panas and had to pay for her dowry and ornaments. Those who deflowered a female slave, who was due for redemption, were fined 12 panas and had to pay for her clothes and ornaments⁸⁶. The master was expected to pay a fine to the ever vigilant state too. A man who stole a female slave had both his feet cut off and had to pay a fine of six hundred panas⁸⁷. If a master raped a dasi who was pledged to him and who was under his protection, or if he helped another to do so, he was not only required to forfeit the purchase value but also to compensate

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her with money⁸⁸. According to Kautilya for killing a mother, a daughter or a female slave (Rupadasi) living by her beauty, the highest fine for violence shall be imposed⁸⁹.

We find a great difference in the attitude towards the female slaves during the Kautilyan age from that of the Buddhist period. In Buddha's age slaves were not allowed to own any kind of property, whatever they earned in their spare time belonged to their masters as is depicted in the story of the slave girl who was severely beaten for not giving her mistress the money earned by her. On the other hand Kautilya had put some restrictions on the rights of the owners and was not in favour of complete ownership of the masters over their slaves rather he made laws to regulate the masters hold over their slaves. As a result of this slaves in Kautilya's age could keep the money earned by them in their spare time along with their parental inheritance as long as this did not affect the duty owed by them to their owners⁹⁰. A certain amount of liberty was given to the Arya slaves as they could regain their freedom by paying the sum due to the creditor⁹¹, and a slave on whom a fine was imposed could work in lieu of the fine⁹². Kautilya had not only passed laws to protect the chastity of female slaves but he also laid down strict rules regarding the assignment of work to the female slaves. But Kautilya imposed a heavy penalty upon men who made pledged slaves perform certain kinds of impure work like removing dead bodies, dung, urine, leftover of food, or in attending to him while he was bathing naked. Masters could not inflict corporal punishment on them nor could he dishonor them in any way and any violation of this law would automatically lead to forfeiture of the capital amount spent on the slaves and the loss of the slaves as well, for, they gained freedom⁹³. But one need to keep one thing in mind that all these laws were meant for the *ahitaka* slaves i.e. Arya women, the non Aryan female slaves were subject to exploitation and abuse as before as Kautilya had distinguished between pledged (*ahitaka*) slaves and unpledged slaves. But Narada distinguishes slaves from free labourers on the ground that the former, unlike the latter, are

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employed in impure work. According to him, there are two kinds of work, pure and impure. Impure work is done by slaves and pure work by free labourers. Gradually there evolved legal provisions for the slaves especially with regard to female slaves to provide them with protection and security. Laws concerning the woman slaves and labourers were quite liberal. Corporal punishment was given to those who exploited slave women or dishonoured them⁹⁴. Their progeny were regarded as Arya and were free⁹⁵. The offspring begotten on the female slave by her master would be free along with its mother. If the mother was unwilling to take advantage of this right, the right of liberty could be transferred to the brother or sister of the girl⁹⁶. Slaves enjoyed quite a degree of personal and property rights⁹⁷. Such humane treatment and legal protection as provided by Kautilya to slaves, is hardly to be observed in the Buddhist canonical texts already referred to⁹⁸. It was, perhaps, owing to this humane treatment towards slaves that the Greek writer, Megasthenes, refers to the non-existence of slavery in India. He says, 'no one among the Indians has any slaves in his service'⁹⁹.

Kautilya has provided the most elaborate legal provisions with respect to *dasis* but one needs to take note of the fact that how far these injunctions were effective in reducing the exploitation of the female slaves of early Indian society. The *arya dasis* enjoyed immunity from impure work and from physical violence. For the other categories of *dasis*, over whom the master had absolute control and who could not look forward to possible redemption, there was no such protective legislation¹⁰⁰. Kautilya's injunction was more in favour of the state than the *dasis* as their lot remained the same. Since many of the offences were made punishable by imposing fines, instead of imprisonment, the prevalence of sexual exploitation was utilized by the state to fill the state coffer.

Manu puts them on the same level as one's own wife, son, the menial servants and full brother in the matter of giving corporal punishments. He enjoins that a slave, if found guilty, should be beaten with a rope or a thin piece of split bamboo only

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on the back and never on the head¹⁰¹. A person who behaved otherwise should be punished like a thief. What is enjoyed here is the method of keeping the persons on the right path and not actual beating, chastisement could be verbal also. The earnings of a slave belonged to the master. What is meant by the text is only this much that the slave should not spend his earnings.

Yajnavalkya introduced a revolutionary principle that nobody can be reduced to slavery against the wishes of the slaves. It was supported by Naradasmṛti and Mahabharata as they were also against the forcible enforcement of slavery. Like Kautilya, the tendency to protect the honour of a slave woman is maintained by the smṛtikaras too. According to Yajnavalkya, women slaves were given adequate protection with regard to their chastity. No one could violate the chastity of a slave-girl against her wishes¹⁰². Yajnavalkyasmṛti¹⁰³ prescribes that a slave girl who has been purchased may be returned or changed within one month only. Yajnavalkya had prescribed a fine for a master who destroyed the foetus of a slave girl against her wishes. Yajnavalkya¹⁰⁴ has made a provision of a fine of 50 panas on a man approaching an avaruddha (a dasi kept only for masters service) or bhujshya (a dasi given to an individual in particular). Yajnavalkya¹⁰⁵ clears that if a man approaches a female slave, he has to pay a fine of 10 panas but if several persons force an unwilling female slave, then the fine was 24 panas. Narada states that it is by permission of the owner only that a female slave may be enjoyed by a stranger¹⁰⁶.

Katyayana like Kautilya holds the similar opinion that the slave girl who begets an offspring from the union with her master should be set free along with the child but Katyayana disagrees with Kautilya on the point that he does not mention the right of transfer of freedom to the relatives of the slave-girl, in case, she is reluctant to be redeemed¹⁰⁷.

It is clear that a dasa/dasi had no right to own property of any kind, whatever money they earned belonged to their masters¹⁰⁸. So far as the question of property rights of a slave woman or her son from her master are concerned, Vijanaesvara¹⁰⁹

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explaining Yajnavalkya says that they (his natural and lawful sons) should give him half from their own share. It is not only the son of a slave woman (by her master) who should be released from servitude but also a slave-woman, according to Devanabhatta¹¹⁰, who has her master's child in her womb so that the child born, whether a son or a daughter, should be a free child. The later law givers limit the application of the equitable smṛti rule, requiring the master begetting a son on his female-slave to release them both by stating that this should be done when the master has no other son¹¹¹. The property of an issueless man can be inherited by the children of dāsis¹¹². According to Agni Purana, the punishment for destroying the foetus of female slaves was 100 panas. Female slaves were also imported from foreign lands.

Epigraphical references to slave women are also available. Some of them were to do all the menial jobs for their masters, some were kept in the king's harem. War prisoners were reduced to slaves, inscription of the time of Yadava Simghana (A.D. 1209-10) refers to prince Krishmaraja of the solar lineage hero whose head was fanned by the wives of his enemies¹¹³. Ganopes-Varma inscription of Ganapati (A.D.1153) from Andhra also refers to women captured in war and then made slaves¹¹⁴.

The total number of slaves both in production and domestic work does not seem to exceed the non-slave population as happened in Greece during the same period. The figures mentioned for domestic slaves (male and female) are far larger than those of slaves employed in agricultural and craft production. Slavery was not restricted to a particular caste or class. Members of higher varnas might also be reduced to slavery but only in limited circumstances¹¹⁵. The general slaves were mostly drawn from the 'śudra varna'¹¹⁶. Slavery arising out of debt, purchase, free will and fear can be expected more in the case of the lower order people than in that of the members of the higher varnas (Brahmana-Ksatriya). The position of very many working women of early India is not very clear, whether they were slave women or free women working for wages. But it is certain that the bulk

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of these women belonged to the lower sections of society, who adopted some or the other professions for their subsistence.

Nature of slavery

Slavery has existed in India since the time of the Vedic age at least. However, since Indian society has throughout been subject to the strictly-enforced caste system, the differences between those in the lowest caste and the lot of the slaves are not very great and, in some cases, it may have been better to be a slave. For example, a low caste person had to work constantly to obtain food and water while slaves occasionally (although not very often) could have time off from work. Laws also existed as to what sort of treatment masters were permitted to use with slaves for example they could be beaten on the back but not on the head, while a woman who was made pregnant by her master would, at the moment of birth, be freed together with her child. Of course, no one can minimize the misery of being enslaved and although it is almost certain that masters paid least attention to these kinds of rules but, nevertheless, at least some structure of protection was provided. These were supplemented by both Hindu and Buddhist precepts, which must have been influential in affecting the behaviour of some people.

The position of female slaves was at times quite better than other kinds of female labourer of the early society. As they were attached to the family on hereditary line and could not be removed from their position throughout their life this provided them with some sense of job security which was not the same with other types of labourers of ancient India. Hired labourers, women workers etc all had to work hard through out the day to meet their livelihood and any kind of carelessness or lack on their part would have cost them dear. But the female slaves were in a position to take liberty as they knew that they could not be removed from the house, they were to be provided with food, clothing and lodging and not only the slaves even their children were to be provided with the same no matter whether they were doing their

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work properly or not. It was not always the slaves who were victim of their masters oppression but sometimes even the master/mistress were also fed up with their disobedient and lazy slaves as even if they were not doing the tasks properly they could not be removed from their position.

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Conclusion

मानुषाः मानुषामेव दास भावेन भुञ्जेत्।
वधबन्धनिरोधेन कारयन्ति दिवानिशम्।।

(महाभारत, शान्ति पर्व ,262.38)

“Men acquire men as slaves, and by beating, binding, and by otherwise subjugating them, make them work day and night. These people are not ignorant of the pain that is caused by beating and chains.”¹ and the same passage has been rendered as follows:

Human beings, enslaved by human beings, are exploited by them;

Tortured, shackled and incarcerated are forced to work day and night;

Though they (who do this) themselves know the agony evoked by torture and chains.²

The story of slaves has ever been a tale of suppression, oppression, subordination, exploitation as it is rightly depicted in the Mahabharata. The reference of female slaves immediately draws our sympathy and attention as the general notion of slaves is of the subjugated and subjected class, oppressed and suppressed through the ages. The modern age scholars have studied the lot of the slaves with the modern concept of human rights which isn't incorrect. One keeps quoting the violence, abuse and harsh treatment that slaves had to bear with in early societies. But one

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also needs to reconsider the circumstances in which the slaves were bet or abused. Were the masters or mistress always at fault? D.R.Chanana³ has drawn our attention to the position of masters too as at times they were at the receiving end as the slaves position in early Indian societies were quite secure. The slaves were bound with the household they served through out their life, they couldn't be removed in any circumstances and the slaves took advantage of it most of the times. As the slaves and their family were to be provided with food, clothing and maintenance by the master and they could not be deprived of it, the slaves used to abstain from their jobs, were negligent in their duties and were unwilling to abide by the wishes of their owners.

We get a significant hint of this in a verse in the Therigatha which says that the Kammakara did not take any interest in the work given to him and went on neglecting his duty till his master came and ordered him to do it⁴. A similar allusion occurs in the Majjhima Nikaya where a master complains to the Buddha:

“O master, our slaves..... do one thing with their bodies, say another with their speech and have a third in their mind”⁵.

According to Uma Chakaravarty, ‘the Buddhist society clearly reflects the emergence of impoverished and dispossessed sections who had no other alternative but to sell their labour or be enslaved in return for a basic existence.’ The position of the slaves were quite better than the kammakara or daily wage labourers as they had to be always worried about their livelihood, if they didn't labour out a day they failed to meet the requirement of food. They couldn't afford to be careless or reckless in their task, it cost them dear as they could be easily removed. This was not the condition of the slaves, as their position was quite secure and permanent in nature and very often they took advantage of it. Apart from this we come to know about the references of female slaves betraying their master or mistress e.g. Khujjutara, a slave girl of Samavati, queen of Udena, king of Kausambi, used to

purchase flowers daily for the queen. She was in a habit of stealing some coins from the money given to her for buying flowers. It was only hearing Buddha's sermon that she gave up her habit of theft and she confessed her guilt before her mistress after hearing Buddha's sermon and left this habit and persuaded her mistress also to listen to the Dharma of Buddha. The maid servant was then honored as a mother and a teacher by the queen⁶. Lord Buddha was deeply concerned about the lot of the slaves of the early society. Buddha never talked of abolishing slavery as he knew the importance of the slave labour but Buddha never gave approval to such inhuman treatment of slaves. In one of the discourses, Buddha once pointed to the sufferings of the slaves and said that they had sometimes to carry out the inhuman orders of their masters as they were afraid of being beaten⁷. He tried to mitigate the condition of slaves thorough his sermons and discourses. There was a remarkable impact of this on the masters attitude towards their slaves. Another slave servant Virani attained heaven by offering food to the Buddhist Samgha with devotion, with the permission of her mistress⁸. Kautilya was not in favour of slavery for the Aryans as he strongly denounced that the free persons could not be sold and if found then the culprit was liable for punishment⁹.

The institution of slavery in early Indian society had provided the dasis with a security cover as they couldn't be deprived of their job, if they were no longer useful for one task they were put to some other job. The female dasis engaged in royal establishments in their old age were put in other departments for their sustenance.

There are reference where slaves reacted or revolted against their owners and it is perhaps for this reason that the ancient law givers when on the one hand provided them legal coverage and on the other hand tightened their grip over their labour. Their movement and independence was checked and regulated. There was resentment in the servile class of early India as they often had to carry out orders under the duress and the fear

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of punishment but this didn't lead to class consciousness of any kind or united and organized reaction against the upperclass, any reaction found is incidental as the reaction was guided by the demands of the situation. The only reference of retaliatory action found is of *dasa-karmakaras* of Sakyans who violated the Sakayan womenfolk to wreak vengeance against them. But for Uma Chakarvarty, 'the most significant aspect of this reference is that it is the *dasa-karmakaras* of one of the *gana-sanghas* who were responsible for the only instance of retaliatory action in the existing literature¹⁰. It has been argued elsewhere that this collective action was possible because of certain characteristics of the social organization of the *gana-sanghas*¹¹. Since the *dasa-karmakaras* worked on the land for joint masters, and were themselves a group in relation to their masters, it was easier for them to take collective action against their masters¹².

From the *Arthashastra* we find that the amelioration of labour condition was accompanied by a tightening of the control over labourers. *Manu* is also strict towards the slaves so as to regulate their behaviour. But again the slaves gained upper hand with influx of foreign invaders who successively ruled over the country. As a reaction to this the Gupta and post Gupta orthodox *smrtikaras* made once again an attempt at clarifying and defining the position of social classes and laying down fixed laws to exercise a stricter control over the slaves.

Although the socio-economic position of the *dasis* was not very satisfactory but they didn't have to work in adverse conditions. The instances of violence or abuse were not the normal feature of early societies rather exceptional ones. These were the extreme cases of violence that it got recorded in the literature of early India. Scholars have often been comparing the position of Indian slaves with that of west and have found that the early Indian slavery institution provided the slaves great amount of security and safety than their western counterparts.

In the present globalized world the outlook has changed towards the household activities of women or dasis. These are also regarded as economic activities because its providing livelihood and economic security to women. The dasis position had some advantages in early societies. The dasis used to be bound with the house and her master/mistress and her job was permanent in nature and couldn't be removed from the house in any condition. Any kind of negligence or carelessness on the part of the dasis couldn't force the masters to remove her from her position. The maintenance of the dasi's family and looking after her future generation was mandatory on the part of the owners.

The institution of slavery had ethnic identity in the Vedic age as dasa/dasis stood for a race or community but gradually this distinction disappeared altogether once for ever because of mixing of populations and later on slavery existed purely for economic reasons and on the caste basis. Even the kindest of the emperors, Piyadassi Asoka, didn't think of abolishing slavery. Further it is likely that the state faced with new expenses of a highly centralized administration, was forced to take recourse to slave labour by employing war prisoners to reclaim new land for the imperial farms¹³.

Even lord Buddha was professing against slavery for the Buddhist but slavery had crept in Buddhism against his wish in some form or the other and the general attitude of the society was also not in favour of abolishing the institution of slavery.

We need to give a reasoned and balanced account of lower order women without being influenced by any preconceived perception of slavery. Women of lower classes had to labour out for their subsistence and livelihood in all ages. The contemporary society has begun to recognize the labour of this subjugated slave class as they bring comfort and ease to the millions of households. We escape the drudgery of menial chores and lead a peaceful life because of them. They slog and slave to make our life better and at a barest minimum cost.

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JGJRI : Journal of Ganganath Jha Research Institute

JESHO : Journal of Economic and Social History
Organisation

IHC : Indian History Congress

