

AGRESTIC SERFDOM IN NORTHERN INDIA

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THE employment of human labour in agriculture gives rise to many problems with regard to the type and conditions of work which are of supreme importance. In India, as in all agricultural countries of the world, forced labour has played an important part in supplying a permanent source of power in times when family or hired help was scarce. Although agriculture was regarded as the most honourable of professions, it was, nevertheless, considered a suitable employment for slaves who ultimately outnumbered the other type of workers.

The system of personal servitude is a picturesque relic of the past. Though the history of the development of village communities in northern India does not throw sufficient light on the origin and growth of agrestic serfdom, there is ample evidence that this pernicious custom is not exotic to India. As a trait of culture, agrestic serfdom is a creation of environmental pressure, and must be attributed a parallel growth in different regions of the earth; and though it manifests itself in multifarious forms at different times and in different places, it shrinks in essence to a simple economic product of the geographical environment. Whenever a transition in economic stages is forced by the pressure of physical environment—soil, climate, fauna and flora—new economic institutions evolve themselves and gradually merge into the social structure, thus making adaptation quicker and easier. The agrarian history of India shows that agrestic serfdom is a socio-economic institution, evolved out of an imperious economic necessity in a closed system of village economy.

Agrestic serfdom is not a primitive institution, and therefore, it cannot be traced back to the Collectional Economic Stage. It is essentially an industrial institution of late growth. In the pastoral stage, particularly, where the peripatetic tribes became

comparatively more localized by practising meadow-husbandry, agrestic serfdom had gained good ground; whilst in the more settled economic stages of village settlement, where agriculture became the principal source of subsistence and other primitive occupations subservient to cultivation, serfdom had come to stay. Where agriculture is practised with crude implements and without the aid of domestic animals, where the working population is scarce, where the land must be reclaimed from the wilds and marshes, and where soil and climate act as limiting factors for the employment of imported labour—it is not the capital that is wanted, but native labour to reclaim the land and cultivate it under difficult environmental conditions. Under these circumstances bond-labour of the native population is introduced and pinned to the soil in conditions akin to slavery and serfdom.

The institution of slavery in India, with special reference to agricultural slaves, seems to have been established in very remote times, and is linked up with the idea of innate dependence of *Sudras* and their perpetual slavery as one of the axioms of Brahmanism; because the *Sudra* issued from the feet of *Purusa*, the primeval male feet denoting service. Thus the original slaves were called *Dasas* or *Sevaks*, terms which signify eternal social and economic dependence, and the existence of *Dasas* was considered a liability redeemable only by service.

As an established social institution slave labour was a conspicuous feature in ancient India. The Law Book of Narada enumerated fifteen different varieties of them. The *Kutumbins*, who cultivated land as a subsidiary means of livelihood, were understood by Kielhorn to be only serfs. Similarly, the *Upavasas* who formed the bulk of the landless class flourished in an aggressive state of serfdom. Kautalya gave

it his sanction as the lawful privilege of Government servants and the land-owning classes. The number of slaves was increased from time to time when the villagers captured in a war by an enemy were sold as agricultural slaves, or by addition of persons who sold themselves to landlords during famines, and to money-lenders for relieving themselves from the burden of cumulative debts.

The nature and extent of agricultural slavery in northern India cannot be estimated beyond the middle of the 18th century A. D. from the meagre data available. Traces, however, of agricultural slavery appear in the history of the occupation and development of the Chota Nagpur plateau by hordes of immigrants from the Ganges and Mahanadi valleys. The Munda chiefs were the first and original reclaimers of the soil, but were subjugated by the Oraons in the 10th century A. D. After about two hundred years the Oraons were crushed by Cheros and Kharwars who exercised dominion from Ranchi to Allahabad. In the 13th century A. D., however, the first influx of Banias began from Bihar, the U. P. and Central India and, by a systematic policy of money-lending, these Dikkus (immigrant Mahajans) had assumed supremacy over large stretches of land and become jagirdars. With the increase of Hindu jagirdars there grew a competition for raiyats, and the system of bond-labour was inevitably introduced. Agricultural slavery was therefore established long before the British occupation of the Chota Nagpur territories.

From the proceedings of the Council of Revenue dated 17th May, 1774, we learn that vending of persons as slaves to landholders was abolished in Bhagalpur district of Bihar. Early in 1789 the Collector of Shahabad wrote to Lord Cornwallis requesting speedy instructions as to the manner in which he should determine cases of agricultural and domestic slaves. In 1790 forced Santal labour was freely used in Birbhum to clear jungles and reclaim land for cultiva-

tion, and according to Southerland (1818) and Dunbar (1836) the Ghatwals and Dikkus had completely enslaved the aboriginal population of Santal Parganas, and the Santal insurrection which broke out in 1854 was due to the oppression of usurers who had systematically reduced the Santals to poverty and slavery. In 1800 it was observed by several travellers that the condition of the indebted and landless agricultural labourers in Cooch Behar was akin to *Villain Franks* and *Sokemen* of the French and English manorial villages. In 1808 Dr. Buchanan Hamilton made a minute survey of some of the districts of Bihar and concluded that agricultural slavery was a common feature of the rural economy of these regions, as is also evident from the answers of the Muftis and Pundits to the questions put by the Nizam-i-Adalat in 1809.

In 1859 the "Statement Showing the Material and Moral Progress of India" showed that agricultural slavery still prevailed in the Chota Nagpur plateau, the Ganges and Brahmaputra valleys, and the sub-Himalayan regions. From the classification of bond-slaves made by Professor Wilson (1865) and Sir W. Hunter (1872) we find that the system was introduced by moneyed Hindu settlers. It was organized primarily for forming various agricultural and domestic duties. In 1886 the Jesuit Missionaries, after converting them to Christianity, liberated many slaves from the clutches of their masters. The report of the Bailey Conference with Christian Missionaries and landlords in 1890 brought to light the universal practice of Kamiauti (bond-labour) in northern India.

The first systematic survey was made by Sifton in 1908, who observed that agricultural slavery was extending in all parts of Chota Nagpur, and in 1913 Bridges reported that almost the entire aboriginal population of Bihar had been enslaved by non-cultivating landlords. In 1930 Dr. Radha Kamal Mukerji during an unofficial in-

vestigation found that many villages of Ranchi, Hazaribagh and Pallamau were populated only by landless serfs. The Government of Bihar in 1934 deputed Chowdhuri for an official enquiry into the nature and extent of Kamiauti and bond-labour in the province, but the report was not made public. Our systematic investigations from 1933 to 1940, however, have brought to light several important points : *first*, that agricultural slavery in its original form does not exist any more, but appears in milder forms of 'serfdom' and 'begar' ; *second*, that newly reclaimed forest lands and unhealthy submontane tracts are hotbeds for agrestic serfdom ; *third*, that the system, though considerably now weakened, is not completely suppressed and likely to persist until the bogie of absentee landlordism and non-cultivating owners is removed by drastic legislation.

A distinction, however, might be drawn between slavery and serfdom. Slavery is the subjection of men individually, and a subjection which includes the whole personality of the slave. The master of the slave is entitled to all the services of the slave, including his personality or his very existence, which makes him a living chattel. Serfdom, on the other hand, is the subjection of men individually or collectively for rendering services to the master in lieu of some obligation. The slave owner may do with his slave whatever he is not by special laws forbidden to do ; the master of a serf may require from his men such services or tributes only as the law allows him to require.

Serfdom in India is characteristically a group status where custom still mainly controls status and tenure. The depressed and exterior castes are supposed to be degraded and despised and their members are in collective subjection to the members of higher castes. The fate of many caste-groups, whether due to poverty, low birth or the nature of occupation, is sealed by **forces of** socio-economic nature which are

often beyond their control. Serfdom in India, therefore, does not amount to personal servitude. It is usufruct-servitude, with a right to enjoy a thing, the property of which is vested in another, and to take its fruits, but not to destroy or fundamentally to alter its substance. While it extends for life, the usufruct right might be created for a fixed term, or it may be terminated by the death of the holder.

Serfdom, therefore, will be used in the following pages to designate, first, a group subjection ; and second, a usufruct personal servitude. No doubt, under bad masters, it has assumed the form of primitive slavery and involved the entire personality of the serf, but recent legislation in all parts of India against slave-labour has brought this institution into a stage of further transaction. Thus we have passed from slavery to serfdom, and now to Begar, which is simply a seasonal servitude justified both by custom and law. This transition was forced by pressure of changing custom due to cultural penetration and diffusion, the opening up of dark regions, and a more effective political administration. Wherever the status of the peasant proprietor has been encroached upon by high-caste money-lenders, who have broken through the weak system of tenancy and usurped the land of poorer classes, the farm-hand verges on serfdom like that of the *Chakar* in Bengal, the *Baramasiya* in north Bihar, the *Kamla* in Chota Nagpur, the *Muliya* in Orissa, the *Sewak* in the U. P., the *Hurwahee* in Central India, the *Cheora* in Kumaon, the *Shalkari* in the C. P., the *Halia* in Gujarat, the *Bulla* in Bombay, and the *Padial* in Madras.

Agrestic Serfdom, as a social liability to landlords, by virtue of their property ownership, has still a stronghold in certain backward agricultural regions of northern India, and appears to be an old and hereditary practice. If one travels along the Himalayan base, from the valley of Kashmir to the Brahmaputra basin, a multitudinous

variety of serfdom will be found associated with the agricultural practices of different regions. Purely physico-environmental rather than social causes are responsible for the consistent prevalence and inertia of agrestic serfdom in these 'dark' regions of the country. The institution, as old as the cultural history of the Aryans, has flourished unimpaired by the vagaries of times and has played an important part in the rural economy of the regions where it has been established. The vestigial remains of agrestic serfdom, still found under different forms, are briefly described below :—

The Haliyas and Chyoras of Kumaon.—These are household slaves as well as slaves for the cultivation of the land, and are recruited from the Khasiya and Dom castes respectively. Both these classes of slaves are dependent on their masters for food, shelter and clothing, and an obligation for the discharge of marriage expenses. Slavery in the form of household women slaves (who are also sold for immoral purposes) are not uncommon even under strict prohibitory measures. Up to 1840 the name Haliya was given to these Doms who were employed as ploughmen with their families, and could be sold with the land, that is, title in land also gave title to the slaves cultivating it. The Cheora, or the domestic slave could be sold or given away with his family without any reason being assigned. These slaves are almost solely confined to the hill-pattis and to Bhabar regions, and along with many other low castes, such as Ruriyas, Orhs, Bhuls, Bhairsuwas, Agaris and Kolis, constitute the bulk of the agricultural serf population. All these castes represent apparently an aboriginal race and from time immemorial have played the part of serfs to the agricultural land holding-castes of the Bhotias, Khas-Rajputs and Bagbans.

The Sewaks and Hariyas of Oudh.—The 'Sewak' system is prevalent mostly in the submontane districts of Gonda, Bahraich, Basti, Gorakhpur, Kheri and everywhere east of the Ghagra river, and appears in

different forms under modified conditions. The Tharus, Chamars, Nats, Doms and Ghoriyas, who are generally landless labourers, form the bulk of Sewak population. The Hariya is a seasonal serf, whereas the Sewak is permanent. Both the Hariya and the Sewak are under a debt bondage, pure and simple. The ordinary sum so given varies from Rs. 20/- to Rs. 100/- according to the needs of the borrower, which, it must be noted, multiplies to an enormous amount due to an exorbitant rate of interest. The Hariya can liberate himself any time after paying off his debt, but the bondage of the Sewak is hereditary, passing on to his children down to the remotest generation. It is quite common to meet labourers, whose forefathers entered into these obligations, and who still labour in their discharge, although well aware that they can discard them and be free to sell their labour in the open market. The serfs, however, never receive cash, and their grain pittance never exceeds their bare requirements, lest they should repay their debt and be lost to their master. Even when cash wages are received, they are never in a position to pay more than the interest during the year.

The Hurwahees and Baramasiyas of North Bihar :—The lowest depth of serfdom is touched by the Baramasiyas of Bettiah, Motihari, Darbhanga and Pertabganj in North Bihar, who perform whatever menial services are required of them by their masters. They are purely domestic slaves and their serfdom is hereditary, whereas the Hurwahees are bond-servants who work in lieu of the interest due on the loan. The Baramasiya is given a small pittance, but allowed a hut and the left over food from the master's table. The Hurwahees often receive cash wages (not exceeding 113 of the daily rate), but on account of their extravagance the cash is utilized in drinks and feasts, and often the labour of women and children is pledged for paltry sums.

The Chakars and Muliya of Orissa.—The

Muliyas are evidently the descendants of the forest races by whom the uplands of Orissa were inhabited before the Aryan conquest. At present there are three kinds of Muliyas: (a) *Nitmajur*, whose social position is *de-facto* that of a slave. He is a hereditary slave. He gets food and clothing from his master and works as a domestic slave. (b) *Naga*, who is also a slave, but of higher status and works on the field of his master. At harvest time he sleeps on the field to watch over the crops. He seldom receives cash wages, but in addition to the customary grain allowance he gets a strip from his master's land (20-25 decimals) which he cultivates for himself. (c) *Danda*, who is a seasonal serf, hired usually for sowing or harvesting season, and paid in kind.

The Kamias of Chota Nagpur :—The Kamias are bond servants of their masters. In return for a loan received, they bind themselves and often their generations, to perform whatever menial services are required of them in lieu of the interest due on the loan. Such loans are usually borrowed at times of economic distress or social necessity. It is usually the poor labourers and low caste agriculturists who are victimised by those rich and high caste ryots and landlords who do not care to do the actual cultivation themselves. In Chota Nagpur, owing to the presence of a large aboriginal and depressed caste population, the Kamia system has become a common feature of rural economy. The term Kamia stands for the fourfold characteristics of an agricultural labourer :—

(a) A field worker whose labour is exacted by force.

(b) A working client of the mahajan-cum-landlord master.

(c) A farm hand whose duties are varied and many, and without whom the 'Sir' land of the landlord may lie uncultivated.

(d) A sweated class of worker, underfed and mentally stunted, and regarded by their masters as little better than human chattel.

The Kamia is too valuable to be ill-

treated, and his master always anxiously looks after his health and welfare, and provides him with at least the bare necessities of life. The chief diet of the Kamia consists of coarse rice and dal. His wife and children also get clothes and a free house attached to a makan-bari plot. The Kamia never has any money, and the restrictions imposed on his movement render him not better than a slave. An absconding Kamia can hardly find asylum anywhere in the district, because the landlords, as a class, combine to maintain the system and return to his master any Kamia taking shelter in their village. A Kamiauti bond, therefore, involves a life sentence. Many Kamias have, however, run away to the mining centres at Giridih and Kodarma and liberated themselves from their cruel and unsympathetic masters. The Kamia population comprises of the semi-primitive tribes, such as the Mundas, Oraons, Bhuiyas, Dusadhs, Kols, Santals, Ghatwars and a large number of other aboriginal castes. Big zamindars command a large number of Kamias because their prestige is measured by the number of their retinue. The social position, befitting zamindars, can not be maintained by many of the small zamindars if the Kamia system is suppressed and serfdom abolished.

Agrestic serfdom is most commonly associated with conditions of socio-economic nature. These conditions are not peculiar to certain backward provinces of Northern India, but are characteristic of all regions where the agricultural population has been dissociated from modern social and economic changes in the country. A systematic and detailed study of this time-honoured institution in India leads us to the following conclusions:—

(a) Agrestic serfdom is a common feature of those places where the low castes and depressed orders are most numerous. The ethnic composition of the village greatly determines the social and economic status of the people and is responsible for the

survival of these conditions. 'Whether in the capacity of the slave, a serf, or a beggar, at present more than five crores of people in India suffer both socially and economically on account of the stigma of untouchability attached to them. In Bihar and Orissa, about one-sixth of the total population (i.e. $7\frac{1}{2}$ millions) belongs to 24 purest aboriginal and 17 semi-aboriginal tribes. Besides these, more than $6\frac{1}{2}$ millions belong to the depressed classes. Roughly speaking one-third of the total population of Bihar and Orissa is composed of semi-serf, depressed and exterior castes. In Chota Nagpur this class accounts for 65 to 85 per cent of the total population. The Kamla population is composed of those aboriginal tribes and depressed castes which are lazy and careless, and are content with a dole of food and a house to live in and, so long as these are not denied, consider it an honour to relish the crumbs from their masters' tables.

(b) Serfdom is an evil of the Zamindari system. In districts where there is landlord tenancy over big estates, and Zamindari is under the Brahmins, Thakurs, Rajputs, Pathans and other high castes, the system has gathered enormous strength. Wherever the original population was subdued by foreign immigrants, who, though financially powerful, were unable to cultivate the land themselves on account of the natural conditions of soil and water supply, a regular supply of labour became imperative for the cultivation of the landlord's 'Sir' land, and to assist the agents of an absentee landlord.

(c) Serfdom is almost entirely associated with indebtedness. The mahajan has always exploited the miserable plight of the poor peasantry and reduced them to eternal serfdom. Since the Kamia population is composed of migratory tribes, in whose hands neither the principal debt is secure nor a guarantee of regular labour supply obtainable, they have to be pinned to the estate and their wanderlust broken.

The existence of the Kamia system is

both a social and an economic menace and, in these days of considerable freedom, widened economic outlook, social upheaval and a strong central Government, it tells on the whole social and administrative machinery of a progressive country. Though social and legislative measures are being taken to eradicate this evil, yet a more vigorous and determined move is required to abolish an old custom that preys upon the very life of the man behind the plough. •

Under British Rule slavery was not abolished at once, but only gradually. The existence of the institution of slavery in the latter half of the 18th century was brought to light by Jesuit Missionaries in Chota Nagpur. These missionaries took an active interest in the temporal interests of their converts, and lent a sympathetic ear to the complaints of the aborigines about the heavy load of praedial services and the cruelties and injustices to which they were subjected in the capacity of slaves. In 1774 legal measures were taken in the Bhagalpur District (Bihar), and 1789 Lord Cornwallis despatched instructions to the collector of Shahabad as to the manner in which he should determine cases of slavery.

On the basis of the Minute of Sir Buchanan, more effective measures were taken in the Government of India's Regulation X of 1811, prohibiting the importation of slaves from foreign countries into the British territories. This rule was, by Regulation III of 1832, extended to the Provinces which subsequently came into the possession of the British Government. Later on, Act V of 1843 prohibited all Government officers from recognizing slavery, and it was finally abolished in 1860 by the I. P. C. which declared the equality of all men and provided punishment for buying or selling any person as a slave. »

In spite of these legal measures this evil custom continued to flourish in a modified form known as Kamiauti (debt-bondage), in remote rural areas of Northern India. In 1872 Hunter found that the

system was a universal feature of the rural economy of Chota Nagpur. In 1908 Sifton observed its detrimental growth in Hazaribagh, and in 1913 Bridges submitted a report to the Government of Bihar and Orissa sounding the dangers of a growing menace of slavery in the Province. It was on these findings that the Government of Bihar and Orissa passed the "B & O. Kamiauti Agreement Act VIII of 1920", which declared that such agreements were void, unless (a) the full terms of the agreements were expressed in a stamped document; (b) the Kamia was given a copy of this document; (c) the period of the agreement exceeded or could possibly exceed one year; (d) the Kamia's liability was completely extinguished on the expiry of the term of the agreement; (e) the Kamia's remuneration under the agreement was fair and equitable.

But the Kamiauti Agreements Act of 1920 did not prove effective in suppressing the abuse. The master-landlords proved too elusive in getting round the legal restrictions. Moreover, the Act did not apply to agreements entered into by 'skilled workmen', so that the old Kamiauti conditions still applied to labour rendered by such persons as Chamars.

All legal measures have so far proved ineffective to suppress this system of serfdom completely. And thus the matter at present stands. But no legislation can ever become fruitful unless the people for whom it is formulated consciously strive to make the best of it. In this particular case, legislation preceded the economic and social uplift of the serf population, a policy nothing short of putting the cart before the horse. As a temporary measure, when such special legislation is enforced, the Government should provide new lands by reclamation for the discharged serfs in the same vicinity, or provide facilities for emigration to industrial districts. In the case of the extension of cultivation, the tendency of land hitherto uncultivated

should be offered to the Khunt-Kattidar and not to the holder of adjoining cultivated land, as has been the practice in the past. Otherwise the landless labourers will have no chance of settling down as peasant proprietors.

Legislation, in order to be effective, must cover all the problems directly or indirectly associated with the system of serfdom. There is an urgent need for a new Anti-Kamiauti Act which should be based on the following considerations:—

(a) Almost all forms of agrestic serfdom take their root in indebtedness. When the yoke of the moneylender becomes unbearably heavy, and indebtedness assumes a chronic form, the plight of the derelict farm-hand is nothing short of serfdom. Therefore, neither the principal debt nor the interest accrued thereon, should be repayable in services.

(b) No landlord should have more 'Sir' land than he can cultivate himself with family assistance. (The U. P. Government has now limited the 'Sir' to 50 acres).

(c) All praedial services (Begar) and illegal dues (Rukumats) should be commuted into cash.

(d) There should be a strict regulation of the hours and conditions of work.

(e) The employment of agricultural serfs should be considered a penal offence.

The Kamias are gradually emerging from the state of serfdom to that of free labour. But the improvement in their social status is very slow. This is due to their ignorance, improvidence and disinclination to fight their own battle. Whenever they have shown signs of independence, they have been subjected to most inhuman atrocities by their masters—their lands have been taken away, their house and property confiscated and their families mercilessly beaten. The acquirement of servile dispositions after generations of toil and labour by the serf population, has developed a character which cannot be modified by a stroke of the pen. Legislation, therefore, cannot immediately be a cure but only act

as a palliative. The real cure lies in the improvement of the lot of these wretched classes, the diffusion of elementary education, and above all the creation of a strong public opinion by patient toil in the right direction.

Viewed in a correct perspective, the problem of agrestic serfdom in India is essentially one of justice and humanity. It requires a complete readjustment of social conditions of the depressed orders of humanity who suffer from numerous disabilities, injustices and cruelties on account of their birth. This state of affairs cannot be defended on grounds of equity or true religion. Indians who are striving for national freedom ought not to deny just treatment to a section of their own countrymen. They must remember that in the struggle for national freedom and social emancipation a country cannot efficiently work in sections.

At present more than five crores of the entire population of this country belong to the so-called exterior castes and depressed classes. There can be no denying the fact that most, almost all, of these classes labour under disabilities only on account of the stigma attached to their castes. These down-trodden classes have developed a deleterious inferiority complex on account of the time-worn custom which has consigned them to their present degraded conditions. They have to rest content with whatever little opportunities are allowed them to develop their full stature. Under the circumstances,

pinned as they are under the weight of heavy chains of prejudice and usage of long times, their existence acts as a drag on the body politic.

The salvation of India as a whole must be preceded by the solution of this grave problem which has of late attracted the attention both of the politician and the reformer. Everywhere, throughout the world, attempts are being made to ameliorate the plight of the poor. The humanitarian efforts of Mahatma Gandhi and the Christian missionary institutions in India in the cause of Harijans have been noteworthy. Whatever motives may be attributed to the uplift of the depressed, one fact stands out prominent, namely, the present national awakening in India is entirely due to the realization of the spirit of freedom amongst the lower strata of humanity. It would perhaps not be far wrong to say that those who make the allegation that the movement for the uplift of the depressed classes is due to the political motives (e. g. with Mahatma Gandhi), or religious motives (e. g. with Christian Missionaries) are themselves victims of such motives in making this assertion. Whatever may be said, it is the bounden duty of every true Indian to do everything in his or her power to wipe out the stain of untouchability from the country, eschewing every idea of exploiting the miserable plight of these unfortunate human beings for communal or political ends.