

A short history of slavery in Coochbehar

¹Susnata Sarkar
¹Research Scholar
¹Visva Bharati

Abstract - From the early centuries traffic in slave was as important feature of Coochbehar trade. Slave trade was prevalent in Coochbehar from very ancient times. There were many market centers where slaves were sold openly. The slaves were used for household affairs, prostitution, to work in temples, to fight in the battlefield and also for many other purposes. The elites kept slaves to show their status. It is quite evident that indebtedness was one of the major causes of increase of slavery in Coochbehar. Ultimately this evil practice was abolished from Coochbehar in 1864.

keywords - Coochbehar, slave, market, 'jagir'.

Introduction

The historiography of slavery in India has been haunted by the long shadow of plantation economies of the Atlantic. Older trade- patterns and alternative uses of slaves within a complex society have left little trace in the historiography of eighteenth or nineteenth-century India. Much before the British colonial rule, India was involved in the global slave trade that included Arabia, East Africa, the Persian Gulf, Mauritius, Indonesia, and South Africa, although after the East India Company gained a foothold in the subcontinent, the company itself legitimized and took part in the slave trade. For example, take Governor-General Lord Auckland's argument against legislation banning slavery that slavery provides "mutual advantages" to both the slaves and the masters. Even in the 1840s, a decade after Britain's much-touted Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, conservative estimates suggest that there were half a million slaves in the British territories in India. Slaves were transported from long distances into Bengal, including *Coffrees* and *Habshis* (Africans slaves); however, most slaves were indigenous people, mostly war captives, abducted children, or the rural poor who had sold themselves. Slaves were a signifier of the *malik's* social status as well, as the rituals regarding the slaves, as well as the number of slaves in employ, indicated wealth and prosperity for the owner.

Slave trade was very common in ancient Coochbehar, as in other parts of India. Slaves were sold in open market in Coochbehar, lower Assam, and Bhutan. Turner wrote that the master was very much humanitarian to the slaves. The '*Kathagurucharit*' describes the oppression of the master towards the slaves. The war captives, tribal from the hills were sold in the market. There are many references to show that due to indebtedness the people of the State often sold their wives and children. There are references of self-selling in ancient Coochbehar.

Kothabari, Gossaignanj, Ghoramara, Chilakhana etc. were important centers of slave trade in Coochbehar. Generally the rate of slaves was fixed depending on their caste, gender and age. Slaves were sold from 3 to 40 Narayane tanka. The hill tribes were sold in comparatively low rate. The higher class elites usually kept slaves in their houses as a symbol of vanity. Sometimes slaves were recruited as '*debdasi*' in temples of Kamrup- Coochbehar. In every year at least 100 slaves were sent to *Bangadesh* from Assam and Coochbehar. Boys of *Cooch* origin were sold in 25 Narayane and boys of *kalita* origin were sold in 50 *Narayane tanka*.

There are references of slaves in Coochbehar from the time of Nara Narayan. When the Ahom Raj was defeated by Nara Narayan in 1553 he presented Nara Narayan 60 beautiful women as slave. Instead of the above mentioned land grant a special kind of land grant named Jaigir was granted in those days particularly among the slaves. Slaves were engaged in various activities connected with the royal palace. The right over such land was neither hereditary nor transferable. It may however be stated that this Jaigir right took the shape of "*Cakran*" of Bengal. This system came down to Koch kingdom from the period of Nara Narayan who received a few Morangi slaves from the Morangi king. These slaves were given the Taluks in Mathbhanga, Kodalkseti, Bhogmara etc. They acquired lands in return to their service to the palace. The Jaigirdari right was confiscated if they failed to perform the work entrusted to them. The total numbers of Jaigirdars were 974. Stephen Casella and John Cabral during their visit to Bhutan went through Coochbehar. They mentioned in their account that a considerable number of slaves were sold to Bhutan from Coochbehar. Turner in course of his visit to Tibet went through Coochbehar and gave the following description: "...If a Rayat, or peasant, owes a sum of money, and has not the ability to satisfy his creditor, he is compelled to give up his wife as a pledge, and possession of her is kept until the debt is discharged. ...Nothing is more common than to see a mother dress up her child, and bring it to market, with no other hope, no other view than to enhance the price she might procure for it...." Buchanan Hamilton also noticed in 1808 that "If a man incurs a debt or fine heavier than he can pay, he becomes a slave or mortgages himself, unless his wife chooses to redeem him. The slave works for his master, and receives food and raiment." In a letter to Fort William (20th April, 1815), the Commissioner of Coochbehar Macloyad wrote that during Harendra Narayan "there is, in Coochbehar, a tribe of

slaves, under the domination of Mooringheas, scattered about the country, in the possession of petty Jaghires, in the number of from 2000 to 3000 men of resolute but profligate character, who are devoted to the will of the Rajah, from among whom he would be able to raise a considerable body of fighting men.....”

Maharaja Shibendra Narayan ordered stoppage of external slave trade and therefore confined it to his Kingdom only. From 1849 onwards the record of buying and selling of slaves was being recorded in Coochbehar *Dewani Adalat*. Still then Bhabaniganj market of Coochbehar was a popular center of slave trade. Zamindar Isanchandra Mustafi bought two slaves named Jhalu Das and Jentu Das from this market in 50 and 25 *Narayani tanka* respectively. Due to indebtedness mostly husbands sold their wives and sometimes parents sold their children. During this time most of them were sold for prostitution. Wheeler in his book “*Summary of Affairs of the Government of India in the Foreign Department 1864-1869*” wrote that, “the existence of actual slavery in Kuch Behar forced itself upon the attention of the Commissioner, and the matter was laid before the Governor-General. On 7th September 1864, the abolition of slavery was formally proclaimed at a public Darbar; and a Regulation in Bengali language, embodying the provisions of the Penal Code respecting kidnapping and abductions, was declared to be in force as regards all future seizures, sales, or detention of persons, male or female.”

Conclusion:-Abolition of slavery would take many decades in Bengal, even after the enactment of “Act-V” of 1843. Act-V did not abolish slavery itself but dissolved the distinction between free persons and slaves. Although the law did not immediately end the practice of slavery, it laid the foundation for eventual abolition. Making imports and exports of slaves illegal was the first crucial step. It would take many other factors, including abolitionist movements, social stigma around slaveholding, industrialization and the rise of free labour, to end the practice of slavery. Slavery continued until the early 20th century, a testament to the extent to which slavery was part and parcel of the economy and social fabric in Bengal.

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