



## The Concept of Servitude: An Illustration in the Light of the Vedas and Smṛtiśāstra

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**Abstract:** Slavery has existed as a constant element in the social and economic life of all nations of antiquity such as Babylon, Egypt, Greece and also of many nations of Europe. The word ‘dāsa’ in the Ṛgveda generally stands for the opponents of the āryas. It is possible that when the dāsas were vanquished in battle and taken prisoners they were treated as slaves. In the Ṛgveda however, there are not many passages where the word ‘dāsa’ can be said to have been used in the sense of slave. Kautīlyā’s Arthśāstra gives very important provisions about slaves. He says that the mlecchas are not punishable if they sell or pledge their children, but an ārya cannot be reduced to slavery. He then prescribes that if a relative sells or pledges a sūdra who is not born as a slave or a vaiśya or kṣatriya or a brāhmaṇa, he should be respectively fined 12, 24, 36 and 48 paṇas and that if a stranger sells or pledges the above then the vendor, the vendee and the abettors will be liable to the first, middle and highest amercements and whipping respectively. He allows the pledge of even an ārya in family distress.

**Keywords:** Slavery, dāsa, sūdra, dāsī

Slavery has existed as a constant element in the social and economic life of all nations of antiquity such as Babylon, Egypt, Greece and also of many nations of Europe. It was however left to such Christian nations of the West as England and the United States of America to carry on the institution of slavery in the most horrible manner possible never dreamt of by any nation of antiquity, viz. by sending out kidnapping expeditions to Africa to collect slaves, to huddle them in ships in such unspeakably filthy conditions that half of them died on the voyage, to sell them to plantation owners and others like chattel.

The word ‘dāsa’ in the Ṛgveda generally stands for the opponents of the āryas. It is possible that when the dāsas were vanquished in battle and taken prisoners they were treated as slaves. In the Ṛgveda, however, there are not many passages where the word ‘dāsa’ can be said to have been used in the sense of slave. In Ṛgveda VIII.56.3 we read ‘thou maddest a gift to me of one hundred donkeys, of one hundred fleece-bearing ewes and one hundred dāsas’.<sup>1</sup> It appears that here dāsa means slaves or serfs.

The Taittīriya Saṁhitā VII.5.10.1 says ‘dāsis (girl slaves) place on their heads jars full of water and singing this *madhu* and beating their feet against the ground dance round the *mārjalīya*’.<sup>2</sup> The Taittīriya Saṁhitā II.2.6.3 refers to the gift of a horse or a male (slave). ‘He obtains a portion of himself who accepts (in gift) a being with two rows of teeth, a horse or a human male; on accepting an animal with two rows of teeth one should offer to Vaiśvānara a mess cooked on twelve potsherds’.<sup>3</sup> In the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad IV.4.23 Janaka after receiving instruction in Brahmavidyā from Yājñavalkya exclaims ‘I make a gift to your honour of the Videhas together with myself for being your slave’.<sup>4</sup> We read in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad ‘ In this world they speak of cows and horses, elephants and gold, fields and houses as greatness’.<sup>5</sup>

Manu ordained (I.91, VIII.413, 414) that the principal duty of the śūdra was the wait upon the three higher castes or that the śūdra was created by the Creator for the service of brāhmaṇas, the śūdra who thus served a *dvijāti* as a duty was not his slave. Jaimini (VI.7.6) makes this perfectly clear by saying that when a man makes a gift in the Viśvajit sacrifice of everything belonging to himself he cannot make a gift of the śūdra who waits upon him as his duty. Śabara in his bhāṣya adds ‘the śūdra may not desire to serve the man to whom the sacrificer gives his all and śūdra the latter has no power over him if he is unwilling’. Manu (VIII.299-300) places a slave on the same level as one’s son in the matter of corporal punishment ‘the wife, the son, the slave, a menial servant one’s full brother – these when guilty of wrong may be beaten with a rope or a thin piece of split bamboo, but only on the back and never on the head and if a person beat them otherwise he would be punished as a thief’.<sup>6</sup> Āpastamba dharmasūtra says that one may indeed stint oneself, one’s wife or son if guests come, but never a dāsa who does one’s menial work or a dāsa and hired servants.<sup>7</sup>

In the Kauṭilya’s Arthaśāstra<sup>8</sup> gives very important provisions about slaves. He says that the mleccas are not punishable if they sell or pledge their children, but an ārya cannot be reduced to slavery. He then prescribes that if a relative sells or pledges a śūdra (who is not born as a slave) or a vaiśya or kṣatriya or a brāhmaṇa, he should be respectively fined 12, 24, 36 and 48 paṇas and that if a stranger sells or pledges the above then the vendor, the vendee and the abettors will be liable to the first, middle and highest amercements and whipping respectively. But he allows the pledge of even an ārya in family distress. He refers to several kinds of slaves viz. *dhvajāhṛta* (captured in battle), *ātmavikrayin* (who sells himself), *udaradāsa* (or *garbhadāsa*, one who is born to a dāsī from a slave) or those so made for a debt (*āhitika*), or for a fine or court’s decree. He then prescribes how they are set free from slavery. One who sells himself or is pledged or is born a slave becomes a free man by paying off respectively the amount for which he was purchased or pledged or what would be a proper price. One who is made a slave for a fine may pay off the fine by doing work. One captured in war may become free by paying according to the time he has been in bondage and the work he did or by paying half of it. The child of one who sells himself remains an ārya (free man). He prescribes that if a master makes a pledged slave carry a corpse or sweep ordure, urine or leavings of food, or keeps hi naked,

beats him or abuses him or violates the chastity of a female slave, he forfeits the price paid by him. He prescribes the first amercement for a master having intercourse with a pledged slave girl against her will and middle amercement for a stranger doing so.

On VIII.415 Manu speaks of seven kinds of *dāsas*, viz. one captured in battle, one who becomes so for food (i.e. in scarcity or in a feminine), one born in the house (i.e. of a female slave), one bought, one given (by his parents or relatives), one inherited (as part of the patrimony), one who becomes so far paying off a fine or judicial decree. He states the general rule that the wife, the son and the slave have no wealth and whatever they earn belongs to him whose wife, son or slave they are.<sup>9</sup>

Nārada and Kātyāyana among the *smṛtikāras* contain the most elaborate treatment on slavery. Nārada first says that a *śúśrūṣaka* is of five kind viz. a Vedic student, an *antevāsin* (an apprentice who is learning a craft), *adhikarmakṛt* (a supervisor over workmen), *bhṛtaka* (hired servant) and *dāsa*. The first four are called *karmakara*. They can be called upon to do only work that is pure, while a *dāsa* may have to do impure work such as cleaning the entrances to the house, filthy pits, the road, dunghill heaps, touching private parts, taking up and throwing away ordure and urine doing bodily service to the master if he so desires.<sup>10</sup> Nārada mentions fifteen kinds of slaves viz. ones born in the house, one bought, one acquired, one inherited, one saved in a time of famine one pledged by the master, one discharged from a large debt, one captured in a battle, one vanquished in a bet, one who accepts slavery by saying ‘I am yours’, an apostate from the order of asceticism, one who stipulates to be a slave, one who is a slave for food, one who is tempted to become a slave out of a love for a female slave and one who sells himself. Nārada says that the first four of these are not freed from slavery except by the favour of the master, while one who sells himself is the word kind of slave and he also does not become free from slavery. Nārada (V.30) and Yājñavalkya (II.182) state a rule applicable to all slaves, that is when a slave saves a master from imminent danger to latter’s life the slave become a free man and that he gets a share in the inheritance as a son. One who is an apostate from the order of ascetics is a slave of the king till the former’s death. Nārada says that one saved in a famine becomes free by giving a pair of cows, one pledged if the master who pledged him repays the debt, the slave in lieu of discharge of debt by paying off the debt with interest, one who accepted slavery or who was captured in battle or became so under a bet is freed by giving a substitute who is equal to whom in work, one for a stipulated period by the lapse of the period, one who is a *bhakta-dāsa* becomes free by the master ceasing to give food, one who is ‘*vaḍavāhṛta*’ by abandoning his intercourse with her. Nārada (V.38) and Yājñavalkya say that one who was made a slave by force or was carried away by raiders and sold should be set free by the king. Nārada (V.39) and Yājñavalkya II.183 prescribe that a man can be a slave to a master only in the proper order of *varṇas* that is the three *varṇas* next to *brāhmaṇa* may be a slaves to a *brāhmaṇa*, a *vaiśya* or a *śūdra* may be a slave to a *kṣatriya* but a *kṣatriya* cannot be the slave of a *vaiśya* or a *śūdra* nor a *vaiśya* of a *śūdra*.<sup>11</sup> There is

one exception viz. an apostate from asceticism may be the slave of a vaiśya or a śūdra king. Kātyāyana emphasizes that a brāhmaṇa cannot be made a slave even to a brāhmaṇa, but if he himself chooses, he may do pure work for a brāhmaṇa endowed with character and Vedic learning, but no impure work. Kātyāyana says that when a brāhmaṇa becomes an apostate from the order of asceticism he should be banished from the kingdom and the kṣatriya or vaiśya apostate may become a slave to the king.

There are numerous works dealing with slavery in its various aspects. The latest book on the subject is 'Slavery through the ages' by Sir George Mac Munn (1938). Dr. H. J. Nieboer's 'Slavery as an Industrial System' (1910) is a well-documented study of slavery in various countries and at various times.

**Conclusion:** Slavery is coming from ancient era in many countries in different social and economic need. The usage of slavery is seen in the Vedic period. The word 'dāsa' in the Ṛgveda generally stands for the opponents of the āryas. It is possible that when the dāsas were vanquished in battle and taken prisoners they were treated as slaves. Slavery is also noticed in the later Dharmaśāstra era. Such as Manu ordained that the principal duty of the śūdra was the wait upon the three higher castes or that the śūdra was created by the Creator for the service of brāhmaṇas, the śūdra who thus served a dvijāti as a duty was not his slave. Today, slavery is used in many countries for social and economic purposes.

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2. उदकुम्भानधिनिधाय दास्यो मार्जालीयं परिनृत्यति पदो निघ्नतीरिदं मधु गायन्त्यो मधु वै देवानां परममन्नाद्यम्। तै.स. VII.5.10.1.
3. आत्मनो वा एष मात्रामाप्नोति यो उभयादत्प्रतिगृहणात्यश्वं वा पुरुषं वा वैश्वानरं द्वादशकपालं निर्वपेदुभयादत्प्रतिगृह्य। तै.स. II.2.6.3.
4. सोहं भगवते विदेहान् ददामि मां चापि सह दास्याय। बृह. 3.IV.4.23.
5. गो अश्वमिह महिमेत्याचक्षते हस्तिहिरण्यं दासभार्ये क्षेत्राण्यायतनानीति। छा.3.VI.24.3.
6. शूद्रस्य धर्मशास्त्रत्वात्। जै. VI.7.6; 'शूद्रस्य न देय इत्यन्वादेशः। कुतः। धर्मशास्त्रत्वात्। धर्मशासनोपनतत्वात्तस्य। एवमसौ तद्यै त्रैवर्णिकायोपनत इमं शुश्रूषमाणो धर्मेण संमन्त्स्य इति। सोन्यस्मै दीयमानो नेच्छदति। न चानिच्छतस्तस्य स प्रभवति।' शबर.
7. काममात्मानं भार्या पुत्रं वोपरुन्ध्यान्न त्वेव दासकर्मकरम्। आप. ध. सू. II.4.9.11.
8. म्लेच्छानामदोषः प्रजां विक्रेतुमाधातुं वा । न त्वेवार्यस्य दासभावः । कौटिल्य III.13.
9. भार्या पुत्रश्च दासश्च त्रय एवाधनाः स्मृताः । यत्ते समधिगच्छन्ति यस्य ते तस्य तद्धनम् ॥ मनु. VIII.416.
10. गृहद्वाराशुचिस्थानरथ्यावस्व रशोधनम्। गृहमाङ्गस्पर्शनोच्छिष्टविण्मूत्रग्रहणोज्झनम्। इच्छतः स्वामिनश्चाङ्गैरुपस्थानमथान्ततः। अशुभं कर्म विज्ञेयं शुभमन्यदतःपस्म्। नारद (अभ्यु. 6-7).
11. स्वतन्त्रस्यात्प्रनो दानाद् दासत्वं दासवद्भृगुः। त्रिषु वर्णेषु विज्ञेयं दास्यं विप्रस्य न क्ववित्॥ वर्णानामानुलोम्येन दास्यं न प्रतिलोमतः॥ कात्यायन quoted by अपरार्क p.788.

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