

Slavery in Pre-colonial Sri Lanka; What the literature reveals

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Most current discussions on slavery focus on the colonial period and the transatlantic slave trade from Africa. Less attention is paid to slavery in Asia or slavery as a domestic or indigenous practice in different countries around the globe. This brief contribution discusses the existence of slavery in Sri Lanka before the arrival of the colonial powers and in the Kandyan Kingdom till it was captured by the British. It serves as an exploratory exercise and is based on the perusal of a limited number of academic and other sources.

Origin and history

The practice of slavery was brought to Sri Lanka from India, most probably in the wake of the arrival of Prince Vijaya, the legendary founder of the Sinhalese race and first king of Sri Lanka around the 5th century B.C. (Ellawala 1969: 60). Slavery in pre-colonial Sri Lanka is documented in various ancient manuscripts and inscriptions and also has been subject of research by a variety of modern academic scholars. Writing about the Sinhalese caste system William H. Gilbert states that “slavery was permitted under the native regime, but no one could hold slaves of a higher caste than himself” (1945: 72). Another authoritative source on caste in Sri Lanka, Bryce Ryan, remarks that “Of slavery in ancient Ceylon, and through most of the colonial period, there is ample evidence, but this was not a product of conquest, except in so far as Indian slaves were introduced, and it was an institution coincidental to caste. The caste rights of slaves were kept, under Kandyan law, and although there developed a Kandyan subcaste nominally of slaves, their status in island society was quite high”(1993: 14). This positive assessment of the status of slaves in Sri Lanka will be further discussed below. In addition, a variety of other authors have mentioned the existence of slavery in Sri Lanka, varying from the 17th century traveler Robert Knox (1981) to the reputed historian prof. K.M. de Silva (1981), prof. H. Ellawala (1969) and, more recently, academic Chandima S.M. Wickramasinghe (2007 and 2010) who has published several valuable articles and overviews on slavery in Sri Lanka, next to other scholars and writers. In the succinct contribution below I cannot do justice to the depth and width of all these scholars’ work and have to limit myself to some highlights, but interested readers can consult their works as they are listed in the references section below.

The notion of slavery in the Sri Lankan context

There is debate - and perhaps even a level of confusion - on the nomenclature, conceptualization and hence also the nature of slavery in the Sri Lankan context. This is because slavery is enmeshed with a wider, highly complex system comprising different degrees and forms of servitude, peonage and bondage, and a caste system that demanded customary *rajakariya* services to be provided by lower castes to royals, nobility and king’s office holders. In addition, people were expected to provide services to the temples. There

are different terms used to denote 'unfree persons' as clarified by Wickramasinghe: The indigenous terms *dasa* (male) and *dasi* (female), which occur in both epigraphic and literary sources from the second to the fourteenth centuries, the term *vahal* (both male and female), which appears in the epigraphic sources from the late eleventh to the early twelfth centuries AD, the term *vaharala* (both male and female) and its variant forms (in the epigraphic records ascribed to the period between the fourth and the eighth centuries AD) and the terms *midi* or *mindī*, in the epigraphic record of Mahinda IV in Mihintale (945–961 AD), are all loosely rendered into English as 'slaves' or 'slavery'" (2010: 317). According to Wickramasinghe this is problematic, "since these terms, especially *dasa/dasi* and *vahal*, seem to encompass all forms of servitude, including slavery, serfdom, peonage and bondage. For instance, a characteristic of a slave is that s/he could be bought and sold, as well as given away as a gift like any other material item. Serfs, on the other hand, were attached to land or their transactions accompanied a block of land, presumably where they lodged and worked. Moreover, they were allowed to live with families in communities, and their ownership of property was tolerated" (2010: 317). Wickramasinghe concluded that the situation as it existed in Sri Lanka represented a continuum with one servile status overlapping into another (2010: 318). He also points out that "servitude existed within the framework of an occupation-based caste system ... [and] that the caste distinction was considered superior to the servile/free distinction". He explains that the "Niti Niganduwa, the code of law of the Kandyan period, established rules mainly to preserve the caste dignity of those who fell into slavery due to poverty" ... It states that: 'As the distinction of caste exists also among slaves, a master cannot sell, give away, or otherwise make over a male or female slave to a person of a caste inferior to that of the slave ... a female slave cannot be given in marriage against her will to one who is her inferior in caste.' This was a measure to preserve the dignity of high-caste people, since some of the [highest] *govigama* caste were also liable to fall into servitude as a result of unpaid debts or as a punishment" (2010: 318). Whereas these variations and complexities may easily confuse the lay observer, there yet seems to be consensus that slavery *per se* existed, as slaves were owned as personal property and could be transferred, given away or sold to others by their owners. As stated by Ellewala: ..it is evident that the master was free to sell or give his slaves as he liked, and even had the right to chastise his slaves and punish them in whatever way he liked (1969: 63). But, unlike in the case of African slaves, there is little evidence that slaves became a commodity that were traded for profit in Sri Lanka. The ownership of slaves was centred upon the monarch and his entourage, which included the royal family. The slaves carried out domestic tasks in aristocratic homes and their main function was to underline the high rank and status of the owners. Buddhist temples, that also owned considerable amounts of slaves, used them mainly to work their lands (Wickramasinghe 2010: 318-9). Also Ellewala confirms that "In Ceylon, slaves (*dasa*) were normally employed in the capacity of domestic servants and labourers" (1969: 59).

How to become enslaved?

Ellewala describes how, according to the Vinaya [the division of the Buddhist canon containing the rules and procedures that govern the Buddhist monastic community, or *Sangha*], one could be rendered a slave: "... those that are born in the house, those that are bought with money, and those that are captured in the war". Another source, the *Manusmṛti*, distinguishes also those who serve in return for maintenance, those who are received as gifts, those who are inherited, and those who are made slaves by punishment (Ellewala 1969: 59). One example of the latter was by decision of the King who could promote or punish his officers (*appuhamies*) as documented by Dewaraja et al. "If the king approved of them they were promoted to higher offices when vacancies occurred. If they incurred his displeasure, the whole family might be punished; sometimes the entire family would be given away as slaves" (1995: 331). It was considered meritorious among the wealthy to offer slaves to monasteries to serve the *Sangha* and this seems to have happened in fairly large numbers towards the 6th and 7th centuries A.D., according to Ellewala (1969: 64). In an article on 'Temple slavery in ancient Sri Lanka', Wickramasinghe (2007: 37-38) provides extensive evidence on the donation of large numbers of slaves by Sri Lankan kings and queens to Buddhist temples.

A usual reason for becoming a slave was poverty or the inability to pay back debts or advances. Ellewala (1969: 61) says: "Poverty among the poorer classes was so acute ... that sometimes parents were compelled to sell or mortgage their children for a few *kahapanas*" [the earliest currency in Sri Lanka]. C.R. de Silva describes how Portuguese settlers continued the prevailing system: "As those who failed to pay their debts became bond slaves of their creditors according to Sinhalese custom, there were instances of Sinhalese being sold as slaves abroad (1995: 73).

Treatment of slaves

There is fairly broad consensus that slavery in pre-colonial Sri Lanka was relatively mild compared with the exploitative, commodified and harsh forms implemented by the European colonial powers worldwide as well as in Sri Lanka itself. Ellewala derives from various references that: "the slaves in Ceylon society were generally treated rather as adopted dependents or as faithful domestic servants than as menials". He attributes this also to the influence of Buddhism from the 3rd century B.C. and prevailing codes of treatment of a slave by a master (1969: 63). Robert Knox also reports on slaves, "For whose maintenance, their masters allow them land and cattle. Which many of them do so improve; that except in dignity they are not far behind their master, only they are not permitted to have slaves" (1981: 208). Regarding the treatment of slaves in temples, Wickramasinghe notes that they worked as labourers on temple lands, preparing food and carrying out all types of menial tasks. There is evidence the slaves could possess own lands and live in a family and community. Wickramasinghe observes that "the consent given to these *vahal/dasa* by the owner to live in families and community and also to own property could be to enable exacting a range of services from the group for generations, without taking on

the costs of providing for their daily existence” (2007: 46). In the Sri Lankan context, master and slave were of the same ethnic group and even sometimes caste. In contrast to the Transatlantic slave trade, the practice in Sri Lanka did not transform a slave into a total stranger in a foreign social and cultural environment without kin, as observed by Patterson (in Wickramasinghe 2010: 320). Also K.M. de Silva characterized Sri Lankan slavery as “immeasurably milder in form” (in Wickramasinghe 2010: 315). Paradoxically, this “mild nature associated with the system of servitude until the arrival of the Europeans may have led to its prevalence in the island for centuries”(Wickramasinghe 2007: 47-8).

The end of slavery in Sri Lanka

During the colonial period the practice of slavery was continued in the Kandyan Kingdom, while a much harsher European, colonial form of slavery was introduced by the European, colonial powers in the areas under their control. The latter also obtained slaves from Africa and India. Unified under the British in 1815, slavery was gradually transformed and was formally abolished in the Island in 1844, but it took several more years and a series of gradual steps before the laws were effectuated, partly because of local resistance and attempts not to antagonize the local elites.

Obviously, at present slavery does not prevail anymore in the country, but Ryan reports there is still an exceedingly small *Vahal* subcaste and though slavery was originally not a caste status, they are recognized as descendants of slaves in ancient times. Ryan also reports there was during his field work an ‘openly and self-admitted *Vahal* village’ in ‘the isolated heart of the Uva jungle’ (1993: 101-2), while in 1899 levers still tabulated the existence of three slave villages in the North Central Province that are called there *Vidanela* (in Ryan 1993: 242-243). With the further transformation and modernization of Sri Lankan society since Ryan started his research in 1948, such legacies of slavery in Sri Lanka may even have been pushed further to the background.

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