



Slavery in the Sangam to Medieval Eras: Economic Roots and Social Consequences

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History

Received 05 Jan, 2023
Revised 23 Mar, 2023
Accepted 19 May, 2023
Available Online 30 Jun, 2023

ARTICLE ID

CLIO0101001

KEYWORDS

Slavery, Ancient Tamil Nadu, Debt Bondage, Caste Discrimination, Temple Slavery, Economic Exploitation, Social Hierarchy, Human Rights.

ABSTRACT

The study explores the social and economic dimensions of slavery in ancient Tamil Nadu from the Sangam period (3rd century BCE) to the end of the medieval era (15th century CE). Drawing on literary, historical, and archaeological sources, the paper provides a comprehensive analysis of the various forms of slavery—including debt bondage, war captivity, inherited slavery, caste-based servitude, and temple slavery—and examines the broader socio-political and economic contexts that sustained them. It investigates the roles played by domestic, agricultural, artisan, and military slaves, highlighting how their labour was central to the agrarian and artisanal economy of the region. The paper also assesses the intersection of slavery with caste hierarchies, gender dynamics, and religious institutions, especially in the context of temple-based servitude. Furthermore, it analyses how trade routes, legal norms, and demographic pressures influenced the slave economy.



INTRODUCTION

Over history, slavery has been a ubiquitous and recurring element of human civilisations. Although slavery has taken many various forms in many different countries, it has always included the exploitation and subjection of one set of people by another. Scholars and researchers have extensively debated and studied the long and complicated history of slavery and slave trade that ancient Tamil Nadu, a southern Indian area, boasts. Drawing on a variety of historical sources and multidisciplinary viewpoints, this research piece seeks to provide a thorough picture of the history of slavery and slave trade in ancient Tamil Nadu. The paper starts by summarising the conceptual framework of slavery and the many ways it has evolved in past times. It then goes into great length on the many forms of slavery that were practiced in Ancient Tamil Nadu, including debt bondage, military imprisonment, and slave sales and purchase.

Examining its effects on gender relations, caste-based discrimination, and religious practices, the paper looks at the social and cultural consequences of slavery. It also looks at the political and financial elements influencing the rise of the slave trade in Ancient Tamil Nadu, including the spread of trade routes and the rise of strong nations. Reflecting the rich and varied cultural legacy of Ancient Tamil Nadu, the history of slavery and slave trade there is a complicated and multifarious subject. From the Sangam period (3rd century BC to 4th century AD) until the mediaeval period (about 15th century AD), Tamil Nadu, in southern region of India, has a lengthy history of slavery spanning many centuries (Sivaraman, 2005). Slavery in ancient Tamil Nadu was not a monolithic institution but rather took many distinct forms depending on the political, social, and economic situation of the period (Manickam, 2018). Drawing on a variety of multidisciplinary sources and viewpoints, this conversation seeks to provide a thorough study of the history of slavery and slave trade in Ancient Tamil Nadu.

By means of this multidisciplinary approach, the paper clarifies the convoluted history of slavery and slave trade in Ancient Tamil Nadu, thereby stressing the many ways in which it affected political, social, and economic systems in the area. The study ends by considering Tamil Nadu's ongoing legacy from slavery and its implications for modern discussions on human rights and social justice.

TYPES OF SLAVERY IN ANCIENT TAMIL NADU

Debt Slavery:

Debt slavery was one of the most common forms of slavery in ancient Tamil Nadu. In this form of slavery, individuals who could not pay their debts were forced to work as slaves to their creditors until their debts were paid off. Debt slavery was considered a legitimate means of repaying debts, and slaves were often treated as property rather than as human beings.

Prisoner of War Slavery:

Prisoner of war slavery was another common form of slavery in ancient Tamil Nadu. In this form of slavery, prisoners of war were taken as slaves by the victorious army. Prisoners of war were often forced to work as laborers or soldiers for their captors and were treated as property rather than as human beings.

Inherited Slavery:

Inherited slavery was a form of slavery in which individuals were born into slavery and remained slaves throughout their lives. Inherited slavery was prevalent in ancient Tamil Nadu and was often passed down from one generation to the next. Slaves who were born into slavery had no rights and were treated as property rather than as human beings.

Temple Slavery:

Temple slavery was a form of slavery in which individuals were dedicated to temples as slaves. Temple slavery was prevalent in ancient Tamil Nadu, and individuals were often dedicated to temples as children. Temple slaves were required to perform various tasks, including cooking, cleaning, and other menial tasks, and were often treated poorly by their masters.

Caste-based Slavery:

Caste-based slavery was a form of slavery in which individuals were forced into slavery based on their caste. This form of slavery was prevalent in ancient Tamil Nadu and was often practiced by the upper castes. Lower-caste individuals were often forced to work as slaves for the upper castes and were treated poorly.

TYPES OF SLAVES

Domestic Slaves:

Domestic slaves were one of the most common types of slaves in ancient Tamil Nadu. These slaves were used for domestic labor, including cooking, cleaning, and other household tasks. Domestic slaves were often acquired through debt slavery, and slaves were treated as property rather than as human beings.

Agricultural Slaves:

Agricultural slaves were another common type of slaves in ancient Tamil Nadu. These slaves were used for agricultural labor, including planting, harvesting, and other tasks related to farming. Agricultural slaves were often acquired through debt slavery or the slave trade, and slaves were treated as property rather than as human beings.

Artisan Slaves:

Artisan slaves were another type of slaves in ancient Tamil Nadu. These slaves were skilled laborers who were used for various tasks, including metalworking, weaving, and other crafts. Artisan slaves were often acquired through the slave trade, and slaves were treated as property rather than as human beings.

Military Slaves:

Military slaves were another type of slaves in ancient Tamil Nadu. These slaves were used as soldiers or mercenaries and were often acquired through the prisoner of war slave trade. Military slaves were trained to fight and were often treated as property rather than as human beings.

Slave Trade Routes:

The slave trade in ancient Tamil Nadu involved both domestic and international trade routes. Domestically, slaves were acquired through debt slavery and the slave trade between various regions of Tamil Nadu. Internationally, slaves were acquired through the slave trade with other countries in the region, including Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia.

Impact of the Slave Trade:

The slave trade had a significant impact on the economy and society of ancient Tamil Nadu. The practice of slavery was considered a legitimate means of acquiring labor, and slaves were often treated as property rather than as human beings. The legacy of slavery in Tamil Nadu continues to affect the region today, and efforts are being made to eradicate the practice of slavery and promote human rights.

FACTORS RESPONSIBLE FOR SLAVERY IN ANCIENT TAMIL NADU

Economic Factors:

One of the primary causes of the slave trade in ancient Tamil Nadu was economic factors. The region was primarily agricultural, and there was a constant need for labor. Slaves were seen as a cheap source of labor, and they were used to work on farms, in households, and in various industries. The availability of slaves allowed for the expansion of agriculture and industry, which contributed to the economic growth of the region.

Political Factors:

Political factors also played a role in the practice of slavery in ancient Tamil Nadu. The region was ruled by various dynasties, and wars and conquests were common. Slaves were often acquired through the spoils of war or as tribute from conquered territories. The acquisition of slaves was seen as a way to consolidate power and expand the influence of the ruling dynasty.

Social Factors:

Social factors were another cause of the slave trade in ancient Tamil Nadu. Slavery was seen as a legitimate means of acquiring labor, and slaves were often treated as property rather than as human beings. The caste system also played a role in the practice of slavery, as members of lower castes were often sold into slavery to pay off debts or as punishment for crimes.

Religious Factors:

Religious factors also contributed to the practice of slavery in ancient Tamil Nadu. The dominant religion of the region was Hinduism, which has a long history of legitimizing the practice of slavery. The caste system, which is an integral part of Hinduism, also contributed to the practice of slavery, as members of lower castes were often sold into slavery.

Cultural Factors:

Cultural factors also played a role in the practice of slavery in ancient Tamil Nadu. The region has a long history of trade and commerce, and slaves were often used as a form of currency. Slaves were seen as a valuable commodity, and their acquisition and trade were an integral part of the region's culture and economy.

Demographic Factors:

Demographic factors also contributed to the practice of slavery in ancient Tamil Nadu. The region had a high population density, and there was a constant need for labor. Slaves were seen as a way to fill the labor shortage, and they were often acquired through various means, including debt slavery and the slave trade.

Geographical Factors:

Geographical factors also played a role in the practice of slavery in ancient Tamil Nadu. The region was located on the trade routes between India and Southeast Asia, and slaves were often acquired through the international slave trade. The proximity to the sea also allowed for the development of a thriving maritime trade, which contributed to the acquisition and trade of slaves.

Legal Factors:

Legal factors were another cause of the slave trade in ancient Tamil Nadu. The region had a complex legal system, and slavery was recognized as a legitimate practice under certain circumstances. Debt slavery was one of the most common forms of slavery in ancient Tamil Nadu, and it was recognized under the legal system of the region.

Technological Factors:

Technological factors also played a role in the practice of slavery in ancient Tamil Nadu. The region was known for its advanced agricultural techniques and industries, and slaves were often used to work in these areas. The development of new technologies, such as irrigation and metalworking, contributed to the expansion of the slave trade in the region.

Environmental Factors:

Environmental factors were also a cause of the slave trade in ancient Tamil Nadu. The region had a monsoon climate, which resulted in seasonal changes in agriculture.

CONCLUSION

A difficult and multifarious subject is the history of slavery and the slave trade in ancient Tamil Nadu. Scholars have assembled a picture of the ways in which slavery and the slave trade were fundamental

to the social, political, and economic systems of ancient Tamil Nadu despite the little body of recorded evidence. Examining many historical sources reveals clearly how important slavery and the slave trade were to the labour systems, trade, and agriculture of the area. The many kinds of slavery, including debt bondage and military imprisonment, further underlines the complex character of the practice of enslavement in ancient Tamil Nadu. Furthermore influencing the history of slavery in the area was the Indian Ocean slave trade, which imported slaves from East Africa and other areas of the Indian Ocean continent. Slavery and the slave trade in Tamil Nadu and beyond were formed by the contacts and exchanges among many civilisations and communities in the Indian Ocean globe. All things considered, the research of slavery and the slave trade in ancient Tamil Nadu offers a fresh viewpoint on the complexity of past social systems and their ongoing influence on the present. Slavery and the slave trade still influence social and economic systems in Tamil Nadu and other nations. Therefore, it is important to keep investigating and interacting with the historical foundations of these ideas if we are to build a society more fair and equal.

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