

Unraveling the history of slavery in ancient Indian society



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Abstract This paper aims to investigate the history of slavery in ancient Indian society. The historical landscape of ancient India was shaped by a sophisticated system of slavery, divergent from the chattel slavery paradigm of the Western world. This nuanced institution, intricately woven into the socio-economic fabric, found its roots in debt bondage, social stratification, and the aftermath of conflicts. Unlike Western models, the absence of racial dimensions in ancient Indian slavery is significant. To analyze these historical aspects, the study employs qualitative methodologies, including the examination of ancient texts, secondary sources, and socio-economic analyses. A comprehensive exploration of this facet of ancient Indian society reveals a profound understanding of the structural dynamics that defined the civilization, highlighting the diverse pathways through which individuals entered servitude. This investigation provides insights into the socio-economic realities of the past and offers valuable perspectives on contemporary social hierarchies and inequality.

Keywords: ancient India, slavery, the caste system, debt bondage, social hierarchy

1. Introduction

Slavery, a dark chapter in human history, found its presence in various societies across the world, and ancient India was no exception. In ancient India, the complex institution of slavery manifested through various channels, reflecting the intricacies of socio-economic structures prevailing during that epoch. Diverging from the chattel slavery prevalent in the Western world, where individuals were treated as property, slavery in ancient India often resulted from debt bondage, social stratification, or the aftermath of warfare. The *Arthashastra*, attributed to the ancient scholar Chanakya, furnishes insights into the regulation and treatment of slaves, offering a glimpse into the intricacies of this system (Rangarajan, 1992). Although devoid of racial dimensions, the persistence of slavery in ancient India highlights the multifaceted nature of social structures, where individuals could find themselves in servitude due to diverse circumstances. Importantly, slavery in ancient India intersected significantly with the caste system, a rigid social hierarchy that governed all aspects of life. The caste system influenced who could become slaves, with lower-caste individuals or those outside the caste system often being more vulnerable to enslavement due to economic hardships or social marginalization (Thapar, 2004). Meanwhile, higher-caste individuals, although less frequently, could also enter slavery mainly through debt or punishment, with their experiences shaped by their original social standing. This interplay between caste and slavery, as outlined in texts like the *Arthashastra*, integrated slavery into the broader socio-economic and cultural norms, reinforcing and perpetuating social hierarchies. A deeper exploration of this historical phenomenon enhances our comprehension of the dynamics shaping ancient Indian civilization, providing crucial insights into how caste and slavery were interlinked and how these relationships structured the lived experiences of individuals, maintaining the socio-economic fabric of the time.

2. Literature Review

The history of slavery in ancient Indian society is a complex tapestry woven through centuries of socio-economic and cultural evolution. This review synthesizes scholarly perspectives to illuminate the origins, forms, and socio-economic impacts of slavery in various periods of Indian history.

Mann offers a broader perspective on slavery in the Indian Ocean world, emphasizing its continuity and transformation over centuries. His analysis includes pre-colonial and colonial periods, highlighting diverse forms of bondage and labor relations across the region. Mann's work contributes to understanding the global context of Indian Ocean slavery and its implications for historical and contemporary debates on abolition and human rights (Davis, 2015, p. 451).

Davis explores the legal and social dimensions of slavery in medieval India through the lens of the *Smṛticandrikā*. His study emphasizes the categorization of labor under master-servant laws, which included slaves within a continuum of workers. The absence of legal autonomy for slaves is highlighted, reflecting how slavery intertwined with social stratification and gender roles, akin to the status of *Śūdras* and wives in ancient texts (Mann, 2020, p. 299).



Kumar (2020) provides an overview of slavery in ancient India, focusing on its social and economic implications. He discusses the origins and types of slavery, including the roles of women and lower-caste individuals. Kumar's study underscores slavery's integration with economic and political conditions, illustrating its impact on social hierarchies and labor practices in ancient Indian society.

Singh (2020) examines nineteenth-century slavery in Northern India, emphasizing its legal transformation and socio-economic implications under colonial rule. Her study critiques the comparative approach to Indian slavery vis-à-vis Atlantic slavery, arguing for a nuanced understanding that considers regional specificities and legal reforms post-Abolition Act of 1843.

Goyal et al. (2012) delve into the work and wages of labor in ancient India, drawing on Vedic literature and legal texts. Their research explores the division of labor and wage systems, highlighting the socio-economic structures that governed labor relations and influenced early economic practices in India.

Stanziani (2020) traces the evolution of slavery and post-slavery in the Indian Ocean world, spanning pre-colonial to post-colonial eras. His study emphasizes the continuity of bonded labor and diverse emancipatory movements, challenging Western-centric narratives of slavery and highlighting the complexities of labor exploitation and liberation in the Indian Ocean region.

The existing literature on slavery in ancient India primarily focuses on legal frameworks, socio-economic implications, and comparative analyses with other global slave systems. However, there remains a significant gap in exploring the everyday lived experiences of slaves, their agency, resistance strategies, and the cultural dimensions of slavery in ancient Indian society. Most studies also tend to overlook regional variations and specific historical contexts that shaped the institution of slavery differently across India.

This research aims to address the literature gap by investigating the nuanced aspects of slavery in ancient Indian society through a socio-cultural lens. It will explore the everyday realities of slaves, their roles in economic production, and their interactions within social hierarchies defined by caste and gender. The study will utilize qualitative methodologies, including close readings of ancient texts, comparative historical analyses, and contextual interpretations. By focusing on these aspects, this research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how slavery functioned as a socio-cultural institution in ancient India, contributing to broader discussions on labor history and social dynamics in pre-modern South Asia.

3. Materials and Methods

This study utilizes a qualitative research methodology to investigate the history of slavery in ancient Indian society, combining a historical-analytical approach with anthropological perspectives. Primary sources include ancient texts such as the *Arthashastra*, *Dharmashastra*, and Vedic scriptures, which are meticulously analyzed for content, context, and linguistic nuances to understand legal and socio-economic aspects of slavery. These texts are complemented by the examination of works like "Lekhapaddhati" from the Gaekwad's Oriental Series and other critical historical documents. Secondary sources comprise scholarly articles, books, and historical analyses, selected based on their relevance and depth, such as Basham's "The Wonder That Was India" and Kosambi's "The Culture and Civilisation of Ancient India." Analytical techniques involve content analysis to identify themes, comparative analysis to cross-reference historical accounts, and socio-economic contextualization to understand factors like caste structures and labor practices. This approach ensures a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of slavery's socio-cultural dynamics, enabling a balanced interpretation of ancient evidence and contemporary scholarly insights. Primary sources will be identified as those directly obtained from historical texts and documents of ancient India, while secondary sources will be recognized as scholarly interpretations and analyses of these primary texts, as well as research studies that provide context or comparative perspectives. Ethical considerations include a sensitive and respectful approach to studying the historical impact of slavery, and all sources are cited following APA 7th guidelines.

4. Discussion

4.1. Origin of slavery

It is necessary to know what is meant by slavery. Slavery is the social practice that forces people to be used as laborers and subservient to an owner. Described as an institution in ancient Roman law. According to this law "*Someone is subject to the dominium of another contrary to nature*" (Encyclopedia of the social science, 1972, 307).

The term slavery, however, does embrace differing degrees of social status. Slaves in ancient Rome, for instance, could be educated and could, in many cases, acquire property and means of buying their freedom (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1972, p. 853).

At the end of the primitive society, the means of production began to improve. As a result of the discovery of iron and the custom of using it, the economic condition of the people began to improve. Along with that, the assurance and security of people's own life has increased. To protect themselves from wild animals and simultaneously to hunt and Agricultural work becomes much easier for people. The impact of these economic activities also affects social life. Gradually, class differences appear in the society. The slave system appears in the early stages of class-divided society.

Slavery broke the primitive communist social relations of human society and brought a new change. In fact, human civilization began from here and it was in this slave-based society that the civilizations of ancient Greece and Rome flourished. Ancient Egyptian, Babylonian, Assyrian, and later Greek and Roman empires were built on slave labor.

However, it should be remembered that the slave system has not developed in the same form in all countries. This practice has been developed in different countries depending on the social organization and geographical environment, depending on the needs of the society and time. Historically, it is true that slavery flourished in the European civilizations of Greece and Rome. In fact, these two civilizations are called slave civilizations. That is why interpretations based on civilizations that explain slavery or serfdom may not apply to very different societies, where slavery did not develop in the same way.

The first true slave society was ancient Greece. The Greeks, who were not only keen warriors but had a huge influence on trade across the Mediterranean, brought affordable slaves and showed how useful slaves could be.

Some scholars estimate that 1/3 to 1/2 of the population of ancient Athens were slaves. Slaves were found throughout society, performing almost any task imaginable, from construction and labor to artisan crafts and arts. As Roman society developed in the west of Greece, so did the slave system. Rome's streets, temples, and merchants' shops were all built by slaves.

Slavery has existed as a constant element in the social and economic life of all nations of antiquity such as Babylon, Egypt, Greece, Rome and also of many nations of Europe (Kane, 1941, p. 180).

4.2. Forms of slavery

- War Captives: War was one of the main sources of slaves in ancient India. Those captured in war were often enslaved and incorporated into the families of the victors or used for labor.
- Slaves by birth: Many became slaves by birth. Continuing from the time of their ancestors, they themselves are slaves under masters.
- Debt Slavery: People who could not pay their debts often became slaves as a means of settling their financial obligations. This form of slavery was prevalent and reflected the socio-economic inequality of the time.
- Criminal Slavery: Convicted criminals faced slavery as a form of punishment aimed at both punishment and social deterrence.

4.3. Origin and growth of slavery in early India

Indian civilization is one among the oldest civilizations in the world. Under this civilization Indian society survived for a long time with various characteristics and diversity. Through anthropological research we have various aspects of Indian society, which is expanding our horizons of knowledge. The contrast between the course of development of European society and that of almost the whole of the East is particularly striking. For this reason, various sociologists have mentioned it with great importance in their statements. A significant difference between European and Eastern societies is the development of private property, which was not so developed in Eastern societies.

Before the British gained political power in India, the power of the central ruling group was absolute. The concept of private property in the western sense was not clear or absent at that time. The king owned everything. The geographical conditions of almost the entire East contributed to such socio-economic conditions. Because every civilization in the East is known as the 'river civilization'. Every ancient civilization like Egypt, Babylon, Indus, China etc. was based on the river. Below are important facts about slave system during different civilizations of ancient India.

4.3.1. Slave system in harappan civilization

The situation before the arrival of the Aryans is still unclear to historians. India's pre-Aryan civilization began to be known only in 1921 when the traces of the Indus civilization were discovered. According to archeologist the Indus civilization belongs to the period between 2500 and 1500 B.C. (Wheeler, 1968, p. 93). Nothing is clearly known about the social life of the Harappan civilization. However, from the houses, roads and other archaeological materials of the Harappan civilization discovered as a result of the excavations, it is assumed that there was a monarchical or republican regime. Rows of small rooms found near the cities of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro are believed by many to be slave quarters. Historian Mortimer Wheeler notes that the farmers who cultivated the agricultural land around the Indus cities were made serfs by the city rulers.

4.3.2. Slave system in aryan civilization

Historians know the facts about how the Aryans destroyed the ancient civilization of India and established permanent residence here through their advanced military knowledge and strategy. Gradually the Aryans spread over this vast land. After conquering North India, they spread to the South East. They were born in India for the benefit of governance. Introduces custom. Initially there were three cast – Brahmin, Kshatriya, and Vaisya.

The Aryans faced significant challenges in establishing their relationship with the indigenous population of the Indian subcontinent. Since the locals were non-Aryans, they were not part of the Aryan caste system. Despite being a small group in

a vast territory, the Aryans needed to coexist with the native people. To secure their own dominance and ensure labor for agriculture and other demanding tasks, the Aryans subjugated the local population, assigning them the status of 'Shudras' and placing them at the lowest tier of society.

These Shudras, seen as the lowest caste, are often referred to as Indian slaves. Their contribution to manual labor was substantial and could not be ignored. The key question revolves around the degree to which these Shudras were considered slaves and the extent to which they could enjoy human rights (Buch, 1979, p. 253).

On the other hand, some contend that slavery did not exist in India. Megasthenes provides an interesting viewpoint: "The law ordains that no one among them shall under any circumstances be a slave, but that, enjoying freedom, they shall respect the equal right to it which all possess, for those, they thought have learned neither to domineer over nor to cringe to others will attain life best adapted for all vicissitudes of lot." According to Megasthenes, all Indians were free and none were slaves (Buch, 1979, pp. 253-254).

4.3.3. Slave system in vedic period

The existence of slavery in India was noted during the Vedic period.

The ancient Indian literary sources bring to notices that slavery was a recognized institution in India in the Vedic age (Chanana, 1960, p.7). The primitive tribes of India are referred to as *dasas* or *bandits* in Vedic literature. The Aryans employed these slaves in agriculture as personal property. Also, in the Vedic period.

1. many became slaves by birth,
2. some were sold as slaves, and
3. some accepted slavery voluntarily.

In the *vedic* period one can easily observe the distinction between two peoples, one white and the other black. They have also some cultural differences. The word *dasa* indicates the black skinned who had been subjugated by the others. This fact of conquest confers the rights of master on the conquerors and the obligations of slaves on the conquered; so much so that thenceforth the word *dasa* begins to signify the slave (Chanana, 1960, p. 105).

The status of slaves in India is also known from literature and other sources of the Vedic period. It is natural that when the Aryans conquered the Indus and started living there, many of the local people of that period submitted to them and accepted slavery. Even in the Vedic period, gifting of slaves is known- "*Yadu and Turvs too, have given two Dasas, well-disposed, together with a great store of kine*" (Buch, 1979, p. 254).

The term "*dasa*" typically refers to the adversaries of the Aryans. It is conceivable that when the *dasas* were defeated in battle and captured, they were treated as slaves. However, in the Rigveda, there are few instances where "*dasa*" is explicitly used to mean slave (Kane, 1941, p. 180).

During the Vedic period slaves were forced to accept slavery in various ways. These are.

1. Defeated soldiers were captured and turned into slaves
2. Anyone could voluntarily accept the slavery of another
3. Slaves included both men and women. These slaves were considered the movable property of the master. The 'slave masters' could use the slaves for their own needs, apart from as gifts.

4.3.4. Mauryan era

During the Mauryan period, the majority of slaves were Shudras, and agricultural production heavily relied on their labor. This era is marked by numerous instances of inhumane treatment of slaves. Kautilya referred to slavery as *Mnechchapratha*. However, slaves during this time did have some legal rights.

Megasthenes, who served as an ambassador from Greece in Chandragupta Maurya's court and traveled extensively across North India, provides valuable insights into the social and political conditions of the Maurya era. According to Megasthenes: "The law ordains that no one among them shall under any circumstances be a slave, but that, enjoying freedom, they shall respect the equal right to it which all possess, for those, they thought have learned neither to domineer over nor to cringe to others will attain life best adapted for all vicissitudes of lot." He asserted that all Indians were free and none were slaves (Buch, 1979, pp. 253-254).

The Arthashastra outlines five types of slaves: those captured in battle (*dhvajahita*), those who sold themselves (*atmavikrayin*), those born to slave-parents (*udaradasa*), those who adopted slavery due to debt (*ahitaka*), and those enslaved by legal orders (*dandapanita*). Manu, in contrast, identifies seven types of slaves: war captives (*dhvajaharta*), those serving for subsistence (*bhaktadasa*), offspring of slaves (*grhaja*), purchased slaves (*kreet*), gifted slaves (*datta*), inherited slaves (*paitrika*), and those enslaved as legal punishment (*dandadasa*). These lists are not exhaustive, as ancient texts mention various other kinds of slaves. For instance, the Narada Smriti details fifteen types of slaves, including those born to a female slave in her master's house, purchased, gifted, inherited, maintained during famine, pledged for a loan, debt defaulters, war prisoners,

wager losers, voluntary slaves, those seeking maintenance, those marrying female slaves, and those who sold themselves (Nigom, 1975, pp. 217-218).

4.3.5. Post mauryan age

Slavery is known to have existed in India even during the Gupta period. During this period, slaves were traded, donated or transferred. The Gupta Empire operated within a societal structure known as the caste system, a complex hierarchy deeply ingrained in ancient Indian society. This system categorized individuals into distinct social groups based on their occupation, birth, and perceived purity, shaping every facet of life during that era.

At the pinnacle of this hierarchy stood the Brahmins, revered as the priestly class responsible for religious rituals and spiritual guidance. Following them were the Kshatriyas, the warrior and ruling class entrusted with governance and protection. The Vaishyas, comprising merchants and landowners, formed the third tier, facilitating trade and economic activities.

Below these varnas were the Shudras, constituting the laboring class responsible for various manual and service-oriented tasks. They served the higher castes but had limited social mobility and often faced discrimination and exploitation.

Beyond the traditional four varnas were the "untouchables," marginalized groups relegated to performing tasks deemed ritually impure, such as handling dead bodies and sanitation work. They endured social ostracism and discrimination, existing on the fringes of society.

In this stratified social structure, one's caste was predetermined by birth, offering little opportunity for upward mobility. This system perpetuated social inequality, with privileges and opportunities concentrated among the higher castes while those lower in the hierarchy faced systemic disadvantages.

Despite the Gupta Empire's cultural achievements and contributions to art, literature, and science, it also reinforced and perpetuated the caste system, thereby entrenching social divisions and inequalities within ancient Indian society.

Upinder Singh states that the *Rig Veda* is familiar with slavery, referring to enslavement in course of war or as a result of debt. She states that the use of *dasa* (Sanskrit: दास) and *dasi* in later times were used as terms for male and female slave (Singh, 2008, p. 191).

Slavery existed in this country during the Pala and Sen periods preceding the Sultanate period. The condition of the Shudras further deteriorated when the caste system intensified during the Senya period. At that time their life was equal to that of slaves.

Any person who had once voluntarily enslaved himself if guilty of an offence shall be a slave for life. Similarly, any person whose life has been twice enslaved by others shall, if guilty of an offence, be a slave for life. Both of these two sorts of men shall, if they are once found desirous to run away to foreign countries be slaves for life (Buch, 1979, p. 256).

4.4. Women slaves

In historical contexts, women enslaved in this manner were subjected to severe punishments for perceived transgressions, such as running away or spreading rumors about their owner. Owners had the authority to physically abuse these women, including beating, dragging by hair, and tying them, without facing any repercussions. Non-compliance with the owner's orders could result in further brutal treatment, even leading to the woman's death, deemed acceptable by the master. *Janma Grahaka* is the term assigned to a purchaser of a lifelong slave and his rights over the life of the slave (Dalal and Shirgondkar, 1925, p. 45-47). In a statement, it is confirmed that the recuperation of a slave girl cannot be had at all by her relatives because she is born to serve her master of his house for life (Dalal and Shirgondkar, 1925, Pp. 45-47). Notably, there was no provision for the manumission of slaves, emphasizing their lifelong servitude. These traditions also signify it clearly that slaves were permitted nothing but bare maintenance for the upkeep of their life (Kumar, 2020, p. 3769). The text highlighted that slave girls were entitled only to basic sustenance, reinforcing their status as mere possessions. Offspring of slave girls were considered burdens, often engaging in delinquent behavior due to their deprived upbringing. Another noted scholar Mahapandita Rahula Sankritayayana (Dalal and Shirgondkar, 1925, p. 54) tells clearly that the slave in the period were treated as semi humans.. Despite being part of the family unit, the treatment of slaves varied based on the master's nature, prompting reflection on the ethics of their harsh treatment.

4.5. The roles of slaves in different sectors

Slaves had no right to own any property. Three persons are declared to have no proprietary right, a wife, a slave, and a son. Whatever property they acquire shall be made over to him to whom they belong. A slave's property was to pass to his relatives, in whose absence the master alone possessed it. A slave was entitled to enjoy not only what he had earned but also the inheritance from his father without any hindrance to his master's work. The descendants of a man who sold himself as a slave must be an Arya.

Narada distinguishes between two types of work. "Know that there are two sorts of occupation: pure work and impure work. Impure work is that done by slaves. Pure work is that done by labourers. Sweeping the gateway, the privy, the road, and the place of rubbish, sham-pooing the secret parts of the body, gathering and putting away the leavings of food, ordure and

urine, and lastly rubbing the master's limb when desired, this should be regarded as impure work; all besides this is pure." However, the actual work and position of slaves were not always of the worst type (Buch, 1979, Pp. 258-259).

Slaves in India were mainly engaged in domestic work. Both men and women were used in this work. Although most of the slave labor was engaged in domestic work in India, we also learn about the employment of slave labor in agriculture, mining, various industries. Apart from agriculture and ornamental industries, slave labor is also known to be employed in other industries. Slaves might sometimes perform work of economic importance, such as agriculture or mining, but they were usually domestic servants or personal attendants (Basham, 1969, p. 153). But it is true that in the slave civilization of ancient Greece and Rome, slave labor was employed in mass production, not so in India.

In the history of human civilization, the largest number of enslaved people came from prisoners of war. That is, the side that lost the war accepted the slavery of the conquered side. The slaves of ancient Greece and Rome were collected in this way. Along with the expansion of the empire of Greece and Rome, their number of slaves also increased. In this way, the inhabitants of various places in Asia and Africa became slaves, and the Greeks and Romans They are forced to labor in building civilization.

Ancient Greece was divided into various small states. The main ones were Athens and Sparta. As a result of mutual wars between these city-states, slaves were also collected from the conquered people. In addition to prisoners of war, there was also a system of buying slaves from the market. In European countries, there was a huge trade in slaves. The market was developed. There are traces of the purchase of domestic servants in medieval India. The numerical and material difference between the slavery of the Greco-Roman civilization of the West and the slavery of Indian society was fundamental. But we can learn about the existence of slave system from various sources of Vedic, Buddhist and Puranic period. But it is true that the civilization of Greece and Rome was completely dependent on slaves, not so in India.

India, unlike some other ancient civilizations, was never economically dependent on slavery; the labourer, farm worker and craftsman were normally free men, and the latifundia of the Roman magnate had no counterpart in India. Slave markets are not mentioned in early sources, and though provision was made for the sale of slaves they do not seem at first to have been a regular article of commerce. In the early centuries of the Christian era, however, there was trade in slave-girls between India and the Roman empire in both directions, and slave markets existed in the 16th-century Vijayanagara empire (Basham, 1969, p. 154).

At every stage, in almost every part of the country, a great deal of the superstructure survived, along with the productive and formal mechanism of several previous stages; there always remained some people who could and did cling stubbornly to the older mode. However, we need concentrate only upon each particular mode as it became dominant to the extent that it was bound to prevail over most of the country.... it is impossible to find slavery in the classical European sense in India at any period (Kosambi, 1970, p. 23).

From the ancient history of India, during the period of Muslim kings and even during the British era, slavery was prevalent. After taking over the political power of India, the British did not abolish this custom. Slaves were widely bought and sold even during the British era. Although the slave system was abolished in India by passing a law in the Parliament in 1833, it was actually limited to the book of that law, it was not implemented in reality.

4.6. Social impact

Slavery varied across the vast and varied regions of ancient India. Different states and societies had different approaches to slavery, influenced by cultural, economic and political factors. The social impacts of slavery in ancient Indian society are highlighted:

- **Economic Significance:** Slavery played a significant role in sustaining various economic activities including agriculture, construction and domestic work. Slave labor was essential to the functioning of many ancient Indian societies. Slaves played an important role in agricultural production, especially in the cultivation of crops such as rice, wheat, cotton and sugarcane. Their labor helped expand agricultural production and increase land productivity. Slaves were involved in building cities, temples, palaces, roads and irrigation systems, which contributed to urbanization and infrastructure development in ancient India.
- **Social Stratification:** The presence of slaves contributed to the division of society into distinct social classes, with slave owners occupying positions of special power and authority in society. This social division created disparities in wealth, status and access to wealth, which further widened the inequalities within ancient Indian society. further marginalized certain groups within society, creating a divide that persisted through generations.
- **Reinforcement of Caste System:** Slavery is associated with caste system; lower castes are more vulnerable to slavery. Slavery reinforced social hierarchies, as slaves often belonged to marginalized communities and had limited opportunities for social mobility.
- **Family Structures and Relationships:** Slavery disrupted family structures, as enslaved people were often separated from their families and communities. This separation led to erosion of family ties and loss of cultural heritage, affecting the social structure of ancient Indian communities.

- Resistance and Abolition: Despite the widespread prevalence of slavery, there were examples of resistance and efforts to abolish the practice. Slave revolts, protests, and movements for social justice were not uncommon in ancient India, reflecting the resilience and agency of enslaved people to challenge oppressive systems.

Overall, slavery had far-reaching social effects in ancient India. Slavery resulted in widespread class discrimination in society.

5. Conclusions

The institution of slavery in ancient India was a multifaceted phenomenon deeply rooted in the socio-economic and cultural fabric of the time. Its origins can be traced to various sources, including conquests, debt bondage, and the intricate caste system. Slavery played a pivotal role in sustaining economic activities, with prisoners of war, debtors, and socially marginalized individuals often becoming victims of servitude. The impact of slavery extended beyond the economic realm, influencing and reinforcing social hierarchies. The intricate caste system, prevalent in ancient India, further marginalized certain groups, perpetuating a cycle of inequality and exploitation. For example, texts like the *Manusmriti* and *Arthashastra* outline the roles and rights of different classes, explicitly codifying the lower status of slaves and those in servitude, thereby institutionalizing social hierarchies. This created a complex social structure where the rights and opportunities available to individuals were inherently tied to their social status. As ancient Indian societies evolved, so too did attitudes towards slavery. Influenced by religious doctrines emphasizing compassion and equality, as well as legal reforms aimed at protecting the rights of slaves, there emerged a gradual shift away from the acceptance of this institution. For instance, the *Arthashastra* and certain Buddhist texts reflect an evolving discourse on the treatment and manumission of slaves, suggesting that ethical considerations began to take precedence over economic interests. The decline of slavery in ancient India marked a transformative period, reflecting changing cultural norms and a growing awareness of the inherent dignity of all individuals. Studying the history of slavery in ancient India provides valuable insights into the dynamics of these societies and their journey towards more inclusive and equitable structures. Case studies such as the Mauryan Empire's policies on slavery and the influences of Ashoka's edicts provide concrete examples of how leadership and governance could impact the treatment of slaves and shift societal values towards non-violence and moral righteousness. These examples highlight the interplay of economic, cultural, and religious factors in shaping societal attitudes and contributing to the eventual demise of an institution that left an indelible mark on the region's history.

Ethical Considerations

The study of slavery in ancient Indian Society requires a sensitive approach that avoids judging historical practices by modern standards, while presenting findings in a way that is respectful of contemporary communities and free from harmful stereotypes. Researchers must minimize personal and institutional biases to ensure objective analysis and accurately cite sources to represent the original material faithfully. It is also essential to handle the dissemination of findings carefully, considering the impact on current debates around caste and historical injustices. Transparency in research methods and theoretical frameworks is critical for ensuring accountability and balanced interpretations. Adhering to these guidelines ensures a responsible examination of slavery in ancient Indian society.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest in this study.

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