

Comparative Study of Serfdom in Europe and India with Special Reference to Uttarakhand

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Abstract

Generally the existence of serfdom is not considered in the context of India, because the features of serfdom in India were not the same as in Europe, but, many elements of serfdom existed in India. For example; the agricultural labourers in India were as the serfs, so to understand the serfdom in the context of India; we should remember that the particular system of any region is highly affected by its geographical, social and political conditions. So, it is not necessary that the condition of Serfdom would have been the same in India and Europe; therefore, the concept of Serfdom being different in India is natural. As we know slaves have been used for agricultural works in India since ancient times, so, it is obvious that the higher class in India was dependent on the agro slaves for agricultural works by this way or other; this indicates the prevalence of Serfdom in India. The term of serf used for the slave who was used for agricultural works and his situation was better than a slave in some conditions. As serfdom was originated out of feudalism in Europe, likewise it came into existence in India out of land donations. According to land rights there were various groups of peasants in Europe, and after analysis there were also many groups of peasants in India and their conditions were the same as peasants of Europe, in economic status and limited rights, but there were some differences also, in land ownership, labour and social structure. On this basis the existence of serfdom in India is clear by the special reference to Uttarakhand, with some differences.

Keywords: Serf, Serfdom, Villein, Maurusidar, Khaikar, Sirtan, Kaini.

INTRODUCTION

Generally, the term serfdom is used for a custom which was related with feudalism in Europe, but feudalism was not a new thing or phenomenon since it developed in Ancient Egypt when the old kingdom declined. It was also prevalent in the Homeric Age and also existed in vague fashion in the Roman society when a wealthy landlord surrounded himself with clients. (B.V. Raw, 1984: 173) It was also developed as a *coloni* in Roman society. By the end of 3rd century AD, the Roman Empire faced a labourer shortage. Large Roman landowners increasingly relied on Roman freemen, acting as tenant farmers, instead of slaves; to provide labourer. These tenants' farmers are eventually known as *coloni*. (Mackay Christopher, 2004: 298) Gradually their condition became worse and they were tied to the land, so some consider this situation as the beginning of medieval serfdom in Europe. It also developed among Germanic tribes in the form of an institution called *Comitatus*. Brave lords associated themselves with a powerful chief who provided food, shelter and the weapons to them. But during the middle of 10th century it assumed a definite shape. (B.V. Raw, 1984: 173) In this context C. L. Mariwalla and others write down that feudalism gave a place to serfdom. (Mariwalla, C.L. Gokhale, B.K. & D. Souza, A.L.,

1967: 281) It means that feudalism was not new thing for Europe and other countries, and if feudalism was prevalent in Europe and other countries then it also clears that serfdom was also prevalent, because many Historians consider serfdom as one of the two essential parts of feudalism, so it clear that serfdom also prevalent in Egypt, Rome and German tribes. The above description naturally proves that where there feudalism existed there was the existence of serfdom too. In this sense, it was also existed in India, because existence of feudalism in India is already proved by Ram Saran Sharma and Romila Thapar. To understand Serfdom in context of India; we should remember that the particular system of any region is highly affected by its geographical, social and political conditions; so, it is not necessary that the condition of Serfdom would have been same in India and Europe. So, the concept of Serfdom being different in India is natural, because in the Europe the patronage of serfdom, and an essential part of feudalism system, the manor' system did not exist everywhere in Europe. In this context D. N. Jha writes down, "Manor system was existed only in France, and it was unknown or not fully developed form of the other part of the Europe". (D.N. Jha, 1995: 167) After that the feudalism existed in the whole Europe. Therefore, it is necessary to analyze the original characteristics of Serfdom rather only its external forms while discussing it in Indian context and only then we can understand Serfdom in Indian context. As we know that the slaves have been used for agricultural works in India since ancient times. (D.N. Jha, 1995: 167) However, the prohibition of plough for Brahmins in Indian mythology, has been the root cause behind using slaves for agricultural works. (D.N. Jha & K.M. Shrimali, 1995: 207) Altogether, it also mentioned that the Savarnas (Brahmins & Kshatriyas) can also not cultivate by their own hands (ropaie). (Sharma, 80) So, it is obvious that the higher class in India was dependent on the agro -slaves for agricultural works by this way or other; this indicates the prevalence of Serfdom in India.

Origin of Serfdom in Europe

The word "serf" originated from the French word "serf" and can be traced further back to the Latin servus, meaning "slave". In Late Antiquity and most of the middle Ages, what we now call serf was usually designated in Latin as coloni (sing. Colonus). As slavery gradually disappeared and the legal status of these servi became nearly identical to that of coloni, the term changed meaning into our modern concept of "serf". An agro-slave is named as Serf in Europe (Serf – A person in feudal servitude, bound to a master's land and transferred with it to a new owner). (Michael Agnes, 2002: 582) A serf received protection from the lord and for this he had to (a) work at least three days freely on the lord's land, (b) give the lord a part of the revenue of his own land and (c) make payment for getting the corn ground and baking it for bread at the lord's mill and oven respectively. The serf's position was pitiable as he was neither a freeman nor a slave. He was bounded to serve his lord throughout his life despite of his miserable condition. (B.V. Raw, 1984: 176) Karl Marx considers Serfdom as an essential part of feudalism. According to Marx, in the beginning the Barber castes of Germany and Rome, who lived on farming; used to get ploughed their field by serfs but land was centered to some particular hands in Rome; by which the German Barber castes imposed their agro- organization on the Romans. In this way, with the mixture of these two elements the Feudal production System was originated. (Nicholas M., 1973: 98) So, it means Marx considers Serfdom in the root of origin of Feudalism which was already existed in the German castes and it had been helpful in the exploitation of European serfs. In this way, Serfdom means the exploitation of serfs and their unwanted relation with land. So, it is obvious that the serf was essentially associated with the landowner in Europe. If the land was transferred from one land

owner to another, the serf engaged to that particular land, was automatically transferred to another land owner. The serf had to plough the land of his own landowner in every condition. The serf could not have gone anywhere whether he had to suffer any kind tyranny and trouble. It means the condition of the serf was like a never liberating slave.

In Europe, people were striving for peace, order and security in the middle age. Life became unstable and insecure when the Huns, the Goths, the Vandals and the Magyars laid wild hands on the civilized countries of Europe after the collapse of the Roman Empire. Barbarians destroyed, ran a terror in the hearts of the common people as a large scale. Kings and commoners shook in fear on hearing of the coming of the tribesmen. Under such circumstances, the primary need of the people was peace and security. Similarly the death of Charlemagne also witnessed the rise of great disorder and confusion in Europe. Hence, a new order based on protection and service became indispensable. In this situation, some nobleman who had large and extensive lands came to protect the common people. He had his manor-house, strong enough to afford protection to him and his men. Such a man could protect others if he chose, but such a responsibility he would not undertake without a price. So the free peasant commended himself for protection to the lord by presenting his piece of land to him in perpetuity, and promising to serve him. (Mariawalla, C.L. Gokhale, B.K. & D. Souza, A.L., 1967: 278) In this way a free peasant became a serf, and serfdom became prevalent in Europe.

Characteristics of Serfdom in India

As Serfdom was originated out of feudalism in Europe, (B.V. Raw, 1984: 174) likewise it came into existence in India out of land donation (bhoomidan). In this context, Aatreya Vishwas opined that Gupta's period economic condition makes it clear that the system of land donation gave out the bad results as the landless serfs; who by now used to live a respected wager's life, began to live as half-slave under to their landowners; because it is clearly mentioned in the donation letter (daan patra) that not only the land it donated but also the women serfs working in those lands were also handed over to the land holders. (D.N. Jha & K.M. Shrimali, 1995: 296) Ram Saran Sharma also keeps the same opinion that this system was also prevalent in Madhya Pradesh, Eastern India, Chamba and Rajasthan where serfs, wagers and craftsmen were handed over to the grantee of the donated land. (R.S. Sharma, 1996: 80) It is certain that land donation system favoured Serfdom in India and a large group of serfs was badly affected by it.

The situation of agriculture and agro- system in south India in the period of sultanate was dependent on the relations between the land owner and the landless labourers. In such conditions, there lived the landlord and labourers in villages that used to get a share of crops for cultivating the land. Besides this many artisans and other workers used to get share in the crops. The condition of labours in the villages was the same as of serf. (Harishchandra Verma, 1997: 81)

There were two types of slaves in the society in the Mughal period, first homeless slaves and others were bonded labourers. The second types of slaves were transferred with one land owner to another. (B.L. Grover & Yashpal, 1995: 29) Moreland has also given the same details. He has also described two types of slaves urban and rural. The condition of rural slaves is described as half serf. (W.H. Moreland, 1976: 29) He writes the descriptive details of serfdom that there were a large number of serfs in 18th century but the author of that time did not mention it because they were not interested in that subject. He also describes about a large number of labourers who lived as serf or escaped by that situation. He appreciates that the serfdom was very old system in India and it was started earlier even before Akabar

regime. He again elucidates that this description is based on the 'Report on slavery'. Consequently the result we find out after inquiry commission is that the member of commission find everywhere serfdom and its traces. For example, in the report of Bengal they write serf was sold with land. In this context Sir William Machetton tells that serf comes under the patrimony laws. (W.H. Moreland, 1976: 102) As in the Mughal period Harishchandra Verma gives the details of a large number of landless labourers. (Harishchandra Verma, 1999: 407) As it indicate that indirectly this class also lived as the serf. In the British period, we find the landlord and others who were dependent on the land as a structure of pyramid. Savya Satchee Bhattacharya gives the figure of those 4 crore and 20 lacs slaves which was the 37.8% of the whole population. Among them minimum 30 lacs people were those who were called bonded labourers. (Sabyasachhi Bhattacharya, 1990: 69) In this way, we find it in modern India that serfdom was changed into the bonded labourer.

Comparison of Serfdom in Europe and India

In Europe, we find two types of peasants, freemen, whose tenure within the manor was freehold, and *villeins*. Lower classes of peasants, known as cottars, generally comprising the younger sons of villeins or bordars in the British Isles, and slaves, made up the lower class of workers. In England much numbers of villein, cottar and serf. (Ramsay Muir, 1967: 75) Freemen or free tenants were that type of tenants whose status was better than serfs. (Marc Bloch, 1961, Krishna Kant, Mishra, 2002: 352) A freeman owed little or no service to the lord, and had a good degree of security of tenure and independence. A villein was the most common type of serf in the Middle Ages. A villein contract to landlord, he was expected to spend some of his time working on the landlord's fields. The requirement often was not greatly onerous, contrary to popular belief and was often only seasonal, for example the duty to help at harvest-time. The rest of his time was spent in farming his own and for his own profit. Like other types of serfs he was required to provide other services, possibly in addition to paying rent in money or produce. Villein was tied to the land and under jurisdiction of his lord. (Marc Bloch, 1961, Krishna Kant, Mishra, 2002: 368) The category of border and cottager was found generally in England. In England, the Domesday Book of 1086, uses bordari (border) and cottarii (cottager) as interchangeable terms, cottager being derived from the native tongue whereas border being derived the French. (H.E. Hallam, 1988: 58) The status of border or cottager ranked below a serf in the social hierarchy of manor, holding a cottage, garden and just enough land to feed a family. In England, at the time of Domesday Survey, this would have been between about 1 and 5 acres (0.4 to 2 hectares). (Daniel s. McGarry, 1976: 242)

In other part of Europe, there were also two types of peasants; one of them was free peasant who ploughed his land freely and without interference of landlord. They paid the lord his revenue only. The other category was serfs, who ploughed his land and also worked in the lord's fields, paid corvee and were not free to do anything they like for their betterment. (R.S. Agarwal, 1993: 4) Same as in India, there were many groups of peasants, as- Khudkast, Paikast and the labourer, who worked on the other's fields, some of them was like serf who were bounded with their master's land. We can understand it by the reference of Uttarakhand's peasants.

Serfdom in India with Special Reference to Uttarakhand

In Uttarakhand, there were many groups of peasants likewise in England. Maurusidar was the same as freeman peasant, who ploughed field without anybody's interference and paid revenue to the king. (S.S.

Negi & Shivchand Singh Rawat, 2007: 2) According to this description, the condition of Maurusidar was same as freeman peasant in England. Other group of peasants in Uttarakhand called Khaikar. Khaikar used to be called Asami (farmer) who ploughed field under some Maurusidar and paid a fixed price to the Maurusidar. (S.S. Negi & Shivchand Singh Rawat, 2007: 2) Mr. Batten derives the word Khaikar from khana (to eat), and kar (the royal revenue), that is, he may enjoy the land as long as he pays the revenue. (H.G. Walton, 1921: 81) But Khaikar had also to pay some other taxes that used to be called as gifts (special cash price), Dastoor (some materialistic items) and Pithain. (Shiv Prasad Dabral, 1976: 239) The Khaikar did not have the right to sell the land and to mortgage it; but he had the patriarchal right of ploughing the field. In case of not paying the taxes, he could have been debarred from land ploughing. (S.S.Negi, U.P. Historical Review, Vol-5, 1989: 84) In this situation his condition was like no more less than serf. Sirtan was another group of temporary peasants. Sirtan means that Asami (farmer) who ploughed the land on the willing of a Maurusidar or Khaikar on the basis of some cash prices and something else on being mortgaged. (S.S. Negi & Shivchand Singh Rawat, 2007: 2) The main difference between a Sirtan and a Khaikar was that the Khaikar could give the land to a Sirtan on cash payment because the Khaikar had the patriarchal right of ploughing the land under Maurusidar, (Shivchand Singh Rawat, 2011: 204) but the Sirtan had the right to plough the land for a fixed time. In this situation sirtan had no patriarchal right of ploughing the land; he could only plough the land under his contract, so his condition was like as temporary tenant. The kaini was a group of those peasants as serf in Europe. The condition of a Kaini was the most like a slave and associated with the land of landowner. In principle, a Kaini used to do the personal service to the landowner along with the land ploughing, for example – to carry the palanquin and Daandi, to wash the clothes and utensils and to arrange the wood in funeral. (E.T. Atkinson, 1998: 471) Atkinson clears the condition of a Kaini' association with land – Thatatwan used to keep the right of selling Kainis along with the land because the *Kainis* were totally associated with the land and they could not be sold without selling the land. (E.T. Atkinson, 1998: 439) As per Shekhar Pathak, when land division used to be made among the landowner brothers, the Kainis were also divided among them. (Shekhar Pathak, 1987: 431) While discussing the ancient system of serfdom in Uttarakhand, it becomes obvious that this was also prevalent in Chandas Dynasty. In the regime of Chandas, the slave working in the fields were called 'Kaini' and those who used to do domestic and household works were called 'Chhayodas. (Shekhar Pathak, 1987: 341) Therefore, it is obvious that Serfdom was existed in Uttarakhand before Chanda dynasty. As kaini was a serf in Uttarakhand, same Kudi was also a serf in Vijaynagar empire. (Harishchandra Verma, 1997: 297) In above analysis we discussed on similarities as economic status and land rights, but we have not discussed on differences of serfdom in Europe and India. In Europe feudal lords granted land to serfs to cultivate and in India, king made grants to collect taxes and other dues. In Europe, serfs were required to work for their lord's land in exchange for protection. In India, serfs were required to work for their lord's land in exchange for land occupancy. Some social differences were: in Europe, serfs could not marry, change occupation, or move without their lord's permission. In India, serfs were often harshly treated and had little legal redress against their lords.

Conclusion

By studying the above mentioned different groups of the farmers in Uttarakhand, it is clear that the condition of Thatatwan or Maurusidar was more like independent farmers and they can be called landowner like Zamindar or Khudkast who had patriarchal rights of ploughing the field without any

pressure in Mughal period. But this group was limited because only some high class people were under this category. The other group was of the Khaikars. By analyzing the condition of the Khaikars, this can be said that they neither were Serfs nor independent farmers. They cannot be called independent farmers because the Khaikars ploughed the fields under the Thaatwans and also had to pay them some feudal giving (gifts, Dastoor, Pithain) in addition to the land taxes. Therefore, their condition was not like independent farmers. So, it can be said that the condition of the Khaikars was between an independent farmer and a serf. Like serf, this group was the victim of feudal exploitation. If a serf is known as a serf only because of exploitation then definitely the condition of a Khaikar was like a serf but a less exploited serf. In the classification of the farmers, the third group was of the Kaini or Khurni. The condition of the Kainis was really more like European serfs and on the basis of pre-analysis this can be said that there was no basic difference in the condition of European serfs and Kainis in Uttarakhand; because like European serfs, the Kainis in Uttarakhand was associated with land of landowners and served the landowners in personal. Therefore, by doing the deep study of the Kainis, it can be revealed that Serfdom was existed in Uttarakhand, and on this basis it is clear that serfdom was also existed in India with some differences.

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