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Serfdom: An Insight Into Modern Day Slavery

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Abstract - Bonded labour as well as slavery was abolished in India as soon as the Indian Constitution came into force in the year 1950. However, the ground reality is quite different. To this day, a big number of Dalit labourers work as serfs on the fields and in the houses of wealthy, high caste landlords. This paper proposes to discuss the harsh reality of serfdom in the light of the real life story of Viramma, a Pariah woman, as narrated by her in the book 'Viramma: the life of an untouchable'. This paper shall discuss how caste based discrimination makes way to various forms of unfair practices pushing poor Dalits to live on the margins of the society. This paper shall also discuss how the lives of female serfs are much more painful as compared to their male counterparts.

Index terms - labour, serfs, serfdom, caste, Dalit women

I. Introduction

Serfdom is an age old practice strongly connected with the Indian caste system wherein the family of the serf is dependent on the family of the master for their employment as well as their survival. The total casual labourers in the country, about 32 percent are SC, which is double their population share of 16 percent (Kumar 11). A majority of these Dalit labourers work as agrestic serfs, their state of serfdom might not be as evident since they might appear as simple farmers at first instance, however, their landless position and dependency on the higher castes tells a different story. Hjejle points out that the "agrarian bondage was widespread in South India in the early years of nineteenth century. The remuneration offered to the paraiyans whether they were villeins or slaves, was reduced to something close to a bare subsistence. It was regulated by the rules of caste and bore no affinity to the actual contribution which these people made to the cultivation of land" (93). The legacy of serfdom and exploitation of poor Dalit labourers is as old as the Indian Caste System.

Rajan describes the plight of agrestic slaves as “the agrarian slaves of South India mostly served in the lands and received a minimum wages from their masters; were known by different names such as agrestic slaves, praedial slaves, alloidal slaves of the soil, agricultural serfs, ascripti glebal and mila adimai” (Rajan 85). Agrestic serfdom is similar to bonded labour in the terms of wages and work profile. Nevertheless, the former is a little more lenient in the terms of freedom of choice to work elsewhere when the master fails to provide full time employment. This paper concerns itself with the agrestic serfdom, a form of slavery prevalent in South India. It discusses how the lives and experiences of agrestic serfs are unique and how these serfs form a marginalized community who are discriminated against on the grounds of caste, class and gender.

This paper offers an insight into the lives of serfs and how it is a form of modern day slavery. It throws light on the working and living conditions of serfs and how they try to make ends meet with the meager wages that they are paid by their masters. Furthermore, this paper also discusses how the caste and class hierarchy are maintained using the practice of serfdom and how such a setup denies access to resources to the lower castes, facilitating the class hierarchy of the caste privileged. Furthermore, to give the paper a textual grounding and relate it to the experiences of Dalits more explicitly, it will describe the living conditions of these agricultural serfs in close connection with the life of Viramma as narrated by Viramma, to Jean Luc Racine, in her biography *Viramma Life of an Untouchable*.

II. Serfdom and Class Struggle

A setup like serfdom only exists in India due to the difference in classes, the difference between those who have access to all sorts of resources, not just basic life supporting amenities but also both financial and social capital that improves the quality of life. Within the setup of serfdom the master has resources like fertile land, domestic animals, machinery to cultivate land, other frozen assets like gold and property, and a goodwill in the society. Whereas the poor serf has certain restricting factors like generation old debt, a number of mouths to feed within the house, little to no personal land and no access to basic life supporting facilities. The difference in the holdings of the two groups creates a class ridge, where one group is the ‘have’s’ and the other group is the ‘have not’s.’ Due to such state of affairs, the serf becomes a vulnerable entity that shall have to depend on a master so that he can support himself. The vulnerability or depravity of the serf makes the master a powerful entity since the conditions of the serf do not allow him to negotiate his wages and he ends up accepting whatever the master proposes as remuneration.

A serf is an individual who owes allegiance to his master. He/She is expected to be available for the master and tend to all the duties and responsibilities that the master bestows upon them. In such a setup the master is usually a high caste landlord, whereas the serf is a low caste untouchable. Agrestic slaves are the ones that only tend to agricultural duties. A. M. Lorenzo marks that “the agrarian history of India shows that agrestic serfdom is a socio-economic institution, evolved out of an imperious economic necessity in a closed system of village economy”(Lorenzo 1). Within a closed economic setup, like that of a village, there is already a dearth of opportunities, there are few job options, a person can either work as a labourer, a farmer, or run his own small business. To own a business a person would need capital and to be an independent farmer a person would need land, in the absence of both these assets an underprivileged, unskilled person resorts to serfdom. However, a number of serfs do not make the choice of working as serfs on their own. The status of a serf is passed down to them as part of their fate. They are born into servitude.

The work profile of serfs is very vast. They are not just required to work on the fields of their master, they are also expected to help the master and his family in his household chores. Viramma in her biography explains how she is expected to bale, harvest and pick the crops. Also she is expected to clean the field and supervise the temporary labourers, as she is trusted more by the Reddiar than others. She also supervises the

distribution of meals amongst labourers. She states, “when the fields are ready it’s us women who go and plant out the rice. The men plough the fields, sow, irrigate and uproot, but we plant out” (Viramma 243). A day’s work in Viramma’s life is extremely exhausting. She describes how, when she has finished her work on the field by the end of the day, her body trembles with exhaustion.

Exhausting and demanding as the work of the serfs and other daily wage earners is, the income they receive is meager. Most of these labourers lead a hand to mouth existence. They work on the landlord’s field all day long for which they were paid very little. To make ends meet the wage earners would pick some food grains from the field while the master would be away. The master too lets them since he knows that the compensation he gives is trivial. In addition, for important occasions like weddings, festivals and in times of other emergencies these workers have no option but to take loans from their employers at heavy interest rates. This result in generations of Pariahs working for the Reddiars without any compensation for their work to pay back the loan their ancestors borrowed. Viramma narrates

“When I’ve done my work, if I’m paid, I take it, but I can also leave without being paid because I’m their own serf... We’ve worked for them for generations, men and women... At the end, on the last day, when it’s all been collected and bagged up, the Reddiar will give us eight measures: four for his serf, four for his Paratchi who collects the cow dung” (Viramma 248).

Serfdom and bonded labour are very similar to each other, the foundation of both lies in debt. Agricultural workers are usually paid in kind, in the grains they sow; hence they usually lack cash and live just one step ahead of starvation. In such a situation when these labourers need money for rituals, weddings or even medical emergencies they have to opt for loans from their masters since no one else will be willing to lend them any amount of money. These small sums of money are lent at exorbitant rates and the labourers work all their lives, for their masters, but are never able to pay them. As Palomba and Joseph mark, “bonded labour is a sort of patronage in which the minimum wage is barely enough to cover the living costs of the employer and employer is often characterized by unfinanced and exploitative payment agreements which benefit the employer” (Palomba and Joseph 11). Thus, the debt serves as a tool that allows the master to gain control on the services and lives of the serfs.

The dynamics of land ownership, control over the lives of serfs, and caste based privileges put the family of the master in a position of reverence, where his authority is not questioned and he has a number of underprivileged humans at his disposal who shall have little to no human rights. Such a set up creates clear class divides where both the classes are dependent upon each other, however, one has the authority to exercise control over the other, while the other is easily replaceable and lives under the constant threat of dying of starvation. The master (the privileged class) needs the services of the serfs (the underprivileged class) but he can easily replace the serfs and also persecute the serfs for not complying with his orders. The serfs are an agency-less lot and caste based hierarchy has a major role to play in this class based setup.

III. Serfdom and Caste

The Government of India statistics outline that the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes are over-represented among the poor and the landless: the all India average indicates that, typically, bonded labourers belong to Scheduled Castes (61.5%) and Scheduled Tribes (25.1%) (Gnanou 1). The connection of caste and servitude or serfdom is very strong. The higher caste individual has at his disposal the services of the lower castes, and the high caste master exercises control over majority aspects of his serf’s life. The concept of serfdom and bonded labour stems from the authority that the hierarchal caste system gives the high castes, the subjugation of the low castes is sanctioned and advocated by the caste system. As Arya and Rathore mark, “within this structure [the caste hierarchy], implicit, insidious and seemingly impossible to challenge, ‘upper’

caste men are most privileged, ‘upper’ – caste women are more privileged, ‘lower’ – caste men are more deprived, and ‘lower’ – caste women are most deprived” (Arya and Rathore 8).

Manusmriti in chapter VIII, verse 413 describes that the shudra, whether bought or not, should serve the high caste; the same chapter verse 418, allows the high castes to confiscate the property of the shudra since owning property is not good for him (Veliveda, 2017). The ideology of caste supremacy builds the grounds for a system like serfdom and bonded labour. The societal belief where one caste is bound to their occupation till eternity facilitates the subjugation of low caste individuals. These ideas only make it easy for the high caste to own a chattel, and dispossess him of his rightfully earned share of income and any property that the low caste manages to buy for himself as “the Indian caste system is historically one of the most exploitative hierarchical social system, which allows unequal access to valued resources such as wealth, income, power and created division of labour” (Singh and Pattanaik 24).

The caste system binds people in strong boundaries which are impossible to cross as one descends this grading system, the lower a person is placed on the caste ladder the harder it is for that person to cross his caste determined boundary. As Ambedkar says, “the division of labour brought about by the caste system is not a division based on choice. Individual sentiment, individual preference has no place in it. It is based on the dogma of predestination” (Ambedkar 37).

Sir Ellis, a British officer in India in the 19th century, mentioned in his accounts certain castes were known as slave castes, they were the pallē, the pallan and the paraiyan. These castes were forever linked with their status of slavery and they were often bought and sold with the lands they cultivated (Hjejele 80). The status of being a serf is passed down from one generation to another, such a status diminishes the opportunities for personal growth and no matter how talented a person might be he is expected to live by his family’s plight of servitude.

When a serf borrows a sum of money, which is lent to him at exorbitant interest rates, fails to pay back the debt in the given time, and becomes unfit to provide any more labour he passes off his status to some other person in line. As Palomba and Joseph states that “it happens very frequently that a worker, after some years of “service” passes off his bonded status to the family members, often younger siblings” (Palomba and Joseph 12). Consequently, a woman can be brought in as a serf when she is married into the family of serfs. The painful and exploitative experience of servitude can be transferred through generations wherein the family in authority remains in the position of authority and the exploited family continues to toil ceaselessly. Viramma was married into serfdom though her parent’s family too was a family of serfs.

In Viramma’s case her son Anban got some education, however, she didn’t allow her son to dress well, or to talk back in front of the Reddiar because of her family’s position with the Reddiar. Viramma says, “We’re poor. We are Pariahs. We live from day to day. We only eat if we’re given work. Those people from the ur employ us. We have to be humble more humble than them. If you go around dressed like that, they’ll say, “What a nerve that Pariah’s got to come and work for us in trousers and a shirt!” No, Appa, be humble and let’s live like we used to!” (Viramma 168). A person’s education, his qualification cannot transcend his caste, in a rural setup where everyone knows everyone, a person is reminded of his caste at every possible instance and low caste is reason enough to act humble and modest at all times.

IV. Life of Female Serfs

Serfs are a marginalized section of the society, however, within this marginalized section is another section the ‘female serfs’ whose problems and issues are unique. The lives of the female serfs are harder as they are expected to work more than their male counterparts, while they are also paid less than the male serfs.

The female serfs are expected to help in the household chores of their masters and help in raising his children as well. Most of these female serfs inherit their status of serfdom from their partners. Joseph and Palomba observe that “women and their children are bonded due to the fact that the male of the household is a bonded labour. Women carry out domestic services in the landlord’s house and besides being exposed to long working hours, they may fall victim to physical and sexual abuse from the landlord” (Joseph and Palomba 19).

The life of a woman serf is much more difficult than that of a male serf. Since these female serfs are uneducated, and poor with almost no access to health amenities there have to withstand a number of pregnancies, and miscarriages throughout their lifetime. These women give birth to almost a dozen babies, and these deliveries take place without any medical supervision. These women are expected to produce a number of children that shall contribute to the family income and continue to provide cheap labour to the masters. Armstrong explains this phenomenon as “women, therefore, reproduced workers – including themselves – to return the next day ready to see their labor power to the capitalist. The use value of this reproductive labor is the worker’s daily and generational renewal. The exchange value of women’s work in the family, however, is nothing at all” (Armstrong 2).

Viramma’s biography sheds light on how her experience working on the field while taking care of her household and raising a number of children is a plight that a lot of Dalit women share. Located in rural and remote areas these women have little to no access to hygiene facilities and medical supplies, they remain ignorant about their own bodies for most part of their lives. These problems when combined with the issues of working in adverse weather conditions and doing heavy physical labour puts the physical well being of these serfs in danger. To counter the absence of medical facilities they tend to believe in a number of deities, and indulge in superstitious rituals that further exhaust their already scarce resources. Additionally, they also have to withstand a number of diseases related to feminine hygiene while working throughout. Most of these Dalit women work full time while being pregnant, moreover, they also return to the field soon after their delivery with their young infants. These newborns are so young and fragile, when their mothers return to work (with them), that they do not survive the harsh weather conditions of the fields.

Gorrige marks “gendered patterns of labor are not only shaped by caste, however, they are determined by class and regional identities, as well as ways of understanding labor that are subject to change over time” (Gorrige 6). The experiences of women serfs are unique in their own right, they are marginalized within the marginalized, they are not just subordinate to their master and their families, they are also subordinate to their male counterparts. The needs, nutrition, wages and interests of the male serfs precede that of female serfs. The forms of labour that a female serf has to undergo are more exhaustive as compared to the male serfs. It is to this effect that it becomes important to recognize this category as unique and discuss its special interests.

V. Conclusion

Arora et al. marks, “often, hierarchies of caste, gender, religion, ethnicity and disability can work together, in enabling the powerful to extend control over markets and state interventions” (Arora et al. 3). Serfdom is a harsh reality of the Indian society and there are number of factors to blame for this. However, the caste system is the primary reason why such a practice still persists. Such an unfair practice is surviving to this day because it benefits the people in charge, that is to say that it benefits the people whose interests matter and whose interests are easily vocalized; whereas the section which is at loss in such a set up lacks the voice to protest against it. Nevertheless, it is important to understand that serfdom is an ugly reality of the society as it denies the serfs basic human facilities and dignity. The practice is very similar to slavery as the master has

an unfair advantage over his serfs and the serfs practically have no option but to execute the master's command and that too at very high personal costs.

Female serfs are an exploited and overworked group whose issues often go unnoticed as these women and their existence is treated like a taboo. Their problems are trivialized and their services are seen as unimportant. These female serfs are a subaltern group that cannot speak for themselves, because they have been rendered mute by societal and caste norms. Hence, it is important to understand that the experiences of women like Viramma, are unique, they are not like the problems of other Dalit women, or other serfs, they are region specific and even sub caste specific and these issues need to be discussed and analyzed so that they can be solved. The issues of both male and female serfs need to be read and analyzed, while the interests of female serfs are unique and their standpoint is special, the problems of male serfs too cannot be neglected or undermined. Hence, it is important that the issues of both the groups are studied and analyzed, and a practice like serfdom comes to an end.

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