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Dr. Devendra Kumar
Associate Professor,
Department of History, Ram
Lal Anand College, University
of Delhi, Delhi, India

Genesis of slavery and slave mode of production in ancient Greece

Dr. Devendra Kumar

Abstract

Slavery in ancient Greece was practised as a necessary adjunct of the social life of the Greek people. Though there is no evidence to record the actual date of the genesis of slavery in Greece, but by a simple surmise its birth is believed to have been synchronised with the crack of cultural dawn on the horizons of the Greek worlds. The Greek people were, by their very temperament disposed to a life of contemplation and were relatively less inclined to the manual labour involving a hard and strenuous physical exercise for which they had to engage persons from amongst the lower classes called as slaves who were procured either by capture in war, or by stealing or by way of purchase in the market. Thus, upon a perusal of the life, living, the style and the approach of the Greek people, we find that far from a life of drudgery and menial labour, their preference for the arm chaired life compatible with their contemplative mood, considerably helped them to make great strides in the field of art, literature, painting, science, politics and philosophy etc., and the entire world, once, saw their cultural achievement with complete awe and reverence.

Keywords: Chattel, farming, master, slavery, slave mode of production, surplus-labour

Introduction

The Greek philosophers regarded the slave as a living instrument in the arrangement of a house hold. In their view possession of property is an essential instrument for the management of a household. As a piece of property the slave wholly belongs to his master. Commenting on the master and slave relationship as interpreted by Aristotle and others Barker remarks that the slave is wholly dependent on his master. He has no existence in the society. If the master says- stand here, he will have to stand there^[1].

The Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle have defended the institution of slavery contending that it is natural as well as moral. In their justification of the institution of slavery they hold that in the very scheme of nature some are born natural masters and others natural slaves. In their view, the master by the virtue of his higher potentialities and nobler attributes claims a superior title over the slave who is much inferior in qualities and capabilities to his master.

The Greek masters justified the concept of slavery by pleading that slavery is embedded in the universal order. A principle of rule and subordination governs the entire gamut of universal activities. Out of these two-contrasting elements the former has a tendency to dominate the other. Based on the same analogy is the master and slave relationship according to which the master has supremacy over the slave who is bound to submit to the authoritative commands of the master. To state it otherwise, just as the soul rules the body, reason control the desires, exactly, the same power is exercised by the master over the slave.

Slave mode of production

Is there a slave mode of production? In order to answer this question it is necessary to recall the fundamental elements constituting the fabric of a general concept of the mode of production. A mode of production is a unified concept comprising of a complex structure of relations and forces of production.

The relations of production define a specific mode of appropriation of surplus-labour and the specific form of the distribution of the means of production. Appropriation of surplus labour may be assessed by working out the difference between the value of the labour-power and the value which maybe created by means of the labour power.

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Devendra Kumar
Associate Professor,
Department of History, Ram
Lal Anand College, University
of Delhi, Delhi, India

Surplus labour takes the form of surplus value. It is a necessary element which is found in almost all modes of production. The mode of appropriation of surplus labour governs the mode in which the social product is distributed among the agents of production.

Forces of production allude to the mode of appropriation to nature, that is, to the labour-process through which a determinate raw material is transformed into a determinate product. The elementary factors governing the labour-process are - 1. The personal activity of man, 2. The subject of that work, 3. Its instruments. Forces of production differ according to the manner in which these elements are combined into concrete forms of the production-process, the forms of co-operation and co-ordination of the labour of several individuals, the form of articulation of the means and object of labour with the activity of the labourers and so on.

The significance of the two rudimentary elements that is the relations of production and the forces of production terms of the construction of the concept of a slave mode of production is elucidated as under:

1. The relations of production

The relations of production in this mode consist of three distinct levels, the form property/legal definition of the agents, the distribution of the means of production and the mode of appropriation of the surplus products.

a) Property form/legal characterisation of the agents

The slave mode of production is marked by a social division of labour into non-labourers and labourers and by private property of relations. The workers who are the direct producers are considered as the legal property of the non-labourers. As chattels, they do not have any legal and social existence independent of their masters and they are dependent on them for their maintenance.

Slavery as an institution existed in ancient Greece and the slave was considered as the chattel and the legal title of his master. This legal form of slave property defines the agents of the slave mode (freeman/slave, owner/chattel) along with the mode of appropriation and the surplus product which are the essential ingredients for the formation of the structure of SMP in the ancient Greece.

b) Distribution of the means of production

In the SMP, where slave labour forms the basis of production, the owner should have not only the effective possession of slave property but also the capacity to set the means of production in motion. The slave property cannot be put to any productive use, unless they are provided with the instruments of production, raw materials and adequate means of subsistence. Moreover, the labour is also required to be directed to some definite activity of labouring. Thus in the SMP the entire process of production is dictated or directed by the slave masters/owners who possess the means of production.

c) Mode of appropriation of the surplus product

The whole product of the direct producers (slaves) goes to the non-labourers (slave-owners). The master owns the product of the slave's labour just as he owns the slave. The quantum of labour put in by the slave is rewarded by the means of subsistence which he receives from his master. The capital invested in the purchase of labour power is

shalogous to the capital investment in machines, animals etc. The value of the slave is subject to depreciation as his labour power is exhausted and the body of the slave engenders the cost of maintenance. A portion of the value produced by the slave reproduces the value of the capital invested in him. The slave mode does not make any division between necessary labour and surplus labour. The surplus product is treated as an element of interest on the capital advanced and the slave's capacity to the labour is equated with ox's capacity to haul carts, ploughs etc.

2. Forces of production/labour process

In the SMP the relations of production play a dominating role over the forces of production. In the slave mode the slave has a contradictory status, as a form and as a labourer/direct producer. This contradiction has a decisive effect on the forces of production. In as much as it displaces the relations surplus labour/necessary labour and it renders the relation of the labourer to the process of production problematical.

In the slave mode the price of the slave represents the anticipated surplus value to be obtained by the exploitation of his labour power, and in order to realise this value the slave must be allotted some definite field of activity (and this entails the expenditure of additional capital on instruments of production, raw materials etc.).

Precisely we may say that –

- a. The price of the slave represents the capitalised surplus-value to be obtained from his labour-power and this can only be realised if he is set to work in some definite activity of labouring. In himself the slave can not add to value.
- b. The slave retains his value as a form of capital whether he labours or no-this value can be realised in circulation.
- c. For the value of the slave to be preserved the body of the slave must be maintained.

As a Chattel set to labour the slave has a close nexus with the labour/process. He is separated from the means of production which are wholly controlled by his master/slave owner. As part of the labour process his action are directed and dictated by his owner. Unlike the fental mode he has no effective possession of the means of production so as to set the process of production in motion. Thus in the SMP there is no separation of the production and the appropriation of the surplus product. The following three effects emerging from the concept of the SMP are noted below:

- **Effect 1:** There is no structural compulsion for the slave to labour to reproduce himself.
- **Effect 2:** The slave is separated from the means of production and unable to set them in motion except at the direction of his owner.
- **Effect 3:** The function of the slave owner is as the constitutive and co-ordinating agency of the labour process.

Co-ordination/supervision by non-labourers is necessary and it takes the form of simple co-operation. In the slave mode the necessity of co-ordination/supervision arises from the labourer (1) from the means of production (2) from his subsumption within capital.

“Slave production requires both the management of the process of production as a whole and the detailed

supervision of the worker within it. Both forms are necessary effects of the social division of labour. The combined working of labourers, the technical division of labour, is an effect of the condition of labour imposed by the social division. This is another of registering the dominance of the relations of production over the productive forces [2].

As observed by Hindess and Hirst. The units of production characteristic of the slave mode are, in agriculture, the estate, which is either a land holding large enough to be worked by several labourers in a gang (latifundium plantation) or a farm employing several labourers which is large enough to permit a division of labour and small enough to permit close supervision (the ideal of the advocates of ‘scientific’ farming in antiquity) and in industry, the workshop, the combination of several labourers

under a single roof. Both of these forms make co-operation possible and minimise the labour of supervision. The form of simple co-operation enables unite of a size and a scale of production which are impossible on the basis of production by isolated individuals the single artisan or the peasant form. Thus relative to peasant farming or artisan production the SMP represents an increase in the complexity, scale and volume of production [3].

While keeping in view the salient feature of the slave mode of production as noted above, it is necessary to have a look at the occupation chart of the slave workers as give by Prof. William Westermann at pp. 13 in ‘The Slave Systems of Greek and Roman Antiquity’. In the chart which is produced below, he has given a break-up of 79 male slaves and 56 females slaves employed in different trades:

Table 1: Given a break-up of 79 male slaves and 56 females slaves employed in different trades

	Agriculture	Manufacture	Transport	Distributive service	Miscellaneous
Men	12	26	10	21	10-79
Women	0	48	0	7	1-56

This shows how is ancient Greece the slave force was employed by the slave owners into various trades, and the production-pattern was very much analogous to that of the SMP.

3. Critical review

The foregoing paras exclusively deal with the enunciation of the concept of slavery and the practice of its different areas in the ancient Greece. Perhaps, there is no period in history of ancient Greece which might not speak of the practice of enslavement in some form or the other. Right from the Homeric times to the beginning of the Christian era when the entire world dell under the sweeping influence of the catholic belief of universal brotherhood, the ancient Greeks had been defending the institution of slavery, claiming a moral and natural justification for the same. Plato and Aristotle were the greatest exponents of the natural school of slavery. They justified the master and slave relationship on natural grounds holding that the former, by virtue of his superior qualities is entitled to rule over the latter who is according to them much inferior to the master.

Aristotle’s theory of rule and subordination is, perhaps based on the assumption that the natural slave because of his physical stoutness and capacity for work is fit for doing the menial labour alone; and the master by virtue of his intellectual capabilities is fit for ruling over the slave. There is little logic in this assumption, as nature does not always admit of such physical distinctions.

While hitting-hard at the fallacy of Aristotle’s concept of natural slavery Barker again remarks that there is not one but several reasons that slavery must be condemned. The person who is born cannot be treated as a slave because he has all the qualities like others [4].

While attempting a moral justification for the institution of slavery Aristotle talks of moral superiority of the master and the slave’s moral inferiority which tells us that slave is born only for his master. Thus the incessant pursuit of virtue in the company of the master inculcates in him not only the virtuous qualities of a good servant but also the excellent attributes of a good man. The slave is a good partner in his master’s life in as much as he receives from such partnership all the essentials of a decent living. Not only this, the slave shares a sense of belonging with the master

and also gets imbued with a sense of devotion and sincerity towards the master. Such an environment fraught with the elixir of morality is conducive to the weal and welfare both for the master and the slave as well. Tough Aristotle stood for such type of slavery where the slave received due dividend for labour. But the fact is that the slave system throughout antiquity breaded contempt and indignity for labour and involved the exploitation of the slaves.

The sophists attached the institution of slavery holding that it was a thing of pure convention and created by man himself for his self-assertion, preservation and perpetuation of his hegemony. According to them, “Man was born free but subsequently made a slave by the circumstances”. In this connection, the remarks of Antiphon, the Sophist who said, “all of us breathe through the mouth and nostrils”, are indicative of the natural equality of the master and slave, the Greeks and non-Greeks as well. The idea of equality is upheld by philemin, the comic poet”, though a man be a slave, he is made of the same flesh as you. For no one was ever made a slave by nature; but chance has enslaved a man’s body [5].

To go back into the genesis of slavery one might hold that the fabric of the slave-systems as practised in ancient Greece was woven with the threads of sighs of the tolling masses. The Greek masters were a leisurely class consisting of scholars, the artists, the musicians and the thinkers wholly devoted to the pursuit of excellence in life, casting aside the menial jobs to be done by the class of weavers, the miners and the farmers called as slaves. Whereas the work of the former involved the application of their mind and soul, the latter required the deployment of the physical powers. It is a fact that construction and the development of the society as a whole both types of work are indispensable. The activities of art and painting can flourish only in an era of perfect calm and peace, and a thinker can afford to walk into the realm of speculative thinking so long as he is fully assured of the support of the farmers in the fields. Hence it is very difficult to make any distinction on the functional basis between the usefulness of the work of the artists, the painters, the scholars and the thinkers on the one hand, and the utility of the manual labour done by a slave on the other. Thus the discrimination meted out to the slaves on this account was uncalled for an unwarranted, and it was highly

unjustified on their part to deny the basic amenities of a civic life to the slaves. In this context, it is worthwhile to refer to the observation of E. Barker that we cannot deny that the fact that we employ several servants whose use is that of their body but this should not be meant for domestic slavery^[6].

Thus to draw any demarcation between the intellectual labour and the physical labour, and on this ground to allocate a higher and a lower status to the master and the slave respectively, we highly unjustified on the part of the ancient Greeks. No man is born so do a menial job for ever. He is the product of the environment. Given proper training and proper schooling, a man who comes of the low-strata in life, may rise to the highest ladder. Thus the Aristotle's theory of natural slavery was utterly false. In this connection, it is interesting to quote E. Barker, the falsehood of his theory is, that he believes these men to be lower than men; mere bodies, or at best half-rational beings. They are men as fully as the man who do the higher works, and they have every right that attaches to men, and especially the primary right of freedom. Modern practice recognizes the right of every man to life and liberty. Socially, it refuses to tolerate slavery; politically it refuses to include the labourer from a vote, as Aristotle would have excluded him from assembly^[7].

In the guise of these arguments, the ancient Greeks kept on perpetuating their dominion over a large segment of the masses who were neglected and denied the basic amenities of a civic life and called as slaves. Now it is abundantly clear that the type of slavery which was practised and perpetuated in ancient Greece was conventional and a creation of man himself. To put it into the grab of naturalness was a mere manipulation which was motivated by their malafide intention to preserve their prerogatives, positions and their comfortable way of life.

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