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Slaves and their Rights in Ancient India

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The word Dasa, originally meant a member of the people conquered by the Aryans in their first invasion of India. It later came to be referred as slaves, who were reduced to bondage as a result of losing the battle against Aryans.¹ This finds the probable origin of Indian Slavery.

Rigveda clearly alludes to a reference where Vedic God Indra is invoked to destroy the Aryan enemies and slay Dasa.² The word Dasa here stands for the enemies of a particular group of Aryans who were either defeated or stood in opposition. But the idea of subservience, implying slavery was not to be found initially. The defeated people were not assimilated into the social systems as slave and the word was used in the economic sense only. This is why reference to slaves or the working of land through slaves is not found in early Vedic texts.³ In the Vedic period in the first phase the natives of the soil were massacred but gradually they (Dasas) were taken as slaves.⁴ In the Vedic hymn literature Das originally denoted an enemy and secondarily a slave. The word Dasa is used in the sense of attendants, found in I and X Mandals which are believed to be of later compositions.⁵ There is no evidence to prove that they were employed in productive work.⁶ Dasi or female Dasa from the beginning of its use bore the meaning of slave-girl and not the wife of an enemy.⁷ This means that at first women were taken as captives and later on males followed them and hence became slaves. In later Vedic period Sudra denoted a slave. "One like a Sudra shall be born in thy line, the slave of another, who may be driven away or slain at will."⁸

Their Kinds

With the passage of time the slavery became institutionalised and assumed different forms from 6th century B.C. down to 6th century A.D. The Buddhist literature including Jataks evidence four kinds of slaves.⁹ However the Pali text for the first time classified slaves into 3 types -

- (i) Slaves born in the house of the master (antojato)
- (ii) Slaves purchased for money (dhanakkito)
- (iii) Slaves captured in war (karmaranito).¹⁰