



BOOK REVIEW

***Slavery and Servitude in Pre-colonial Northeast India*, by Amrendra Kumar Thakur, Guwahati, EBH Publishers (India), 2023, 191pp., ₹ 1295 (hardback), ISBN 978-93-92038-05-1**

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The edited book, *Slavery and Servitude in Pre-colonial Northeast India*, edited by Amarendra Kumar Thakur, is one of the important contributions to the historiography of slavery and unfree labour. For a long time, the historiography of slavery was influenced by analytical categories borrowed from the experiences of the Atlantic World, such as the concept of chattel slavery, the commodification of humans, and the racial hierarchies. Over the past three decades, however, the historiography of slavery in South Asia has seen remarkable changes from Eurocentric paradigms of chattel slavery and plantations to more dynamic forms of slavery rooted in kinship, and particular to a region context. The theory that Orlando Patterson put forward about “social death”, wherein slaves had no rights in society (Patterson 1982), and the

analysis of slavery in classical antiquity by Moses Finley (1980) have largely informed historical discourses on slavery. However, universalist perspectives often overlook the regional variation of different forms of enslavement. In the context of South Asia, scholars like R.S. Sharma (1958), Dharma Kumar (1965), and Indrani Chatterjee (1999) have mainly examined slavery in terms of caste, agricultural labour, and household servitude. On the other hand, important works like Indrani Chatterjee’s *Gender, Slavery and Law in Colonial India* (1999) and her edited collection with Richard M. Eaton, *Slavery and South Asian History* (2006), reveal how slaves in South Asia were integrated into their households in various capacities, such as junior kin, courtesans, or devotees of religious services.

It can be understood that such historiographical frameworks often overlook regions like Northeast India, where slavery took different paths from both Atlantic slavery and caste based slavery. Northeast India is an ethnically diverse zone situated in the India-China-Myanmar border area, where slavery and forced labour were deeply rooted in pre-colonial polities, relationships between hills and valleys, and raiding practices in cross-border regions. Therefore, the edited volume by Thakur attempts to fill this historiographic void. It is also observed that the ideas presented in this book draw explicitly from Thakur's own previous work, *Slavery in Arunachal Pradesh* (2003), arguing that, rather than being marginal or non-existent, the practice of slavery in Northeast India was invisible due to the colonial anthropological representation of "tribal" societies as egalitarian and "primitive." Thakur's key argument that slavery and other kinds of bondage existed throughout the pre-colonial and early colonial period in Northeast India, transcending modern political borders, needs to be considered within the context of larger discussions in South Asian slavery studies against the outdated dichotomy of "slave" and "free" (Chatterjee 1999; Eaton and Chatterjee 2006).

The book has eleven chapters, the first of which is an introduction. The study of slavery and servitude among the people of Northeast India forms the core focus of this book, which operates within an expansive regional and ethnographic framework. The book includes a discussion of regions such as Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura and includes groups like the Singpho, Khampti, Meitei, Garo, Khasi-Jaintia, Mizo, Naga, and Tripuri. Such extensive inclusion in terms of geographical and ethnic aspects is one of the main highlights of the book.

The introductory chapter, "Introduction", written by the editor, Amarendra Kumar Thakur (pp. 1-46), lays down a very effective

conceptual basis for the volume, critiquing these dominant perspectives and offering an alternative framework for analysis. Thakur makes use of Patterson's theory of "social death" and "natal alienation" (Patterson 1982) but contextualises it carefully in Northeast Indian context, where slaves could often get incorporated into the family structure but nevertheless would continue to remain outcasts. While not resembling either the institution of chattel slavery in the Atlantic colonies or Greco-Roman models, the Northeast Indian form of slavery was largely domestic and military and connected with the practice of wet-rice cultivation, opium plantation, head-hunting, and religious practices. The introduction also highlights the dynamics of slave trade in the area, particularly its fragmented and non-market dynamics. Instead of involving exchange mechanisms the slaves were obtained through wars and raids in the frontier regions connecting the hills and valleys within and between the polities. Thakur juxtaposes these with more traditional systems from the heartland of South Asia, such as the *dāsa* in classical literature and debt bondage in the period of colonial India. At the same time, the editor criticises the artificial character of state frontiers, which broke up the system of slave raids conducted between different communities in the region, namely the Ahom, Meitei, Burmese, and hill polities.

Thakur suggests that the institution of slavery in Northeast India cannot be interpreted within the framework of simplistic distinctions between "free" and "unfree" labour, nor can it be classified within the caste hierarchy structure. Rather, it is necessary to understand it as an institution embedded in kinship relations, military activity, economic transactions, and rituals. Such an approach finds a parallel in the discussion by Joseph Miller, who insists that the institution of slavery should be thought of as a process and context-based (Miller 2012). Similarly, it aligns with the perspective developed by Gwyn

Campbell in his book about Indian Ocean slavery in Africa and Asia (Campbell 2004). Placing Northeast India in a wider context, the introduction manages to provincialise dominant historiographical frameworks. At the same time, criticism of colonial representation of the area corresponds with the argument developed by Nicholas Dirks, according to whom the colonial construction of knowledge influenced Indian society greatly (Dirks 2001).

As a whole, the chapters in this volume reveal the complexities involved in trying to conceptualise slavery in Northeast India as a phenomenon that can be accounted for with a single theory. Instead, it appears to be a highly adaptable phenomenon that depends on factors such as warfare, kinship relations, religion, political power, environmental conditions, and changing labour demands. It is especially valuable to discuss the chapter on female slaves due to the presence of the gender dimension. Gender must not be ignored when analysing slavery, as argued by feminist scholars like Jennifer Morgan and Stephanie Camp (2004). They maintain that slavery cannot be dissociated from labour, reproduction, or the domestic sphere. With regard to this collection, it can be seen that women were essential figures not only for their labour but also because of their role in social reproduction and household continuity. The chapters dealing with the societies of the Singpho, Khampti, and Meitei communities highlight the intimate linkages of slavery, warfare, and politics. For the Singpho and Khampti societies, slavery had a lot to do with the status of chieftains and their power. These communities viewed slaves as both a source of labour and a symbol of prestige. In this regard, Pierre Dockès's theory (1982) that slavery is likely to evolve in conjunction with political unification can be applied here. At the same time, slavery in the society of Manipur could be viewed as an aspect of state domination through hereditary processes and the capture of enemy prisoners in war.

Another strong point of the volume is its focus on servitude in religious and moral economies. The particular chapter about temples and *satra* institutions in Assam indicate that servitude appears to have been an established part of ritual hierarchy and justified by religious institutions. This argument resonates with the work of Indrani Chatterjee (1999), who writes about domestic slavery in South Asia and religious households; however, while Chatterjee focuses on households, this new argument presented in the chapter sheds light on sacred institutions that might have also depended on servitude. Likewise, the chapter about the *Bawi* system in Mizoram defines the system as a patron-client relationship that includes both coercion and reciprocity, which is similar to James Scott's (1976) theory of moral economy.

The chapters on Garo, Khasi-Jaintia, Tripura, and the Nagas reinforce even more the social embeddedness and flexibility of slavery. While the chapter on the Garo demonstrates how pre-colonial systems of kin-based and war-based slavery were reconstituted through colonial interventions in law and economy, much like what Frederick Cooper (1994) argued in his book, it is the chapter on the Khasi-Jaintia that brings in an anthropological perspective as articulated by Igor Kopytoff and Suzanne Miers (1977), wherein slavery is viewed in the context of debt, reciprocity, and negotiated servitude. The two chapters on Tripura offer a different perspective on the emergence of slavery and servitude, highlighting how subsistence crises, royal privileges, and borderland dynamics contribute to this phenomenon, although the slave trade is seen as intermittent in that context.

The chapter on the Nagas of Naga Hills acts as a synthesis of thoughts about the entire collection. Slavery in Northeast India, it claims, could not have come into existence based on one particular reason alone, as environmental, economic, political, and socio-cultural influences played an important role in bringing about this practice and running it smoothly. This argument

is what sets apart the importance of this book. It moves away from a homogenised concept of slavery that could be based either on plantations or the caste system on the Indian mainland.

One of the greatest strengths of this volume in particular is that it calls into challenge the existing approaches to studying slavery from a caste-based perspective in the historiography of South Asia. Whereas scholars like Sharma (1958) and Kumar (1965), among others, have argued that unfree labour should be examined primarily through a lens of caste, this volume argues that in the Northeast of India, slavery had little to do with caste but was a function of kinship ties and warfare. This distinction is vital to the discussion surrounding slavery and its conceptualisation in South Asia. On the other hand, the volume fits into the trend within global historiography of looking at slavery as being pluralistic and context-dependent (Patterson 1982; Miller 2012). Finally, from a methodological perspective, it is worth praising the use of oral traditions in addition to colonial records in making such arguments in this volume.

Despite the volume's significant contributions to historical scholarship, it also exhibits a few limitations. It is observed that there appears to be an inconsistent use of theoretical approaches within the volume, even though the theoretical background provided in the Introduction is quite impressive, which may lead to a lack of depth in the analysis of the historical narratives presented. The majority of chapters have a predominantly empirical character, but a more consistent discussion of global theoretical concerns about slavery and its key concepts, for instance, "social death", "dependency", and "relational enslavement" could have been incorporated into those chapters. Although the inclusion of a chapter that focuses on women in the volume is certainly beneficial, gender issues have not been consistently examined in any of the other chapters. However, *Slavery and Servitude in Pre-*

colonial Northeast India is a groundbreaking and intellectually rigorous book that expands the boundaries of scholarship in both Indian and world history. It does so by examining the variety of forms of servitude in Northeast India, which will force us to reassess many of our long-held beliefs and create new pathways for future exploration. This book is especially useful for those who are interested in labour histories, indigenous peoples, comparative slavery studies, and, of course, global slavery studies.

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