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Forms of Servitude: Slavery in North East India with Special Reference to Arunchal Pradesh

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Abstract

Slavery is arguably the most misused word in the English language. It has become a metaphor for extreme inequality, for subordination, deprivation and discrimination. The definition of slavery has caused controversy since the beginning of the abolition process. Definitions have caused dissensions for two reasons: first, there are differences of opinion about which practices should be categorised as slavery and thus designated for elimination; secondly, definitions have been accompanied by obligations on States to carry out particular remedial measures. Slavery in the fullest sense of the word has existed for ages in NEFA, but it is somewhat different from what once was practiced in the west. In the first place, it is on a comparatively small scale. It is estimated that some millions of slaves were imported into America during the period of the African slave-trade. In the whole of NEFA there are only a few thousand slaves, many of them in the very remote areas. The slave population of Lohit Valley was not more than two hundred. Secondly, there is no racialism in NEFA slavery. Western slavery took a darker tinge from the prevailing theory of the racial inequality. 'Negros', it was held, were only partly human; by becoming slaves they were expiating the sins of their fathers; they did not deserve the elementary human rights; even a freed slave was irrevocably an inferior being. Yet many of the American slaves were in practice well-treated as members of the family, and one of the arguments used by anti-Abolitionists was that the Negros liked being slaves and would only be unhappy if they were liberated.

Five key words: Slavery, Serfdom, Debt-bondage, Chaos, Gilas.

Slavery is arguably the most misused word in the English language. It has become a metaphor for extreme inequality, for subordination, deprivation and discrimination. It is bandied about in all manner of contexts. Thus we have the 'classic' or 'chattel slave', the Marxian 'wage slave', the 'sex slave' and, in the late twentieth century, the 'contemporary slave'. Scholars, government officials, colonial civil servants, explorers, missionaries,

nationalists, League of Nations anti-slavery committees, Human Rights activists, and lawyers charged with drawing up national laws and international conventions, have all wrestled with the difficulty of giving a precise meaning to the term.

Scholars have disagreed over the attributes to slavery. Were slaves primarily property, and if so, how is property to be defined?¹ Did slaves have to be saleable, or otherwise transferable? What rights did owners have over their slaves that they did not have over the free members of a kin group, family or community? Would it be more accurate to define slaves as persons under the complete control of, and utterly dependent upon a master, a mistress, a kin group or some other organisation? If so, did that control have to be lifelong and or hereditary, or could slavery be a temporary condition? Was the slave always acquired through an act of violence? If so, what constituted violence? If people were sold against their will, was this sufficient by itself to define them as slaves? Were slaves necessarily 'social dead'- that is non-person without social existence or status except by virtue of their owners- or could they be recognised as people with rights of their own.

There have been debates on the purpose of slavery. Was it primarily a way of mobilising labour? If so, was it cost effective? Was it a step towards the incorporation of 'outsiders' and their descendants, as full members of a society? Alternatively, was it a method of incorporating outsiders into a particular social formation while excluding them permanently from full membership of a kinship or other group? Was it a device for elites to acquire and retain power and prestige? The questions are endless and the approaches are not mutually exclusive. Slavery as a term is commonly used can fulfil all these purposes.

The Definition Debate: No definition of slavery can be separated from the definition of its antithesis-freedom. This is as difficult to define as slavery, since freedom has meant different things to different people and even to the same people at different times in history. The main question is whether there are certain rights without which people in any society would not consider themselves to be free. In the western world at the outset of the twenty-first century a free person is generally considered to be an autonomous individual – someone with the economic and social rights to move freely, to choose his/her occupation, to keep the proceeds of his/her labour, to determine his/her own lifestyle, to choose his/her spouse, to control his/her own offspring and so forth. Free persons are protected from physical abuse and have a range of political rights, which includes the freedom of speech, of religion, of association, and freedom from arbitrary arrest, embodied in the concept of the 'rule of law'. Communist writers and statesmen have argued that political rights are secondary to social and economic rights to sustenance, employment and equal opportunity. Asian statesmen and intellectuals have challenged some of the western human rights agenda on the grounds that primacy should be given to social and political stability and the well-being of the community.²

The definition of slavery has caused controversy since the beginning of the abolition process. Definitions have caused dissensions for two reasons: first, there are differences of

opinion about which practices should be categorised as slavery and thus designated for elimination; secondly, definitions have been accompanied by obligations on States to carry out particular remedial measures. There has invariably been disagreement about the most appropriate strategies to eradicate any form of slavery. A definition of slavery first appeared in an international agreement in the League of Nations Slavery Convention of 25th September 1926. It defined slavery as “the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised”. It further defined the slave trade as “all acts involved in the acquisition of a slave with a view to selling or exchanging him(her); all acts of disposal by sale or exchange of a slave acquired with a view to being sold or exchanged, and, in general, every act of trade or transport in slaves”. The convention also distinguished forced labour, stipulating that “forced labour may only be exacted for public purposes” and required States parties “to prevent compulsory or forced labour from developing into conditions analogous to slavery”.³ The Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery of 1956, went further and covered more ground than the 1926 Convention.⁴

- (a) Debt bondage, that is to say, the status or condition arising from a pledge by a debtor of his personal services or those of a person under his control as security for a debt, if the value of those services as reasonably assessed is not applied towards the liquidation of the debt or the length of those services are not respectively limited and defined.
- (b) Serfdom, that is to say, the condition or status of a tenant who is by law, custom or agreement bound to live and labour on land belonging to another person and to render some determinate service to such other person, whether for reward or not, and is not free to change his status .

What is a slave? He/she is someone who is the property of another person and entirely subject to him. He/her has to live with and work for someone else, often against his/her will. His/her children have the same fate and they, like him/her, can be bought and sold.

Servitude and Questions of Freedom: In Southeast Asia where nearly all members of society are embedded in webs of hierarchically structured groups, classes, or castes, it would therefore seem that the antithesis of slavery is not freedom, in the European Enlightenment sense of autonomous, self-directed, individual agency, but rather a state of complete detachment from such culturally specific webs. In other words, the slaves were in every instance relatively more dependent on the will and the power of someone else than were non-slaves. There was a virtually contractual relation between slaves and master, the slave owned obedience and loyalty as well as service and labour to the master, while the latter owned protection and support to the slave.

Complete freedom obviously exists only in theory. In practice free people even when defined in the western sense, do not have complete control over their lives, nor do they have equal social standing or material wealth. Their choices are limited by economic, social and political constraints. In certain societies they are also limited by the demands of race and

religion and or the demands of family or kin group, which in some cases has the power to sell or transfer their own members, just as fathers could sell their children in ancient Rome and in pre-communist China. In many societies, also, women do not have equal rights with men. Parents or guardians everywhere have certain rights over their children. Yet in spite of these constraints women, children, and other full members of families, kin groups and societies consider themselves to be free. The term therefore, may be taken to designate the norm in any society, and hence is culturally defined, but within certain limits. Thus, while different societies emphasise different essential features of freedom depending on their history, economic development, politics and culture, some forms of curtailment of personal liberties are universally considered to be forms of slavery. Thus chattel slavery is usually seen as the antithesis of freedom. A chattel slave is normally defined as someone under the complete domination of an owner who has power of life and death over him/her,⁵ can sell and transfer him/her at will and has full control over his/her daily and domestic life including his/her progeny. Moreover, his/her status is hereditary.

A common occurrence, noted in the Indo-China, the Burma-Thai border and Assam, was that people sold themselves or their children in times of distress such as famine or some other disaster. Slavery in such cases was sometimes justified as a form of 'poor relief.'⁶ This again raises the question of whether the method of acquisition determined slave status. Was a slave necessarily someone sold or otherwise acquired against his/her will; or was the defining characteristic how they were subsequently treated; or was it their legal status? Some were well treated and rose to high office. Women and children might be treated like full members of their adoptive kin group or families. Men might be indistinguishable in their daily lives from junior kinsmen. Observers sometimes said they could not distinguish the slaves from the free.⁷ Nevertheless, the difference between slaves and free was clear to both owners and slaves and it remained thus, long after the legal end of slavery.

Then there is the all-important question of whether slavery was necessarily a system of labour exploitation for economic motives or whether it had other equally important functions. One has to keep in mind that many South American Civilisations such as the Mayas and the Aztecs practiced large scale human sacrifice. Most of these humans sacrificed at the altars of the gods were either war captives or slaves from within their own communities who had been raised by their masters for the sole purpose of being sold for sacrifice, particularly young men. Then there is the question of whether slaves were always acquired by violence.⁸ The problem here is that many people enslaved themselves to escape starvation or to gain protection, or parents sold their children to improve their prospects or ensure their survival. The definition of violence, therefore, has to be stretched to include peaceful alienation from one's natal kin.

Forms of Servitude: Many studies have shown that slavery often existed side by side with debt bondage. Legally this is distinct from slavery because the servitude ended with the repayment of debt. However, this distinction was often more theoretical than real, as the debtor might never be able to repay the debt, which could be indefinitely inflated. Debt

bondage is a very common practice in Arunachal Pradesh, when an individual fails to pay a debt he/she is automatically recognised as a slave of the debtor. The debt could be a result of a number of circumstances and often it had nothing to do with economy. It may result from adultery and the adulterer if fails to pay the fine demanded by the so called victim may become a slave of the victim's family till he/she is further traded. Often the debtor's whole family laboured with him. His children might inherit his debt, or be forced to run into debt themselves in order to survive. A man might be in debt was not called a slave unless the debtor tried to leave. If a third party repaid the debt for him, they were considered to have 'bought' him. He was thus transferred.⁹ Debt bondage is an older institution than slavery. It also outlasted slavery as a legal status.

Slavery also existed side by side with serfdom. This term has been used almost as loosely as 'slavery'. A serf was usually conceived as different from a slave because he was in some way attached to the land. He was not saleable but could be transferred with the land. He could not leave and was bound to perform certain services for the landlord. His status was hereditary. However, his position varied in different societies. In Sumatra a serf is described as 'free as a chicken' rather than 'free as a bird.'¹⁰

Finding a universal definition of slavery is all the more difficult because it has been manipulated for political and social reasons. Michael Salman, writing on the Philippines, demonstrates how both Filipino nationalists and American politicians and officials defined it to suit their political aims. The Filipinos, anxious to gain independence from the United States, maintained that colonialism was slavery, and distorted historical records to show that chattel slavery had never existed on the islands. American administrators and politicians, on the other hand, ignored the existence of slavery until it suited them to use it to justify their war of conquest.¹¹

Similarly, anti-slavery ideology played an important role in justifying the European conquests of the nineteenth and twentieth century's. However, when it came to actually governing conquered territories, the colonial powers delayed taking action to end slavery for fear of antagonising the slave-owning elites, disrupting the economy, and being saddled with having to look after freed slaves. The British in India were particularly wary of antagonising the people in the frontier regions for fear that they would turn to neighbouring powers for support. In order to excuse inaction, the British redefined Indian slavery, resorting to euphemisms, describing it, for instance, as 'mild serfdom', or 'a form of poor law' or 'unpaid service.'¹² Moreover, administrators and other observers were want to call practices slavery without defining them and without any clear frame of reference, with the result that what one administrator might call slavery another might consider adoption or client-age, or even poor relief. Similarly explorers saw what they wanted to see. European administrators also had a culturally specific view of freedom- if a slave could leave his/her master and could earn a living and keep the proceeds, by western standards he/she was free, whereas, to the slave real freedom might require not just personal autonomy but complete

social and sometimes ritual, equality with the freedom. It might even involve renouncing certain freedoms.

Debating Slavery in Arunachal Pradesh: The institution of slavery has been practiced in Arunachal Pradesh from the remote past.¹³ Studies clearly indicate that the process for the emergence of slavery has many roots. It has rightly been argued that, the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh made many raids in the inoffensive plains. It is true that people were carried off as captives.¹⁴ In addition to the means of raids for slaves, there were other processes too, which brought free man into the fold of slavery. They were captured at war and were purchased. They were used to repay a debt by accepting servile condition under a master. Sometimes a freeman became a slave because he had committed a serious offense such as adultery, against the community and could not afford to pay the fine demanded. If a man could not pay the compensation demanded by the tribal council, the complainants might take him as a slave, and many more slaves today are the descendants of people who lost their social position in this manner.

Slavery in the fullest sense of the word has existed for ages in NEFA, but it is somewhat different from what once was practiced in the west. In the first place, it is on a comparatively small scale. It is estimated that some millions of slaves were imported into America during the period of the African slave-trade. In the whole of NEFA there are only a few thousand slaves, many of them in the very remote areas. The slave population of Lohit Valley was not more than two hundred. Secondly, there is no racialism in NEFA slavery. Western slavery took a darker tinge from the prevailing theory of the racial inequality. 'Negros', it was held, were only partly human; by becoming slaves they were expiating the sins of their fathers; they did not deserve the elementary human rights; even a freed slave was irrevocably an inferior being. Yet many of the American slaves were in practice well-treated as members of the family, and one of the arguments used by anti-Abolitionists was that the Negros liked being slaves and would only be unhappy if they were liberated.

In Arunachal Pradesh (formerly NEFA) too slaves often won a good position in their master's homes, and naturally, after a period of years, came to be accepted as members of the family. The owners provide his slave with food, clothing and shelter; he arranged his marriage and paid the bride-price. In some areas a slave was allowed to keep a part of any earnings he may receive. But, as in America, there is a strong taboo on social and sexual relations between slaves and free. As in America, there is an emphatic belief in the social inferiority of slaves and even a freed slave, though he may become headman of his village, is forever barred from marrying a girl of a free family. The status of a slave was suggested by the use of such words as 'dog' or 'fowl' to describe him- a dog or a fowl is something that is entirely in your power; you can sell or otherwise dispose of it as you will.

A slave by definition is something that can be bought and sold. Many NEFA slaves were used as merchandise, and in the course of a lifetime were bought and sold a dozen times. It is thus incorrect to say that there is no real slavery in NEFA and that the slaves should be

called serfs. It is true that slaves may, in many places, ransom themselves if they could find the necessary money. Inspired by the new ideas of human brotherhood, for slaves to demand their freedom; they escaped in greater numbers than formerly; and some slave-owners were seriously perturbed about the situation. The matter was complicated by the fact that a number of tribal employees, such as political Jamadars, and headmen who are recognised by the Government, themselves kept slaves, sometimes on a rather large scale. Since independence, in all areas that are fully administered, the Government has aimed at stopping traffic in slaves, the export of slaves across the borders of Tibet or Burma, and the capture of persons from the extortion of ransom. This has been almost entirely successful. The release of existing slaves, who have had this status for generations or on whom their masters have spent a good deal of money, is more complicated. Most of the slaves were in remote, areas where it would have been undesirable to cause economic or political disturbance.¹⁵ Slaves have been freed in the Subansiri Division, 6 in the Kameng, some hundreds in the Siang and 32 in Lohit.¹⁶ In some cases, liberated slaves have continued to work for their former masters with their new status, of their own free will. In other cases they have been helped to find a livelihood and settle down as free members of society. Some of the tribal groups have a sort of class system: for example, the Wanchos have three sharply defined classes between which inter-marriage is at least theoretically forbidden; the Sherdukpens and Buguns have a two class system; the Akas have three divisions- the aristocracy, the middle-classes and the slaves; the freed slaves of Siang forming a class above the slaves but below and separate from the rest of the population, but there has never been anything like real caste or un-touch-ability in NEFA.

Colonial anthropology viewed all tribal societies as egalitarian. Recent research has proven that there is no such thing as an absolutely egalitarian society.¹⁷ In the north-east particularly, tribal societies were mostly stratified and the Monpas and Sherdukpens were no exception. It was a highly polarised society divided between chiefs and commoners, slaves and commoners, and so on and so forth. Among the bonded and deprived classes were the Chaos, the Gilas and the Khulo. As the upper classes/castes among the Monpa, the Tawang Monastery and the Sherdukpens were semi-feudal structures, where the chiefs were not just leaders but were also economically and politically powerful, they came to own a lot of private assets in an economy otherwise characterised by communal ownership of property particularly landed property. One of the assets was human beings, or slaves or serfs.

Aka society freely entertains the idea of slavery. The slaves, known as *khulo*, are not a part of the society but form a separate class by themselves outside the social structure of the Aka, though living with them in the same village. The slaves are recruited usually from amongst the *Sulungs*. They may be purchased by the people from their Bangni neighbours against mithun and cloth. The common price for a slave is two mithuns and a piece of cloth; besides, a pig may be slaughtered to ceremonies the deed. The person once recruited as a slave remains a slave for the whole life, married only a slave girl and the children of the

slave parents inherit slavery from them as a liability. Even the remote generations of a slave can hardly hope to ever get rid of slavery. The slaves are allowed to marry within their own groups. They are not supposed to have any social relations with the master's society. Extra-marital relations of a slave with the woman of the master's family, or of the Aka society in general, are tried to be concealed in the first instance since the publicity of such an affair is only likely to result in social ridicule, which later may result in the slave being reprimanded by being resold. The *khulo* have to till the soil, look after the *pam*/barn and the *jhum* fields, the cattle and the household and do all such menial jobs as their masters may entrust to them. In return for their services, they are given food and clothing. The masters also help them in getting married in time, and as such, the liabilities of a slave go on increasing with each generation. The slaves, who may have inherited the bondage from their parents or may have been recently recruited, cannot hope to pay back the amount spend on them, apart from the obligations which they stand on their parents account, and have thus, to remain under slavery for the rest of their lives. Any hope of freedom from the bondage remains practically abandoned for them.

The general position of slaves in the Aka society is not as extreme as one might anticipate under the system. The *khulo* are virtually the menial servants with the further imposition that the services are compulsory. They are slaves in the sense that they do not have the right to decide for themselves, in other word they lack the right to choose. Again it comes with a social stigma which cannot be washed off in generations.¹⁸ Considering the great range of institutions and practices that have been labelled slavery and the fact they cannot all be encapsulated in one word with a concise definition, one must ask why we continue to use the term. The simple answer is that it gets attention. It evokes strong reaction in those accused of practising it, as well as in those who perceive themselves as victims. The reason being, that it is irrevocably associated in the public mind with the extreme deprivation and inhumanity of chattel slavery, particularly in the western world.

Colonial Encounter with Slavery in Arunachal Pradesh: At the international level, the League of Nations' Temporary Slavery Commission established in 1924 to investigate 'slavery in all its forms' had great trouble finding a definition that included all the forms they wished to attack. They ended by defining slavery as the 'status of a person over whom any or all of the powers of ownership' were exercised. They listed among 'all its forms' chattel slavery, domestic slavery, serfdom debt bondage, forced marriage, the adoption of children to exploit them, and forced labour. They knew that the colonial powers would not agree to a charter to protect native labour. One of the aims of this research is to document the remarkable range of types of slavery that appeared across the region over thousands of years. Some of these appeared at isolated moments, some spanned large swaths of time and space, while some occurred simultaneously with others. By far the largest number of both male and female slaves was war captives. In the sixteenth century, war captives in India's eastern hills were sold for coined silver. In the eastern India, ambitious chiefs gained leverage over famine-stricken families by supplying them with grain. When such families

subsequently attempted to repay the chiefs, the latter would refuse repayment on the grounds that the families had become their slaves. New paths leading from poverty to enslavement emerged with the rise of the British power in India. The British Government forced the East India Company to bond Indian servants to their English masters. Although the government's intent was to extend a measure of security to indigent Indian servants residing in England, the action effectively granted English masters proprietary rights over those same servants. And in eastern India, the colonial regime's introduction of commercial crops and its demand that taxes be paid in cash opened the door to unscrupulous moneylenders, who advanced cash to impoverished farmers while taking the latter's children as security. Similarly, when adults defaulted on their revenue payments, they themselves became bonded to petty revenue farmers.

In 1825, immediately after the provisional occupation of Assam, David Scott and Colonel Richards issued a joint proclamation notifying that "the rights of the Assamese to a property in their slaves would be respected." In the same year, a partial famine caused by the rapine of the Burmese and the allied hill tribes occurred in Assam. The condition was further deteriorated after the release of several thousand captives by the British from the Singphos. The common people in their state of absolute starvation soon started parting with their children by selling them. In order to save the starving free-population, Scott, the Commissioner of Lower Assam issued a proclamation permitting them to sell themselves to any person who would support them.¹⁹

British colonial officials in India's remote eastern hills connived at preserving what they were publically committed to ending. When slavery could be neither ignored nor disguised, however, it was rationalised. For their part British colonial officers, were always mindful of the horrors of the Atlantic plantation slavery, felt that slavery in India they governed was relatively "mild". Some like David Scott even persuaded themselves that for people facing the prospect of starvation, slavery actually represented a form of social welfare. The two primary mechanisms of enslavement were capture in war and impoverishment, had different implications for the slave's cultural position in their host societies. Those entering slavery from impoverishment were usually cultural 'insiders', since their masters tended to be nearby patrons, chiefs, money lenders, or tax farmers. Powerful local elites like these typically held impoverished subjects in a condition of debt bondage that was theoretically terminated upon paying off the loan. But in practice people held in debt bondage often slipped into a state of permanent, even inheritable, dependency and hence slavery.

In eastern hills under the British colonial rule, debt bondsmen who inherited their status from their parent failed to extricate themselves from the grip of their masters. War captives, by contrast, were normally outsiders to the culture of their host societies, at least originally. It was their uprooted and alien status that had made these outsiders vulnerable, and hence, dependent on their masters, which in principle ensured their loyalty to them. Although uprooted slaves began their career as cultural outsiders, they and especially their offspring did not remain such. One's origin could be forgotten over time or submerged by new

identities; one's career could evolve as one moved in time. All these categories were fluid, as historical processes pushed slaves towards even greater cultural and social assimilation with their host societies. One gets the sense, then, of slavery as very much a process of vast numbers of people moving through various kinds of slavery, with a range of different outcomes. Remnants of that generation nonetheless survived, as children of freed slaves, as our still found in a large number of villages around Dirang and Thembang. In one way or another, then, the descendants of slaves endeavoured to claw their way into mainstream society or, failing that, to carve out new identities for themselves, though with only varying of success in either endeavour. Slavery became a stigma that was almost impossible to wash away. Often in the case of Arunachal the mention of either one's name or the name of one's village was enough to establish one's identity as a freeman or a slave. Just as in north India one's surname is enough to confirm one's caste. Past instances of slavery in the north east India never present themselves through crystal-clear glass. What images we have must be painstakingly reconstructed from records that- when we have any at all- are typically fragmentary, opaque, and tainted by the politics of the day. But contemporary and subsequent observers often resorted to a number of rhetorical strategies when writing of slavery. Many simply ignored the phenomenon; when it could not be ignored, they distinguished it; and when it could not be distinguished, they rationalised it.²⁰

Slavery has also existed side by side with serfdom. This term has been used almost as loosely as 'slavery'. A serf was usually conceived as different from a slave because he was in some way attached to the land. He was not saleable but could be transferred with the land. He could not leave and was bound to perform certain services for the landlord. His status was hereditary. However, his position varied in different societies. Boomgaard states that serfs in Java may have been bound to a master rather than to the land. He also describes a 'more or less serf-like population' employed in making bricks among other things. In Sumatra he described as 'free as a chicken' rather than 'free as a bird'.²¹

There are some elements of comparable importance between the slave and the serf. First, the services that have to be provided by the serf are nearly always limited. Secondly, the serf, his being in effect bound to the soil, cannot be sold away from the land he works, and therefore, can marry and enjoy a family life. In these respects serf is better off than a slave. The vast majority of serfs were peasants. This means that they obtained their subsistence from a plot of land. Serfs had to provide for their own food and clothing. This was the essential feature differentiating serfs from slaves. The distinction between the two was also pointed out by the Anti- Slavery Society while the committee of the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations was preparing the preliminary draft of the convention in January 1956. The Society considers the inclusion of serfdom among the practices analogous to slavery as unfortunate. Yet serfdom is not slavery. It is a status intermediate between slavery and complete freedom. The members of the Society in their favour cite the opinion of J.K. Ingram. To quote Ingram, "an intermediate step which has not always, been sufficiently discriminated from slavery, though the confusion between the two leads to

endless misconception we mean serfdom.” Discussing the nature of serfdom. H.J. Nieboer has also expressed the same. He writes, “as soon as forced labourer is no longer entirely at the disposal of the lord, the latter being entitled to fixed services only, such a state of things is called serfdom but not slavery.”²² In 1900, H.J. Nieboer proposed a correlation between land use and agrarian slavery, arguing that when there is a shortage of labour and an abundance of accessible land, coercion- hence, “industrial” slavery-becomes necessary to keep cultivators on the land.²³ More recently another historian of Southeast Asia, Peter Boomgaard, has suggested a correlation between the extent of monetisation and debt bondage, arguing that since cash is at a premium in under monetised states, those who have it hoard it, which in turn drives up the interest rates, preventing peasants from repaying loans and forcing them into debt bondage. Boomgaard has also proposed that slaves are more likely found in weak than strong states, since weak rulers are less able to constrain their nobles from punishing their own underlings by enslavement. And he suggests looking at possible correlations between slavery and natural or man-made disasters, since people at such times can be expected to be more vulnerable and hence more likely than otherwise to sell themselves into debt bondage.²⁴ Such are some of the line of inquiry that both scholars of slavery and historians of South Asia have taken up.

The existence of forced labour together with slavery is also noted. Theoretically, forced labour differs from slavery because the labourers are free and are usually conscripted for a limited time. In practice, it may deteriorate into permanent bondage, as in Madagascar in the nineteenth century, and as Shigeru Sato believes it would have done in Indonesia had Japan not lost the Second World War.²⁵ The victims of forced labour, like persons in debt bondage, have often been more exploited and worse off than slaves. In theory, the servitude of a debtor, a forced labourer and a contract worker is temporary. Theoretically they are free when the debt is repaid, the contract expires or the job is done. Similarly, the ‘comfort women’ employed by the Japanese as ‘sex slaves’ to serve their troops would regain their freedom when grew old or ill.²⁶ None of these practices were hereditary, nor were the victims ‘owned’. However, many of the victims never achieved the freedom awaited them. They are often described as having been in ‘virtual slavery’- a term which emphasises the difficulty of drawing a clear line between the slaves and the free person. Finding a universal definition of slavery is all the more difficult because it has been manipulated for political, economic and social reasons. Michael Salman, writing on the Philippines, demonstrates how both Filipino nationalists and American politicians and officials defined it to suit their political aims. The Filipinos, anxious to gain independence from the United States, maintained that colonialism was slavery, and distorted historical records to show that chattel slavery had never existed on the island. American administrators and politicians, on the other hand, ignored the existence of slavery in Philippines until it suited them to use it to justify their war of conquest.

The British in India were particularly wary of antagonising the people in the frontier regions for fear that they would turn to neighbouring powers for support. In order to excuse

inaction, the British redefined Indian slavery, resorting to euphemisms, describing it, for instance, as ‘mild serfdom’, or ‘as a form of poor law’ or ‘unpaid service’. Non-western slavery was described as ‘benign’. The British even distinguished between permissible and other forms of slave trading- allowing for instance, the sale of women and children for domestic purposes but not for prostitution, and maintaining that it was permissible to sell a child for ‘adoption.’

Notes

1. Verrier Elwin, *A Philosophy for NEFA*, Itanagar, 2018, p. 46
2. Verrier Elwin, *A Philosophy for NEFA*, Itanagar, 2018, p. 231
3. Slavery, Servitude, Forced Labour and Similar Institutions and Practices Convention of 1926, League of Nations Treaty Series, Vol. 60, 9th March 1926 p. 235
4. Mohammed Awad, Report of the Special Rapporteur of the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, “Question of slave trade in all their practices and manifestations, including the slavery-like practices of apartheid and colonialism”, United Nations document E/CN.4/ sub.2/322 (1971), para.12
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7. Boomgaard’s article in *Slavery and Abolition*; Indrani Chatterjee, ‘Abolition by Denial: The South Asian Example’, in Campbell (ed.), *Abolition and its Aftermath*.
8. Delaye’s article in *Slavery and Abolition*.
9. As maintained by Claude Meillassoux, *Anthropology of Slavery*.
10. Indrani Chatterjee, *Abolition by Denial*.
11. Boomgaard’s article in *Slavery and Abolition*.

12. Michael Salman, 'the Meaning of Slavery: The Genealogy of "an Insult to the American Government and to the Filipino People"', in Campbell (ed.), *Abolition and its Aftermath*.
13. V. Elwin, *India's North East Frontier in the Nineteenth century*, Oxford University press, Madras, 1972 (1959) pp. 164 and 229; Verrier Elwin, *A Philosophy For NEFA*, Directorate of Research, Itanagar, 2018, p. 231
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19. For an interesting discussion of this point in relation to Africa see Carolyn A. Brown, 'Testing the Boundaries of Marginality: Twentieth Century Slavery and Emancipation Struggles in Nkanu, Northern Igboland, 1920-1929' in *Journal of African History*, 17, 37 (1996), pp.51-80.
20. Nirode K. Barooach, *David Scott in North East India 1802-1831*, OUP., New Delhi, 1970, p. 159
21. For details of the role of the Anti- Slavery Society see, C.W.W. Greenidge, pp. 23-26 and 74-79.
22. H.J. Nieboer, *Slavery as an Industrial System: Ethnological Researches* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1900). Arguing in a similar vein, Anthony Reid has recently suggested that in areas of low population density control of people is more important than is control of land, which in turn leads to coercive forms of labour. Anthony Reid, "The Decline of Slavery in Nineteenth-Century Indonesia," in Klein, ed., *Breaking the Chains*, 65.
23. Peter Boomgaard, "Human Capital, Slavery and Low Rates of Economic and Population Growth in Indonesia, 1600-1910," in Campbell, ed., *Structure of Slavery*, pp. 89-91
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27. Sajal Nag, *The Uprising*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2016, p. XIV
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