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VETHBIGIRI SYSTEM IN MARATHA KINGDOM



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ABSTRACT

Several Indian historians have done deep study of the 'feudal' structure of Indian society from the 6th century onward, and many aspects of the structure seem to have been clarified up to the Muslim conquest. Prof. R. S. Sharma, has pointed several characteristics consisting of feudalism in Indian history. Other historians of India likewise stressed certain feudalism in Indian polity during early medieval period, usually point out the existence of forced labour as one of the important aspects of the feudalism.² Whether the later medieval Indian polity is to be understood in terms of a concept of feudalism or something else, some scholars have pointed out prevalence of corvee requisitioned by political authorities from subjects in various parts of India, along with exactions of regular revenues, tributes, and miscellaneous dues. But to the best of my knowledge the exact position of this custom of forced labour has not yet been studied for any part of India during the period.

KEYWORDS: Vethbegar system, Several Indian historians, Maratha kingdom.

INTRODUCTION:

Accordingly this paper is an attempt for exposing the position of forced labour as it was practiced in the directly administered regions (swarajya) of the 18th century Maratha Confederacy on the basis of about fifty contemporary records collected from various Marathi source-books. This paper will focus firstly on the relationship between the forced labour and the caste system, and secondly on the freedom of people to migrate in the light of exactions of revenue, and so on.

WHAT IS VETHBEGARI?

1) The Vethbegari as practiced in the 18th century Maratha swarajya, was called either begar (a Persian term), or veth (derived from Sanskrit vishi), or compound of the two terms vethbigar.³ People who were engaged in such service are simply called either 'forced laborers' (begari), vethi, Corveei, 'men (asami), or rayat (or rayet) in our records. According to molesworth dictionary, 'vethkari' 'begari' means "A person pressed to carry a load or to render other service"⁴

2) About fifty records referred to above extend from 1720 to 1787 and cover all the major regions of swarajya⁵ hence they show the wide prevalence of the practice in the kingdom.

3) The corvee was exacted from villages, and it is not clear whether cities distinct from villages also bore the regular forced service.

4) Not all the people, who did not participate in state power, were imposed with the forced service. For instance, not only priestly Brahmans but also secular ones (e.g. landowners) were exempted from it by the government.

Besides, Kasars⁶ (Brassworkers) of Saswad region to the south of Poona were also permanently exempt from forced service, though the reason is not clear

ASPECTS OF VETHBIGARI:

We will first examine different kinds and amounts of forced labour and then try to find out connection between them and caste system on the basis of thirty records out of fifty, which are rather concrete in their contents. The thirty records may be itemized on the basis of various kinds of services as follows:

- a) Seven records pertaining to beggari exacted for construction or repair of forts Police- stations residences of local bureaucrats, as well as the dams.
- b) Six records regarding portorage of grains, timbers and other goods of government.
- c) Five records pertaining to beggari in cutting foddors (gavat) at government meadows scattered in various places.
- d) Five records concerned with miscellaneous labour at the local as well as the central government offices
- e) Two records related to miscellaneous labour and saddlery at government stables
- f) One record on free service of watchman ship at market places.
- g) Four records on forced labcor in inam villages; three of them on construction Of houses and one on portorage for the sake of inamdar.

Above itemization clearly shows that government imposed various kinds of forced labour upon the people both in the centre and in the countryside.⁷ It also suggest that corvee was hardly used for the cultrvation of state lands .people were pressed into service by central as well as local government, though it seems that villagers of a certain village were not engaged in the service continuously for a long time, but they were changed for next village.

More arbitrary exaction of forced labour was often practiced by local authorities, and people faced with the excessive demand of beggari. Sometimes petition was made to central government to reduce or stop it or simply they (vethi) ran away⁸

VETHBIGARI AND CASTE SYSTEM

Here we will begin with the Vethbegar in portorage (Item B) and cutting foddors (Item C). People who were engaged in such services are simply called either 'forced labourers' (begari, vethi, corveei), 'men' (asami), or rayat (or rayet) in our records. As is known, the term rayat⁹ means 'people' or 'subjects' in general and 'peasants' in particular at any rate it is not the name of any specific caste. Accordingly we may infer that the vethbegar in portorage and cutting foddors was not imposed upon any specific castes but upon the villagers as a whole whose main body is peasantry.

On the other hand, it is not clear what kind of people bore the service of watchmanship at market places (Item F). The situation in regard to construction and repair (Items A and G), miscellaneous labour at government offices (Item D) and miscellaneous labour and saddlery at stables (Item E) is, however, very remarkable in connection with caste system. In these items certain specific castes are clearly pointed out in the records as those who have been requisitioned in the different services : Sutars¹⁰(Carpenters), Kumbhars¹¹ (Makers of pots and bricks). Patharvat¹² (Masons), and Gavandi¹³ (Bricklayers) along with the forced labourers (vethes) and rayats in the case of construction and repair of buildings and dams (Items A and G); Mahars¹⁴ (untouchable caste engaged in miscellaneous menial labour such as sweeping the dirt and removing the dead animals, and so on) in 'the case of miscellaneous labour (rabanak or rebate) at government offices (Item D) and stables (Item E); and Chanbhars (untouchable caste occupied with leather works), Mangs¹⁵ (untouchable caste of rope-makers), and Jingars¹⁶(untouchable caste specializing in making bridles and saddles among the leather works) in the case of saddlery at government stables (Item E).so In these items not only the names of specific castes are mentioned but also the number of persons to be requisitioned from each district or from each village are also often specified in our records.

The fact that various artisan castes and untouchable ones were regularly pressed into forced service in

their respective traditional occupations by the government or by the privileged holders of villages either in field. They suggest an important role played by caste system in the total polity of Maratha Kingdom. The caste system did not only maintain a considerable self-sufficiency of services inside the village, but also was closely connected with the authorities and were utilized by the authorities through the system of forced labour.

VETHBIGAR AND FREEDOM OF PEOPLE:

Basic Attitude of Government towards vethbigari

People who bore all these burdens were necessarily to be protected by central government. And in fact the government seems to have always been cautious to see to it that people should not be 'harassed'¹⁷ (upadrav) or 'abscond'¹⁸ (paraganda) because of excessive demand of revenue, begari and so on. But the demand of begari by local bureaucrats and their subordinates tended to be so heavy that people sometimes resorted to absconding. In such cases the central government would command the local bureaucrats to reduce the demand down to the customary standard and levy the corvee only so much as required for the government works and with a due consent of hereditary officers of the place. And on the other hand government would order the headman of the village to bring back all those who had left the village for begari to their village. Many times people in a service of portage ran away on the way, the government imposed a certain amount of money upon their village and employed wage-labourers (mafardar) in their stead. Even when people did not run away but simply complained about excessive demand of vethbegar, government would accept the appeal and allow the people to pay a certain amount of money in lieu of the begari, although such a measure does not seem to have become perpetual but rather appear to have reverted to ordinary provision of labour after some years.¹⁹

Government not only occasionally allow the money-payment of vethbegar, but also specially reduced or cancelled the begari of the year from those masons, bricklayers etc. They were then incidentally employed in the construction of some donated temple, as well as from such villages as had been recently damaged by the army or had just entered the busy agricultural season. All the vethbegar were not unpaid but they were sometimes provided with a small amount of money or grains by the government.²⁰

In short, it seems that the principle of central government was not as good as required but it properly impose upon them all the customs up to the extent to which central government demanded or sanctioned.

CONCLUSION

Although the scope of our discussion has been limited to the 18th century Maratha Swarajya, the following points among others may have been made fairly clear: First, there was a strong financial connection between Maratha polity and caste system through the regular requisition of forced labour from artisan and menial castes by the authorities. Second, the people had their liberty of migration more or less restricted by the government because of the specific revenue systems on the one hand and the vested interests of privileged class on the other. And third, the institution in village community was utilized by ruling powers as the compulsory mechanism for procuring revenue, cesses and vethbegari.

When Maratha swarajya was annexed to British territories in 1817-18, the basic principle of the government of East India Company was to do everything possible 'to reassure people concerning the new government. As a result the government abolished vethbegari system to be used for government works, and in its stead levied from every government village a certain amount of money for fodders (gavat begar) and for miscellaneous labour (rabaniik). But vethbegari continued to be often requisitioned by low-class officers and soldiers of the government so that it had frequently to prohibit the abuse. On the other hand, government connived at the exaction of forced labour by indigent privileged class such as Deshmukhs, Deshpandes, inatudars, and so on for a long period of years. It was in 1860 that the government formally prohibited all sorts 'of forced labour as practiced in British India. The India Penal Code enacted in the year declared, 'whoever unlawfully compels any person to labour against the will of that person, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to one year, or with fine, or with both. Although private exaction of forced labour seems to have been occasionally practiced even after the promulgation of the Code, we may still observe in the provision one of the important aspects of transition from medieval to modern period in Indian

History.

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