
SLAVERY DURING THE PORTUGUESE RULE IN GOA

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Received: May 2019 Accepted: Jun. 2019 Published: Jul. 2019

Abstract: The institution of slavery has existed through times immemorial. In Portuguese Goa too, it mushroomed. There were various potential causes leading to slavery. Portugal was one of the pioneers in slave trade, with special ships transporting these slaves to the various colonies of Portugal. There was the auction of slaves, which was a traumatic experience especially for the female slaves. Prices offered for slaves fluctuated, but most often the male slaves were more expensive, than their female counterparts. Slaves performed various tasks, some of them even serving as soldiers and sailors for the Portuguese army. The exploitation of slaves was rampant and it was heart-rending, though there were a few slave owners, who did adopt a more humanitarian approach towards their slaves. Each Portuguese family owned a large number of slaves; the number would enhance their social status. Several measures were passed to deal with the lawlessness of slaves. The Church also played its part with regard to the slaves. It sympathized with the slaves no doubt, though it did not condemn this institution. Eventually slavery was abolished by the King of Portugal in the mid-nineteenth century.

Keywords: Auction, Church, Exploitation, Portuguese, Slaves.

Introduction: Through times immemorial, the institution of slavery has existed the world over. Portuguese Goa was no exception. It was a highly commercialized institution- a thriving business here, wherein humans were bought by another and treated as living properties of the owners.

Factors Leading to Slavery: There were various criteria which led one to being converted a slave, the usual way being through war. Those defeated in a war i.e. war captives, were doomed to become the slaves of the victorious. Further, all the dependents of the defeated, were also enslaved. This infact, was the general norm of a war, and this was the best legal way of acquiring a huge number of slaves.

Other factors leading to slavery were: the inability to repay one's debts, poor parents selling off their children in times of crisis and calamities.

Illegal means were also employed to obtain slaves, because of the greed to own slaves, as it would increase one's status and reputation. There were times when local agents were employed to kidnap children from reputed families, and then sell them into slavery; such incidences were more frequent in China, after which, these children were sold to the Portuguese.

The Portuguese adopted strategies, where they trapped vulnerable villagers and forced them on board the ships, especially so in Bengal, Malabar, Gujarat and other places in India. At times, by virtue of race, colour, caste, people were roped into slavery. These were some potential causes leading to slavery.

Also the barter, smuggling and tribute system were used to obtain slaves. In North Senegal, slaves were frequently bartered for horses, at the rate of five or six slaves per horse. At other times, slaves, gold or ivory were exchanged for beads or cotton textiles of India. This was compulsory among the Bantu tribes.

There were times when the Portuguese took advantage of certain natural calamities- such as famines, droughts, epidemics etc- to fulfill their need for slaves. So when such disasters occurred in Goa, Coromandel coast and other places, they would send commodities like rice, coconuts etc, in exchange for a ship load of slaves. These slaves were exchanged either for cash or for goods. Because slaves were so freely available, they were even gifted to others.

Portugal Active in Slave Trade: One of the earliest pioneers in this field was Portugal, right from the 15th century. The Portuguese were the first to carry away slaves from the East and West Africa to the European and Asian markets. The ruler who boosted this trade was Prince Henry, who urged his captains not only to conquer lands, but also to get samples of the locals of the lands that they conquered or discovered.

So not only were Africans subjected to slavery, but people of other nationalities as well, including Indians, then became prized possessions of their merchandise and were sold as slaves. Special slave agents called *pombeiros* were appointed to deliver these *pecas* (pieces) to the various Portuguese colonies. Incidentally, slaves were referred to by such terms. The *pombeiros* were *mulattos*.

The slaves were transported by ships called *navios tumbeiros* (coffin ships). Huge was the demand for negro slaves; they were purchased by the Portuguese in Goa. Infact, Goa became the centre of slave trade at the end of the 16th century, along with horse trade. A single frigate coming to Goa, carried as many as 207 negro slaves in 1683, out of which, some of these negroes were the possession of the crew members of the frigate, who traded in slaves, free of freight charges, while there were some others who brought down slaves for sale, paying a duty charge of five *xerafins* per slave.

Price Offered for Slaves: The Portuguese who heavily depended on slave labour, were ready to pay any amount to own slaves. The prices of slaves fluctuated according to the traits, race and availability of slaves. The value of male slaves was double that of female slaves, because they were more strong and could undertake hard tasks as compared to female slaves. But in general, negro slaves popularly known as black ivory did carry a heavy price, their price having shot up from 20 to 30 *pardaos*, in the last quarter of the 17th century to 80 to 90 *pardaos* by mid-17th century.

The price increase was accelerated, due to the heavy demand for slaves. These negro slaves outstood for their muscle power, besides other qualities which were inborn to them. For instance, the slaves of Sudan were very hardworking, robust and intelligent. The Congo and Angolan slaves could be employed as team labour. The Senegalese were remarkable for their intelligence and sincerity in domestic work, while the Koromantes of the Gold Coast were

given household chores, because they too were known for their loyalty to their masters. The Bantus on their part, also did their best for their owners, having always a gleeful adjusting disposition, but they were susceptible to diseases, being a weaker race than the rest of the negro slaves.

Slaves Serving as Soldiers and Sailors: The negro slaves were ever ready and capable of taking up any role that was exacted from them, so much so that they were even ready to be recruited as sailors or to serve in the army. As a matter of fact, the garrison of the *Estado da India* included African recruits known for their warlike skills. Being aware of their hardy nature, the Governor of Macao too, appealed in 1651, for a negro battalion, as a part of his army.

Report of the Foreign Traveller Careri: Carreri, a foreigner who visited Goa in 1695, in the second half of the 17th century, reports there were sizeable number of African slaves called *Kafiris*, from the Arabic word *Kafir*. They were usually bought by Arab merchants or by Muslim officials serving the Adil Shah.

Besides the African slaves, there were slaves from various other nationalities and races such as those from Assam, Bengal, Canara coast, Malabar, Malaya, China, Persia etc. The Chinese slaves were well utilized by the Portuguese, not only because of their intelligence, hard work, loyalty, but also because of their culinary skills. They were employed in Portuguese households as cooks. The slaves of Assam too, had their own advantages. They not only had the physical strength, but they could endure the hardships of life. As such, they were in great demand with high rates. The *Kunbis* of Goa were treated as bonded labourers and sent to Ceylon to cater to agricultural needs.

Female slaves too were well wanted, so much so that the number of male and female slaves imported into Goa, was almost equal. The Habshi female slaves, were regarded as an outstanding commodity, by virtue of their attractive, shapely body. So there was a huge demand for them in the market. Not far were the Chinese slave girls, who were exported from Macao through Goa, to the various Portuguese settlements for sale. This was an attractive, profitable and adventurous business. Those indulging in such trade including the pilot of the ship, would earn a sizeable revenue. Selling two girls would fetch them 3000 *xerafins*. This motivated them to make more such trips.

Auction of Slaves: The auction, barter or sale of slaves was held in a place called *Praca de Leitao*, situated on the *Rua Direita* (a straight road from the palace of the Viceroy to the Church of Misericordia), which was one of the main commercial streets of the City of Goa. It was known not only for the sale of slaves, but also other products that came from Europe and India. It was a bustling street, except on Sundays and some public holidays.

The auctioning of slaves was a traumatic experience for most of the slaves. The seller shouted out aloud the quality, strength, skills, of the slaves who were to be sold. The way these slaves, especially the female slaves were displayed was agonizing. Very often, she was exhibited stark nude, to attract customers and to fetch a high price. Virgin slaves were also an attraction, but they were examined by a female expert to prove the same. Many of these slaves were highly gifted in music, embroidery and cooking skills. Beauty and talent together, was the criterion for her price tag.

The way the slaves were scrutinized by potential buyers crossed all limits of sanity. They were thoroughly checked head to toe, their mouths were forcibly opened to count their teeth. They were forced to walk or run to check their fitness and slapped on their backs to test their endurance. Thus every aspect was minutely verified for deformities. Only then would the buyer negotiate the price with the slave seller.

The prevalence of slave prostitution was characteristic in a society thriving on slaves. Most of these young attractive negro slaves known as *Morenas*, were used as mistresses for sexual affairs, by the Portuguese men who preferred such flitting affairs, rather than a settled married life. Many Portuguese men including the *soldados* bought a number of female slaves to have affairs with them, rather than lead a married life. They believed it was no sin to have an affair with a slave girl, provided she was a spinster or a widow. Some mothers even forced their female slaves to yield to the amorous advances of their sons, as they believed this would satisfy the sexual needs of their sons within the four walls of the house, rather than public display of affection, which could tarnish their popular image. Some female slaves worked as vendors selling fruits, pastries and were engaged in prostitution as well. Such a promiscuous society not only destroyed family life, but resulted in the emergence of mixed offspring. This was rampant in the mid-17th century.

The Portuguese settlers in Goa, owned a large number of slaves, on an average ten per household.

Number of Slaves Owned- Status Symbol: Careri the traveler reports that the Portuguese had at least thirty to forty slaves out of which at least six to twelve would be involved in very demeaning works such as carrying their umbrellas, and *andora* (a type of litter). No wages were paid to these slaves, except a dish of rice at noon and another at night. The more the slaves they owned, greater was their prestige and social status. A *Juiz Ordinario* in the *Camara* (Municipal Chamber) owned more than eighty-five female slaves, while a *Disembarqador* had more than sixty slaves. The Governor and Captain alone had thirty to forty negro slaves, besides servants, all of whom were paid by the Government. Even a Portuguese common man owned fifteen to twenty-nine female slaves. This lavish lifestyle maintained for the sake of social status and prestige, was one of the most important features of the Portuguese colonial rule in Asia, Africa and South America.

Della Valle, yet another traveler, observes that more than a quarter of the population i.e. 1,90,000 of the City of Goa were *mulattos*. The French traveler Pyrard de Laval seconds Della Valle stating that, indeed the number of black slaves in the City of Goa had increased.

Tasks that the Slaves were Subjected To: The slaves were not only used for domestic work, but also as farm-labourers and other manual jobs. Further, the nobles lived on the income earned from the labour of slaves. Sturdy male slaves were hired out to work for others, or sent as *bois* (palanquin-carriers). The female slaves were sent to sell farm products such as fruits, paddy, vegetables, flowers and fancy home-made food items. Some female slaves were decked in such a way, so as to entice young men and please their customers. They served in shops, battlefields, fortresses, ships etc. In the ships, they scrubbed the decks and on the arrival of the ship, the cargo was unloaded and the goods carried by the slaves, to their destination. This was done in a unique way. A long bamboo stick was shouldered by two or four men and the goods were suspended from the stick. This lightened the burden, and all along lively songs were sung.

Many slaves were engaged in various crafts such as baking, distillation of liquor, tanning, shoe-making etc. Whenever their masters went out, some of the slaves carried their *sombreiros* (umbrellas), to protect them from the weather outside. Other slaves marched ahead of their masters, armed with swords, daggers and guns to protect their masters. If the *fidalgo* (nobleman) saddled himself on a horse, two of his slaves would march on either side. Some slaves would carry their mistresses in palanquins, to social gatherings and market place, carrying the former's accessories and even holding the long gown to maintain it clean, while others would accompany them on foot. Male slaves in Goa, who carried the various modes of transport, such as palanquins, *andores*, for their masters and mistresses, were called *boyes* or *bois*.

All domestic chores were completed by them, which included washing the linen, carrying water from Bainguinim, cleaning, cooking, making syrups, pickles, preservatives, sewing, embroidery works and even entertaining their masters and mistresses, by singing songs or playing musical instruments. Some female slaves were even used as wet and dry nurses. In short, they were like the hands and feet of their owners.

But inspite of all this, the life of a slave was governed by his master, he being subjected to cruelty, harshness and ill treatment. Flogging and scarring the backs of slaves, had become the order of the day. Their wounds were washed with vinegar or brine, and at times, they were crippled, maimed or even killed. Every slave was branded in order to deter his escape, at the same time constantly being reminded, that if he ever tried escaping, the punishment would be extremely severe. Manucci- the traveler had witnessed *fidalgos* even ordering their slaves to fire at passers-by or to plunder at night.

Exploitation of Slaves: It was heart-rending to see, slaves being sold either individually or in groups, without the least concern for their family bondings- husband being separated from his wife, child being separated from his mother.

There are instances of exploitation of slaves, as reported by Dom Ignacio de Santa Tereza- Archbishop Primate of Goa. The Portuguese men would exploit the female slaves, while massaging their bodies. At other times, married women would feel threatened, if their husbands eyed female slaves, that they would flog the girls to death and then bury their corpses in the garden at night. Careri- a 17th century traveler corroborates with the Archbishop and states that he was a witness to such horrendous atrocities. Truly, their torture was unending.

Yet another Jesuit priest of the 17th century- Francisco de Souza, regrets the prevalence of sexual promiscuity in the *Estado da India* and the sexual excesses committed by the Portuguese soldiers. Hence the Ecclesiastical Councils, passed stringent laws to protect female slaves, laying down that those of them under the age of fifty, were not to flaunt their feminine attributes or sell their master's goods in the streets or sleep outside their houses.

A slave was not allowed to carry weapons, because by chance if he hurt a white man while carrying the same, the act was most unpardonable. The punishment called for cutting off the right arm of the slave, followed by sending to the galleys for ten years.

Still more tyrannical was the law passed on 9th January 1645, by Viceroy Dom Felipe Mascarenhas (1645-1651), which forbid a slave from even raising his hand against a white man, the punishment in such cases being capital punishment.

Slaves were ferried to various colonies of Portugal in the worse of conditions. They were packed many at a time, in dirty, dark compartments like animals, so they were prone to catching infectious diseases, and very often died during the course of their journey.

Others tried escaping, and on finding their long-lasting freedom, took up to all sorts of vices. They committed crimes including robberies, murders and the like. They targeted their former masters, to avenge the humiliation they had faced. Incidences of plunder, stealing and dead soldiers lying on the streets, had become a common phenomenon during the rule of Viceroy Dom Filipe Mascarenhas.

Measures Passed to Deal with Lawlessness of Slaves: To deal with this lawlessness, the Viceroy issued orders that no slave owners would allow their slaves to move outdoors beyond 8 at night, or else they would be killed. Indeed, 250 slaves were killed one night, for having violated this order.

In spite of such a rigid measure, yet slaves bypassed this order. Hence, again in the 17th century, Viceroy *Conde de Alvor* passed a regulation in 1681, that if a slave moved out at night, beyond the signal bell for retirement, he would be imprisoned for two months, in addition to paying a fine of fifty *xerafins*.

No slave was permitted to carry arms, except when he moved with his master, and if he did so, the punishment would be severe. Further, treaties were signed in 1628 and 1714 with local chiefs, enforcing on them to capture slaves, who had escaped from Goa.

Humanitarian Approach of Some Slave Owners to their Slaves: In spite of all this inhuman treatment meted to slaves, it is interesting to note, that there were quite a few slave owners, who considered it a moral obligation, to maintain their slaves well. They would be well fed by their masters. In fact, some food items such as manioc, maize, sweet potatoes and citrus fruits, were shipped all the way from Portugal, as these were largely consumed by the slaves. Also money was regularly spent on fish and tobacco, consumed by slaves, as seen from the list of expenses of the various colleges and convents.

Further, they were also provided a cheap alcoholic drink, known as *Orraca*. Each slave was given two or three pieces of cloth to cover himself. The male slaves covered their bodies with a small piece of cloth up to the knee and tied a colorful cloth around their waist. The use of such minimum clothing, was perhaps due to the hot, humid climate of Goa. The female slaves on the other hand were fashionable and wore ornaments, some of which were valuable, perhaps gifted to them, by their owners. If a slave died, the master would perform his last rites.

But all said and done, however good a master treated his slave, a slave continued a slave all his life. He had no choice of occupation, no right to property or marriage. His progeny inherited his status. His destiny was manipulated by his master, like a puppet on a string. He was merely a commodity to be bought, sold or inherited, and formed the lowest rung of the social ladder.

The Stand of the Church towards the Slaves: As regards the attitude of the Church towards the slaves, the clergy was most interested in baptizing slaves, in the belief that the latter too, were the sons of God. No sooner was a potential slave caught, he was first converted, before being sold in the slave market, as evident from the baptismal records, showing the conversion of slaves. In the course of the voyage itself, the slaves were indoctrinated with the Christian doctrine.

The clergy requested the slave owners to be kind to their slaves, not to torment them with cruel punishments, to give them food and clothing, and fervently appealed to them to send their slaves for catechism classes, to know more about their religion. Through bible studies, the clergy would make the slaves aware of their self-dignity. When in trouble, slaves would take recourse to the clergy and seek asylum in their convents.

The clergy worked for the welfare of the slaves and became their best friends. They, especially the Jesuits who were well-versed in different vernacular languages, would communicate with the slaves, in languages known to the latter, and thereby establish a close rapport with them.

The cause of the galley slaves was taken up by the Church. They were sentenced to work in dockyards and were locked up in the *bhangasala*, which was a store-house, close to where the galleys were attached. It was used more to arouse a sense of fear, amongst these prisoners, who were kept in isolation here, fastened to the iron chains, attached to the walls of the *bhangasala*. The Jesuit priests would clean up the place once a week, and even fasted on certain days, to save money for the galley slaves.

Efforts of the Provincial Councils: The Provincial Councils-chaired by the Archbishop- held in Goa, requested the King of Portugal and Viceroy, to enact laws that would safeguard the slaves from cruel punishments. Hence the King had issued a decree on 26th January 1599, forbidding the torture and killing of slaves, and if such a death did occur, to report it to the secular authorities.

The Second Provincial Council also condemned the treatment meted out to the galley slaves, and urged the authorities to release them from the *bhangasala* and then hand them over to their masters.

Several Religious Orders who had their monasteries and convents in Goa, came forward to reach out to the slaves. They converted these slaves, sheltered them and even trained them in several skills, the Dominicans in particular, as reported by Careri. According to their aptitude, they were taught carpentry, masonry, bakery, music, while some of the female slave girls were helped to marry and settle down in life. A special confraternity of negroes known as the Confraternity of Our Lady of Rosary was set up, in order to engage the services of negroes for religious activities.

The irony of this is that although the Church did sympathize with the slaves, yet it did not really condemn this institution. On the contrary, the different Religious Orders, convents, monasteries, hospitals, the Holy House of Mercy, all employed them. The Holy House of Mercy had about 200 slaves, the Convent of Santa Monica had around 120, while St. Paul's College had 200.

The Church allowed a Portuguese man to retain his slave, if the latter belonged to any of the below mentioned categories-if the slave was born of slave parents, if he had been captured in a war, if he had freely sold himself due to adverse conditions, or was sold by his parents, due to

poverty and if he was sentenced to slavery for some crime. The Portuguese considered this slave venture of theirs, as one which would fulfill both-their economic and religious needs. It was a very profitable trade, and at the same time, by converting slaves, they won souls for Christ.

End of Slavery in Goa: The first statesman in Portugal to take a daring step towards the abolition of slavery in Goa was *Marquez de Pombal* (1750-1777), the Prime Minister of Portugal. His attempt however did not succeed initially, though it paid off as late as 1869, when the King of Portugal did abolish slavery in all the Portuguese colonies.

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