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Exploring Slavery Practices in 19th Century Bengal: Insights from Two Unpublished Human Sale Deeds at the Bangladesh National Museum

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Abstract

This study explores the historical significance of two unpublished human sale deeds, dated 1214 and 1215 (1807-1808 AD), preserved in the Bangladesh National Museum. Collected in 1980 AD from Mymensingh District of Bangladesh, they provide significant insight into the practice of self-slavery in Bengal during the early 19th century under British colonial rule. Written in Bengali and Sanskrit using the 19th century Proto-Bengali script, these deeds reveal the dire socio-economic conditions that compelled individuals to sell themselves or their family members into servitude in exchange for basic necessities such as food, clothing, and minimal monetary price. Employing a qualitative research approach, this study integrates document analysis, translation, and historical contextualization to interpret the texts and explore their legal, socio-economic, and cultural implications. The findings indicate that the devastating consequences of the Famine of 1770, the exploitative revenue system formed by the Permanent Settlement of 1793, and deep-rooted inequalities within rural society contributed to an environment in 19th century Bengal where survival often necessitated the forfeiture of personal freedom. By situating these findings within the broader context of global discussions on slavery, the research challenges the dominant colonial narratives of progress and highlights the inequality and labor exploitation in contemporary society.

Keywords: Self-slavery, Human Sale Deeds, Bangladesh National Museum, East India Company, Colonial Economic Policies

1. Introduction

The colonial period in Bengal was marked by immense socio-economic turmoil, characterized by widespread poverty, systemic exploitation, and environmental disasters. While the larger frameworks of British colonial policies, such as the Dual Administrative System of 1765 and Permanent Settlement of 1793, have been extensively studied, the lived experiences of marginalized individuals during this era remain underexplored. Both systems established the foundations of self-slavery in India through their changes to land ownership and taxation systems which harmed traditional farming communities. The British Permanent Settlement introduced a land revenue system that granted zamindars the power to collect taxes from peasants on behalf of the British, while subjecting the peasants to heavy burdens.[1] Land ownership shifts during this period led to massive property transfers, affecting half to one-third of all Bengal lands over twenty years, thereby dissolving the traditional aristocracy and forming new social groups.[2] The peasants entered a vicious cycle of debt because they were forced to fulfill excessive revenue obligations, which ultimately led to their enslavement under exploitative labor conditions that scholars describe as self-slavery.[3] This was the most harrowing manifestation of their plight, where individuals and families, pushed to the brink of survival and left with no other option, sold themselves into servitude in exchange for basic sustenance.

Historically, slavery in Bengal was shaped by a variety of factors, including economic demands, colonial influences, and social hierarchies. The history of slavery in South Asia is intricately tied to the region's role as a major center of trade and commerce. Ibn Batuta, during his travels in the 14th century, observed the prevalence of slavery in Bengal, a region deeply integrated into both local and international trading networks. He highlighted Bengal's status as a major center for trade and commerce, where the demand for labor promoted the practice of enslaving individuals. The region's involvement in international sea-borne trade and the impact of local warfare created a burgeoning labor market, leading to increased instances of slavery as a response to these pressures.[4] During Sultanate period, the slavery hold a strong position in the Indian society as there was a ruler class composed of emancipated slave, the Mamluk dynasty. Slavery under the Mughals was multifaceted, shaped by both social and economic phenomena. Freed male slaves (chelas), freed slave-girls (sahelis), and eunuchs (khwajasaras) often lived in conditions like slavery due to their dependence on masters and roles ranging from domestic service to administrative duties.[5] During the 16th to 18th centuries, European slave traders transported large number of enslaved people from Bengal and other parts of India, highlighting the subcontinent's significant role in global chattel labor dynamics.[6] The condition of slavery in British India was complex and full of hardship. It was characterized by both domestic

[1] Virender Singh, "Study of Economic Impact of British Colonial Rule," *ACADEMICIA an International Multidisciplinary Research Journal* 11, no. 8 (January 1, 2021): 1–2, https://doi.org/10.5958/2249-7137.2021.01762.6.

[2] Ratna Ray, "Land Transfer and Social Change Under the Permanent Settlement: A Study of Two Localities," *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 11, no. 1 (January 1, 1974): 1–45, https://doi.org/10.1177/001946467401100101.

[3] Michael Mann, "A Permanent Settlement for the Ceded and Conquered Provinces: Revenue Administration in North India, 1801-1833," *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 32, no. 2 (June 1, 1995): 245–69, https://doi.org/10.1177/001946469503200205; Md. Sohanuzzaman, "Cirosthayi Bondobasto Prathar Provab O Protikria: Bibhutibhuson Bondopaddayer Aronyak (Bangla)," *The Arts Faculty Journal* 13, no. 18 (January 31, 2024): 215–26, https://doi.org/10.62296/kop20241318012.

[4] Rila Mukherjee, "Mobility in the Bay of Bengal World," *Indian Historical Review* 36, no. 1 (June 1, 2009): 109–29, https://doi.org/10.1177/037698360903600107.

[5] Lubna Irfan, "Nature of Slavery and Servitude in Mughal India," *South Asian History and Culture* 13, no. 4 (September 2, 2022): 466–80, https://doi.org/10.1080/19472498.2022.2120243.

[6] Richard B. Allen, "Exporting the Unfortunate: The European Slave Trade from India, 1500–1800," *Slavery and Abolition* 43, no. 3 (July 3, 2022): 533–52, https://doi.org/10.1080/0144039x.2021.2008719.

servitude and systemic labor exploitation. Domestic slaves, often conflated with servants, were integral to Anglo-Indian households from 1780 to 1830, where they were perceived as dependent subordinates, particularly women.[7] The wrap of slavery was significantly reshaped during the British colonial rule in south Asia, from mid-18th century until 1947.

This study focuses on two unpublished human sale deeds from Mymensingh district of Bangladesh preserved in the Bangladesh National Museum, dated 1807 and 1808, which shed light on the nature of human transactions in early 19th century Bengal. Written in both Bangla and Sanskrit, these documents provide rare and invaluable insights into the socio-economic desperation that compelled individuals to make such extreme sacrifices. Deciphering these texts reveals not only the terms and conditions of these transactions but also the broader socio-political and environmental contexts that shaped them. The devastating aftermath of the Famine of 1770, the exploitative revenue systems of the colonial administration, and the entrenched inequalities within rural society collectively created conditions where survival often came at the cost of freedom. This study seeks to enrich our understanding of the multifaceted nature of slavery and servitude under British rule by situating these documents within the broader context of colonial policies, indigenous structures.

2. Literature Review

South Asian slavery in Bengal throughout history has developed into a crucial part of historical development that affected both the social structure and economic management. The European slavers used local practices to create their own slave system which consolidated caste hierarchies while structuring economic markets and transforming social relationships.[8] This region developed multiple types of slavery which progressed throughout history into agricultural, military and domestic forms.[9] Most subcontinent slaves who were women and children worked as military personnel or domestic servants rather than in agricultural fields.[10] The different types of servitude existed in deep connection with both societal political structures and regional power dynamics and cultural norms.

Slavery had significant impact in the labor relations alongside with defining the social structure. Social status of the enslaved person was placed at the bottom of the social strata. Such transformations, in consequence, influenced the history and culture in the respect of memory and identity.[11] Colonial policy of commercializing agriculture only deepened the use of slavery as agriculture required higher output due to new economic circumstances.[12] It influenced the local economic productivity by enslavement of men, women and children for labor, agriculture and domestic work in Bengal.[13] The social impact of the slave trade on local societies of Bengal involved demography, social relations as well as cultures. Bengal in the early modern period observed forced migration of individuals, specifically through slavery affected community disruption whereby hundreds of thousands of

[7] Margot Finn, "Slaves Out of Context: Domestic Slavery and the Anglo-Indian Family, C. 1780–1830," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 19 (December 12, 2009): 181–203, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440109990090.

[8] Ekama, Kate, Lisa Hellman, and Matthias Van Rossum. Slavery and bondage in Asia, 1550–1850. De Gruyter eBooks, 2022. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110777246

[9] Kate Ekama, Lisa Hellman, and Matthias Van Rossum, *Slavery and bondage in Asia, 1550–1850*, *De Gruyter eBooks* (De Gruyter, 2022), https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110777246.

[10] Indrani Chatterjee and Richard M. Eaton, "Slavery and South Asian history," University of Arizona, 2006, https://experts.arizona.edu/en/publications/slavery-and-south-asian-history.

[11] Madhwi, "Collective Memory, Identity and the Legacies of Slavery and Indentured," *South Asian Diaspora* 16, no. 2 (May 22, 2023): 282–84, https://doi.org/10.1080/19438192.2023.2215042.

[12] Sugata Bose, *Peasant Labour and Colonial Capital*, 1993, https://doi.org/10.1017/chol9780521266949.

[13] Allen, "Exporting the Unfortunate: The European Slave Trade from India, 1500–1800."

people were shifted to variably to the Indian Ocean world.[14] Due to demographic changes, there was a scarcity of labor, particularly in agriculture and other industries, disrupting the livelihood and economic systems of many local communities.[15] The slavery fostered a culture of violence and instability, with local population often subjected to raids and abductions to meet the demands of the slave market.[16]

The legal framework governing slavery in Bengal during the early 18th century was complex and distinct from that of other colonial powers. Bengal slavery had two broad categories: domestic and agricultural, but there was no parity in the laws governing both. This contrasted with the more codified systems in European colonies like those of the English, French, and Dutch, where slavery was often legitimized through formal legal frameworks.[17] The East India Company functioned amid such legal indeterminacies: it aided slave trading, although it sometimes failed to distinguish between local practices.[18] Sometimes, it was also legal to enslave the entire village of accused dacoits or other criminals as punishment for dacoity and many other heinous offenses.[19]

Despite the detailed accounts of the global slave trade, existing literature often neglects the local practices of slavery and enslavement in eastern Bengal. One has to admit that the notion mostly stresses the transoceanic dynamics, whereas the specific legal and social contexts of the localized enslavement still fail to attract sufficient attention. For instance, while maritime slavery captured much attention in Bengal, very little was said about how slavery operated within agrarian or domestic systems in Bengal, especially in view of hereditary bondage and its effects on families.[20] This gap in the literature leaves important questions unanswered about how colonial policies interacted with indigenous practices to shape the institution of slavery.

Thus, this study aims to fill this gap by examining two human sale deeds from Mymensingh collected at the Bangladesh National Museum. These documents are unique and reveal important truths about the localized practice of slavery in colonial Bengal. They explain the socio-economic factors that acted as forces leading people into servitude, the practice of human transactions through legal conveyance, as well as the slaves' perspective. By placing these findings in the context of colonial policies and indigenous cultures, the study offers a new perspective on slavery in South Asia, which challenges previous approaches and enriches the field of historiography.

[14] Allen, "Exporting the Unfortunate: The European Slave Trade from India, 1500–1800."
[15] Mukherjee, "Mobility in the Bay of Bengal World."
[16] Titas Chakraborty, "Slave trading and slave resistance in the Indian Ocean world: the case of early eighteenth-century Bengal," *Slavery and Abolition* 40, no. 4 (May 2, 2019): 706–26, https://doi.org/10.1080/0144039x.2019.1606525.
[17] Filip Batselé, "The legal and institutional framework of slavery," in *Studies in the History of Law and Justice*, 2020, 13–62, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-36855-5_2.
[18] Chakraborty, "Slave Trading and Slave Resistance in the Indian Ocean World: The Case of Early Eighteenth-Century Bengal."
[19] Chakraborty, "Slave Trading and Slave Resistance in the Indian Ocean World: The Case of Early Eighteenth-Century Bengal."
[20] Indrani Chatterjee, *Slavery and the Household in Bengal, 1770-1880*, *Google Books* (University of London (School of Oriental and African Stuidies), 1996), https://books.google.com.bd/books/about/Slavery_and_the_Household_in_Bengal_1770.html?id=t9uD0AEACAAJ&redir_esc=y.

3. Method

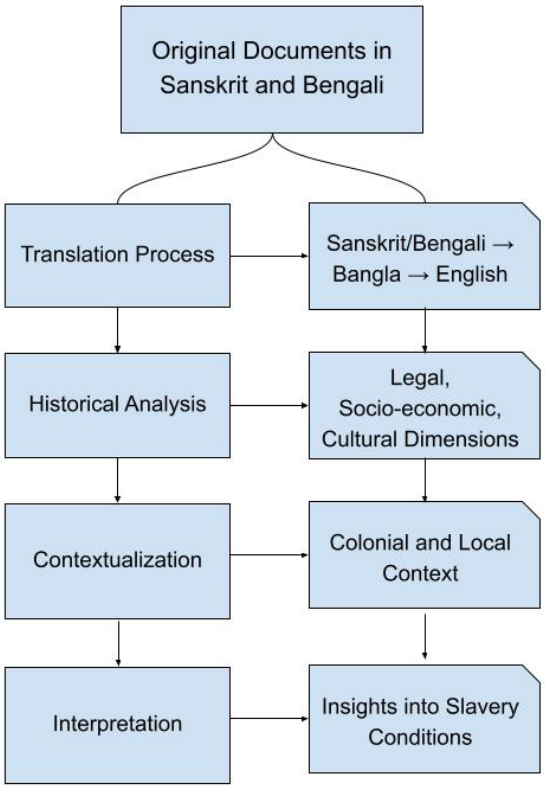

Figure 1: Methodology of research

The study adopts qualitative research method with document analysis and historical context provided an examination of unpublished slave deeds. The main objective is to translate and interpret the original documents that existed in Sanskrit and Bengali while using Bangla as an intermediary step before completing the English translation. Specialists in archaeology and Sanskrit language expertise were needed for accurate interpretation of these texts during their translation process. A historical analysis of legal, socio-economic and cultural aspects followed the translation work. The analysis positions these historical documents within British-ruled Bengal to understand how slavery existed and how legal systems managed it as well as its social and economic consequences for enslaved people and their surrounding society.

4. Description of Two Human Sale Deeds

The Bangladesh National Museum houses approximately eight thousand various manuscripts. Among them, two unpublished and undeciphered human sale deeds are of particular significance. These documents were collected from Douhakhola village in Gauripur, Mymensingh, in 1980 and are currently preserved in the museum. The language of these deeds is bilingual, featuring both Bengali and Sanskrit, and the script is proto-Bengali of the 19th century AD. The first deed (Plate: 01) is a daughter sale agreement, signed on 3 **Śrāvaṇa** 1214 (Bengali Year). The paper measures 40 centimeters in length and 20 centimeters in width, with an accession number of 01.01.009.1980.00184. This deed is heavily ragged around the edges, and much of the writing is illegible. The second deed is a sale agreement involving a husband, wife, and two children. Unlike the first deed, the second is relatively

legible, except for one or two words. It was signed in the Bengali year 1215. The paper measures 27 centimeters in length and 17 centimeters in width, with an accession number of 01.01.009.1980.00185.

4.1 Transliteration of the Daughter Sale Deed dated 3 Śrāvaṇa, Bengali Year 1214 (Plate: 01)

[*Tentative reading as some parts of the document are damaged.]

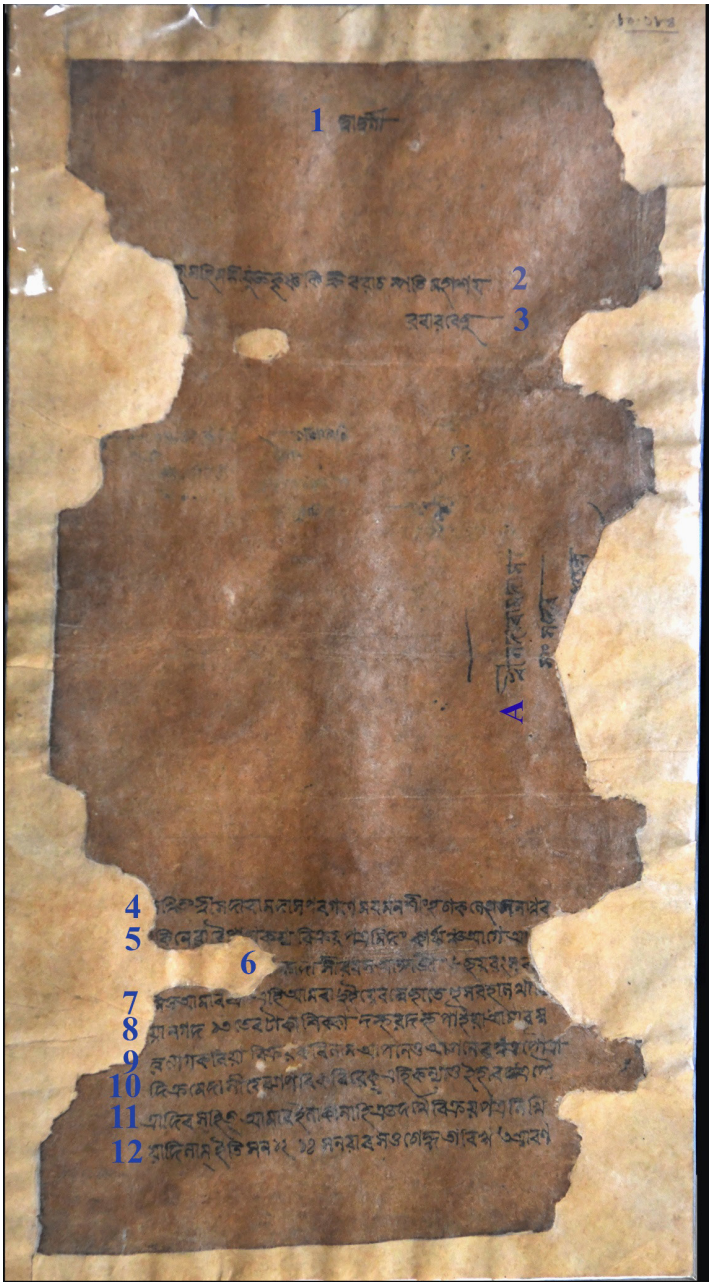

Figure 2: Plate 01(the Daughter Sale Deed dated 3 Śrāvaṇa, Bengali Year 1214)

(A) ŚrīSadārāmadāsa

sāṁ Sadana

-- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- --

-- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- --

1. Śrīdurgā

2. [Ma]hāmahimŚrīyuktaKṛṣṇakiṅkarVācaspatimahāśaya

3. Varāvareha

4. -- –

[Li]khitaṁŚrīSadārāmadāsaparagaṇeMayamanaśīṁha[21]cākalehā[---]naprava-

5. -- –kilevā[raipā]-- -- kanya[22]vikrayapatramidaṁkāryamañcaāgeā-- --

6. -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- kādāsīvayasa [āṇgājī] 6 chaya va 2 sa [ka-------]

7. -------[ā]mi o āmār [strī] ehiāmrāduiyersvecchātehusvahālathā[ki]-

8. yānagad 13 tera tākāśikkā dakaradasthapāiyāāmār sna----

9. velāgakariyāvikrayakarilām [l] āpne o āpnerputrapautrā-

10. dikramedāsīhe [vy]āpārakarivekaehikanyā o ihāraatra pau--

11. trādirasahitāmārailākānāhiñdarthevikrayapatralikhi-

12. yādilāmitisana 1214 sanavārasaocoddatārikha 3 Śrāvaṇa

4.2 Translation of Daughter Sale Deed:

A. Sri Sadaram Das

Village: Sadana

1 Sri Durga

2 Honorable Sri KrishnaKinkar Vacaspati

3 To

(4-11)

It is written in the same manner as previous all deeds. This is the sale deed for the six-year-old daughter of Sri Sadaram Das of Chakla Hasanpur, Mymensing Pragana. My wife and I, both willingly and knowingly, have transferred the rights of our daughter to you in exchange for thirteen taka in cash, received in hand. You, your sons, and their descendants will manage (own) this slave. I have written this deed in such a way that I relinquish all rights over this daughter and her descendants.

12. End, dated the year 1214 (twelve hundred and fourteen), 3rd Śrāvaṇa

[21] Presently, Mymensingh District.

[22] Correct is *kanya*.

4.3 Transliteration of the Men Sale Deed dated 3 Āśāḍha, Bengali Year 1215, (Plate: 02)

[*Tentative reading as some parts of the document are damaged.]

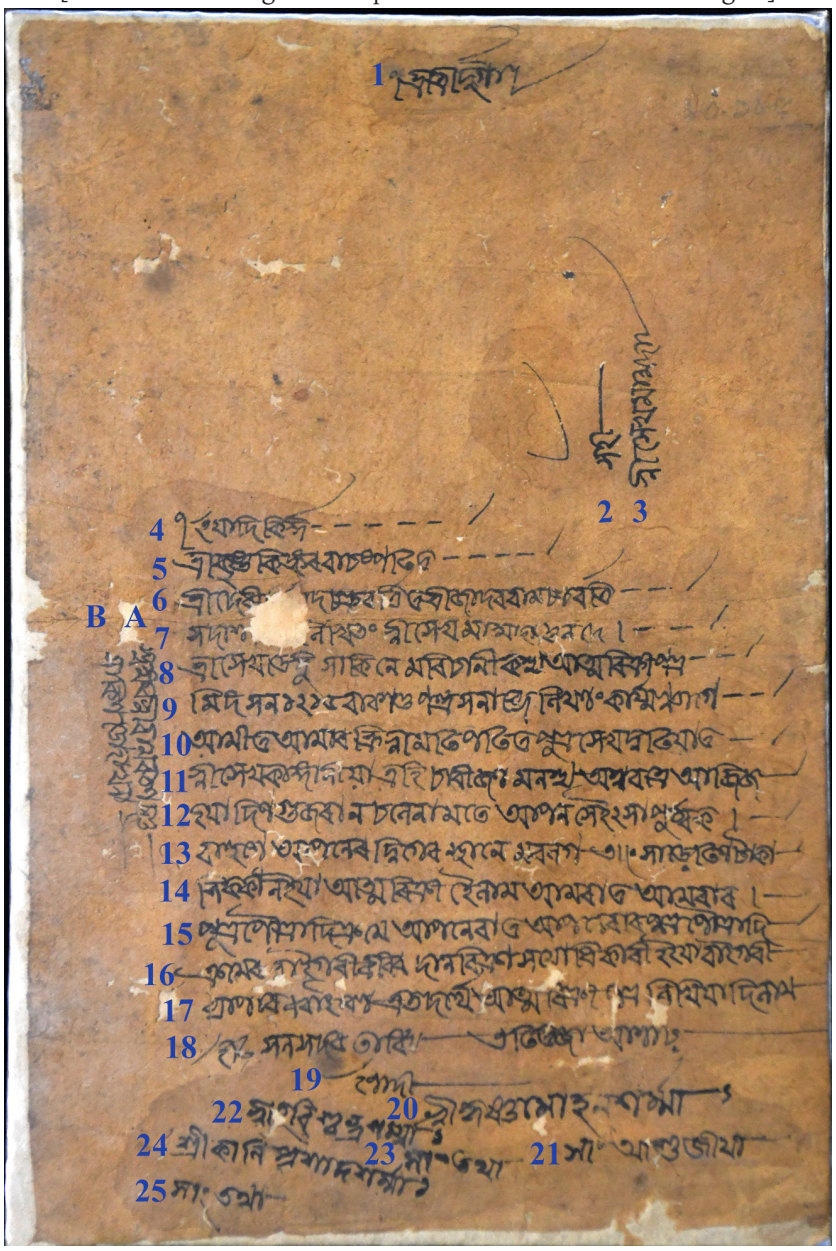

Figure 3: Plate 02(the Men Sale Deed dated 3 Āśāḍha, Bengali Year 1215)

1 ŚrīŚrīDurgā

2. Sahī

3. Śrīsekhamāmmadā

4. Siddham[23]iyādikiṅga - - - -

5. ŚrīKṛṣṇakiṅkaraVāchaṣpati - - - -

6. ŚrīDevī[Prasa]da Chakravarti [o] VījādararāmaChakravati[24] - -

[23] Siddham is expressed by a symbol.

[24] The correct surname is *Chakravarti*.

7. sadāśa[ya ------] likhitaṁ [Śrī]sekhamāmmadā [u]nadel - -
8. Śrīsekhaḍepu sākine mabicānīkatthaātmavikrīpatra - -
9. midaṁ sana 1215 vārasapandrasanāvdelikhāṁkāryamaśravāge - -
10. āmi o āmārkri[dna]mete patita[25]putra sekhadvataya o
11. Śrīsekhakāṅgānīyātrahichāvījaṇamanastha a[nna]vatranājija
12. hayādiṇagujarānacalenāmateāpana sei 2 sāpurvvakal
13. vāhuśeāpanera [dvi]gevasthāne [mavva][26]ga 3.5 sāḍetiṇa[27]tākā
14. śikkīlaiyāātmavikrīhailāmaāmrā o āmrār
15. putrapautrādikrameāpnerā o āpnerāraputrapautrādi-
16. Kramera[tā] igarīkīvaradānavikrīsayodhikārīhaiyāvāigavī
17. vyāparisvāikā[28]etadartheātma [vikraya]patralikhiyādilāma
18. itisalasadavatārki3 ti [u]jāĀśāḍha
19. iṇādī
20. Śrīkṛṣṇamohanaśarmmā
21. sāṁĀśujīyā
22. Śrīgavindchandraśarmmā 1
23. sāṁtathā[29]
24. Śrīkāliprasadśarmmā 1
25. sāṁtathā[30]
A. svakṣara[31]Śrīrāmaracaṇa Datta
B. sākiṇaḌedāyalā

4.4 Translation of Men Sale Deed:

1. Sri Sri Druga
2. Signature
3. SriShekhammada
4. Witness
5. SriKrisnakinkara Vachaspati
6. Sri Devi Prasad Chakravarti and Vijadararam Chakravarti
7. It is written like this always
8. A self-selling deed by a person who lives in Sri Sekhdepu
9. It was written prior to the performance of work in the year 1215

10-17: I, my wife, and my two sons from mixed marriages—Sekhadvataya and Srisekhkangaiya—have decided to enter into servitude for food and clothing. Along with these two sons, we will serve

[25] The word "Patita" was explained by Akbar Ali Khan as "Children of mixed marriages" Khan, Akbar Ali. (2019), Banglay Islam Prochare Safolya: Ekti Oitihashik Bishleshan (Bangla), Prothoma Prakashani, Dhaka, p. 41
[26] The letters are not clear.
[27] Correct is *sāḍetina*.
[28] Some read it as *Prāpakasyabāhuśe*.
[29] Village *Āśujīyā*.
[30] Village *Āśujīyā*.
[31] Read as *svākṣara*.

you in exchange for three and a half taka sikki. We, our sons, and their descendants will perform regular chores for you, your sons, and their descendants. By signing this, we grant you the rights to sell or donate us.

18. The end Year Place Date
19. Signature
20. SrikisnamohanSarma
21. Address: Asujiya
22. SriGavindaChandra Sarma1
23. Address: same
24. SriKaliprasad Sarma1
25.Address: same

A. SignatureSriramcharan Datta

B. Address Dohakhola

5. Result and Discussion:

Two unpublished human sale deeds dated 1214 (1807 AD) and 1215 (1808 AD) from the Mymensingh district offer significant evidence regarding the social history of early 19th century Bengal. These historical records provide explicit documentation of self-enslavement, a prevalent practice wherein individuals exchanged their freedom for essential resources from landlords or masters to ensure survival. The severe economic conditions in Bengal during that period stemmed from various systemic and environmental elements that contributed to these phenomena.

Slavery was practiced in Bengal prior to the commencement of the English East India Company's commercial activities in India. The institution upheld a longstanding heritage due to its governance practices originating from the middle ages. The English colonial authority regulated and legally sanctioned slavery, utilizing it for punitive and administrative purposes.[32] The British East India Company inherited the system of slavery from preceding administrative entities. Slavery was prevalent in ancient Indian civilization, especially in agricultural sectors and residential environments. The incursion of Muslim powers in India transformed slavery into a political instrument.[33] Prior to the British colonial period, slaves in India lacked legal rights; nonetheless, British officials instituted explicit restrictions regarding slavery. British officials recorded through multiple sources that colonial Bengal maintained a large system of slavery, although it's functioning markedly differed from that of slave institutions in America and the Caribbean. British colonial policies impoverished many individuals, compelling them to resort to slavery for survival.[34] The socioeconomic structure of Bengal underwent substantial changes during the 18th and 19th centuries because of colonial rules and agricultural market expansion and worldwide trade which dramatically affected both labor systems and slave practices. The economic systems of Bengal did not reach the level of a slave society

[32] Amal Kumar Chattopadhyay, "Slavery in the Bengal Presidency under East India Company rule, 1772-1843" (1963), https://doi.org/10.25501/soas.00033956.

[33] Peter Jackson, "The Mamlūk Institution in Early Muslim India," Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland (Cambridge University Press, April 1, 1990), https://doi.org/10.1017/s0035869x00108585.

[34] Hiranmay Dhar, "Agricultural Servitude in Bengal Presidency around 1800," *Economic and Political Weekly* 8, no. 30 (1973), https://www.jstor.org/stable/4362899.

comparable to the Americas or the Caribbean yet slavery coexisted with bonded labor throughout its agricultural sectors and household economies.

The British East India Company introduced the Dual Administrative System during this period which divided government oversight into separate domains. The administrative system adopted revenue extraction as its main goal which resulted in the neglect of public welfare[35] and made Mymensingh and other rural areas susceptible to exploitation. The devastating Famine of 1770[36] destroyed a substantial part of Bengal's population on top of the existing structural failure. The aftermath from this disaster continued to affect people for decades by impoverishing agricultural output and weakening social cohesion which deepened both economic and social challenges.

The deeds show that enslavements were made soon after the introduction of the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793. The Permanent Settlement Act of 1793 included elements which could have contributed to self-slavery growth in Bengal. Through the Act of 1793 the British government established landlord classes while reorganizing Bengal agriculture through fixed taxation.[37] Zamindars gained legal status as landlords through this act but it simultaneously weakened tenant-cultivators through sub-infeudation and increased rents which transformed land ownership in Bengal.[38] The economic system evolved toward cash crop agriculture because of this shift which led to jute and indigo and sugar production benefits the colonial economy. The higher agricultural output generated increasing requirements for labor. The economic stress led landowners to boost their profits through peasant exploitation combined with laborer hiring and bonded laborer and enslaved labor.[39] The colonial government's agricultural revenue policy through commercialization strengthened labor exploitation across the region. Through this revenue system zamindars gained permanent power at the expense of peasants and small landowners who lost their lands. Many peasants could not pay their taxes so they forfeited their possessions and life sustenance which pushed them into endless debt and land ownership struggles. The social and economic breakdown resulted in complete desperation which forced people to accept self-slavery as a means for survival.

The human sale deeds from Mymensingh provide unique access to the intense situation endured by people during this period. These documents show the agreements between servants and their masters by specifying important points including:

1. The agreements establish servitude terms that require permanent work in exchange for essential provisions which mainly consist of food alongside clothing and shelter. The survival needs of the individual took precedence over their freedom rights through this arrangement.
2. The modest financial payments reflected the owner's assertion of authority over the servant rather than constituting profits from the transaction.

[35] Vibha Iyer, "A Tangible Concept of Imperialism: Utsa Patnaik's Estimates of Colonial Transfers From India," *The Indian Economic Journal* 71, no. 1 (January 1, 2023): 229–46, https://doi.org/10.1177/00194662221146647.

[36] Senjuti Mallik, "The British East India Company and the Great Bengal Famine of 1770: Towards a Corporate Colonial Biopolitics," *Geographical Review* 114, no. 4 (March 14, 2024): 464–88, https://doi.org/10.1080/00167428.2024.2325977

[37] Vinay Krishin Gidwani, "'Waste' and the Permanent Settlement in Bengal," *Economic and Political Weekly* 27, no. 4 (1992), https://www.jstor.org/stable/4397526.

[38] Karuna Moy Mukerji, "Rents and Forms of Tenancy in Birbhum Since the Permanent Settlement," *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 14, no. 3 (July 1, 1977): 363–76, https://doi.org/10.1177/001946467701400304.

[39] Bose, Peasant Labour and Colonial Capital. Rajat Datta, "Agricultural Production, Social Participation and Domination in Late Eighteenth-century Bengal: Towards an Alternative Explanation," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 17, no. 1 (October 1, 1989): 68–113, https://doi.org/10.1080/03066158908438413

3. Through these pacts individuals lost their freedom and social position thus becoming part of the lowest segment of society.

This first document demonstrates how poverty forces people to reduce their worth to financial value. The child's parents resorted to selling their six-year-old daughter because they faced overwhelming survival needs that required immediate financial relief. The document uses language that demonstrates complete parental surrender of their rights as it stresses both the permanent nature and extreme nature of the transaction.

The second document shows self-enslavement from a broader standpoint by revealing how a family chose to become slaves together. The contract includes provisions that make the servitude perpetual for multiple generations by extending obligations to future descendants and children of the servitude. Such occurrences produce lasting effects that affect entire families across multiple generations.

The legal system of Mymensingh together with Bengal accepted servitude practices which had developed within household economies and agrarian systems. Female slaves actively participated in military operations as well as political activities. The military groups of that time moved female slave populations between locations. A total of 1,271 female slaves were present at key military installations of the Bengal Presidency during 1822 across Berhampore, Dinapore, Ghazipore and Kanpur. A total of 447 female slaves were located at Gazipur which lies in proximity to Mymensingh.[40] Female slaves in Bengal performed indispensable roles within domestic homes as well as on agricultural sites. The laws in both Indigenous and colonial systems determined their legal standing through domestic service restrictions. Their social roles displayed complexity because they took part in inheritance disputes while actively participating in marriage practices. Female slavery in Bengal exhibited multiple dimensions because women worked both as domestic help and military personnel.

Slavery received no challenge to its legitimacy from the population during the Sultanate and Mughal periods because it had become an established part of local traditions. Through legal and penal procedures the British East India Company established slavery as a formal institution. A new practice of legal human transactions which required buyers and sellers to sign documents with witness attendance emerged in South Asian history. The entire community risked enslavement when colonial authorities punished dacoity (armed robbery) offenses.[41] Bengal's agricultural sector together with its domestic sphere experienced sustained slavery because of this legal and economic system.

Self-slavery became widespread in this period because marginalized communities faced extreme vulnerability. This situation demonstrates the inability of colonial rule to tackle fundamental poverty and inequality issues. The British administration pursued revenue generation more than welfare which forced marginalized communities to surrender their freedom in exchange for survival. These documents of human sale challenge the conventional view that colonial rule brought progressive developments to society. These documents demonstrate how poor rural people faced continuous mistreatment and persecution by the system. The practice of self-slavery demonstrates how social and economic imbalances from colonial Bengal influenced the path of its historical development. The documents show the following details:

[40] Chatterjee, *Slavery and the Household in Bengal, 1770-1880.*
[41] Dhar, "Agricultural Servitude in Bengal Presidency around 1800."

1. Self-slavery existed as an actual documented practice during the early 19th century in Bengal because of extreme poverty and the failure of the colonial system.
2. Colonial policies implemented through the Dual Administrative System together with the legacy of Famine of 1770 and Permanent Settlement led to severe rural poverty which forced desperate measures among people.
3. These historical documents provide critical knowledge about the everyday life experiences of disenfranchised people during this time which contrasts conventional elite-focused historical writings.
4. The research shows that analyzing social economic gaps alongside their underlying historical evolution helps modern people study current patterns of unfair treatment and exploitation.

The British colonial legal system in India lacked clarity about whether slavery existed during that time. The documents confirm that the slave trade operated legally through voluntary signatures on family agreements for self-sale and daughter-sale transactions. People who suffered from extreme poverty chose to give themselves and future generations to wealthy masters to receive essential food supplies. The unpublished human sale deeds from Mymensingh not only shed light on the harsh realities of life in colonial Bengal but also serve as a poignant testament to the resilience and agency of individuals navigating profound adversity.

6. Conclusion

The analysis of two historically significant human sale deeds from Mymensingh district, Bangladesh, has revealed valuable insight into the practice of self-slavery in early 19th-century Bengal, a consequence of extreme poverty and exploitative British colonial policies. The devastating impact of the 1770 Famine and the Permanent Settlement of 1793 pushed many rural poor to sell themselves or their family members into servitude to meet basic survival needs—food, shelter, clothing, and minimal financial compensation. These documents further expose the deeply entrenched nature of servitude within both indigenous and colonial systems; challenging the notion that colonial rule brought societal progress. Though officially abolished in 1843, self-slavery persisted due to the failure of colonial policies to address the root causes of economic and social inequalities. Additionally, the deeds have illuminated the resilience and agency of marginalized individuals, who, under extreme duress, had to forfeit their freedom for survival. This study has also highlighted the enduring legacy of colonial exploitation and provided a critical perspective for understanding ongoing labor exploitation and inequality in contemporary societies. Future research—through archival materials and comparative studies—can offer deeper insights into the lived experiences of the marginalized colonial Bengal and similar contexts. Acknowledging the legacies of such practices is essential for addressing the persistent social and economic inequalities that continue to shape our world today.

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