FORCED LABOUR IN MAHĀRĀṢṬRA IN THE SEVENTEENTH AND EIGHTEENTH CENTURIES:
A Study in its Nature and Change

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Though the system of forced or compulsory labour, wherein the government exercised force and limited the choice of the labour, has existed in India since the second century, its systematic study, covering some period and region of India has not yet been made. In case of Mahārāṣṭra there are a few references and notes bearing on the historic system of forced labour. This paper is an attempt to study the system of forced labour in Mahārāṣṭra till the end of the eighteenth century.¹

¹ The system of forced labour has existed over a wide range of time and space in human history. Herodotus tells us of the use of forced labour by Persian rulers for transport and dispatch services (angaree) and by the Pharaoh for the construction of the Great Pyramid. Forced labour was from early times the chief means of maintaining the Egyptian irrigation canals. Most of the population of mediaeval Europe was subject to legally defined forced labour, for example, road work (corree), transport service (angarea) and other feudal sevice obligation. Forced labour continued to exist in Europe and the U.S.A. till the nineteenth century see Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences, volumes V and VI (MacMillan, 1962), pp. 341-42.

D. N. Jha in his Revenue System in post Maurya and Gupta Times (Calcutta, 1967) refers to the avoidance of viṣṭhi by Mahākṣatrapa Rudradāman for the construction of a dam on the basis of Junaṅgadh Rock Inscription. See pp. 29, 43, and 47. Jha also refers to Kautilya, Manu and Mahābhārat (pp. 66-69, 103) in indicating the custom of forced labour to be performed by śudras, craftsmen and artisans as well as the Brahmans. Kautilya suggests the use of forced labour in wars. See D. N., Jha, op. cit., pp. 125, 205-206. There was a special supervisor, known as viṣṭhivandhaka, appointed by the government, who recruited forced labourers in ancient India.

For the references to the existence of the system of forced labour in India under the Mughals see J. N. Sarkar, Mughal Administration. (Orient Longman’s First Edition, 1972) pp. 68-69, wherein there is reference to forced labour extracted by the officials in Gujarat in 1665. Irfan Habib in his The Agrarian System of Mughal India
I have used official correspondence and orders included in two lengthy series: Śivacaritra Sāhitya (its first eleven volumes) and Selections from the Sātāra Rājās' and the Peshuās' Diaries (in nine volumes) edited by G. C. Vad and others. The relevant volumes from other series like Marāṭhāvīcyā Itihiṣācī Sādhane (in twenty-two volumes) edited by V. K. Rājwade and Selections from the Peśwā Daftar edited by G. S. Sardesai have been also used. The sources included in other source-books have also been utilised. Out of these sources used, one is from thirteenth century, three are from late sixteenth century, forty-three are from the seventeenth century, and forty-nine from the eighteenth century.

In most of the documents, used in this paper the word vethbegār, used for the custom of forced labour, has been transliterated by the editors as a single word, without leaving any space in between veth and begār. But in a couple of documents words like vethi and begāri (vethi va begāri), as two distinct words have been used. Moreover, in an order of Śivāji of 1649-50¹), the various rights of Kheloji and Bāji

(Asia Publishing House, 1963) pp. 150-167 and 209 writes about unpaid labour services (begār) extorted by zamindārs and as 'an exceptional form of labour imposed upon some inhabitants by the authorities'. K. P. Mitra in his paper ‘Begar or Forced Labour in Historic Records’ Proceedings of Indian Historical Records Commission, Twenty-fourth Session Jaipur, 1948, pp. 26-27, refers to the practice of forced labour in Bengal and Orissa in the 17th and 18th centuries and steps taken by the government of the East India Company to curb its misuse.

