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THE UNIVERSITY OF PERADENIYA

SLAVERY IN CLASSICAL ATHENS: A REVIEW OF THE INSTITUTION
AND A REAPPRAISAL OF THE MARXIAN DISCUSSION

BY

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P.N. LIYANAGÉ
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A DISSERTATION

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SYNOPSIS

This study of slavery in Classical Athens is undertaken with, in the main two purposes. Firstly it engages in a re-assessment of hitherto known data concerning the slaves and slavery itself. Secondly, based on this re-assessment, it will review the theories and interpretations of modern historians and sociologists of the institution of slavery and the social formation of Classical Athens in which *the former* was a predominant factor.

Accordingly, the study will be in two parts. Part I will discuss the available information on slaves and the institution of slavery. The review of the analyses and interpretations of the modern thinkers will be the subject matter of Part II.

By the 5th century B.C. all of Athens' slaves were of foreign origin - foreign in the sense of being non-Athenian though not always non-Greek. Numerically the slaves were considerable. They were owned by both private individuals and the state. Except for holding public office slaves were involved in every sort of social and economic activity. In exceptional circumstances they were used in the defence of the state as well. Emphasis is laid on their exclusive use in the mines and their strategic importance to the economy of Athens in the Classical era.

The views of the modern scholars on the subject are sharply polemical and the debate still remains inconclusive. To George Thomson and Perry Anderson, slavery was the dominant mode of production and this also shaped the ideology of the age. Moses I. Finley, while avoiding Marxist terminology still finds slavery to have formed the very foundation of Classical Greek civilization. Samir Amin considers slavery to have been a secondary mode of production within a social formation based on tribute. G.E.M. de Ste. Croix views the slaves as comprising a social class along with debt-bondsmen and serfs. Giving primacy of place to the slaves is however seen by Ellen Meiksins Wood as being at the expense of neglecting the contribution of the citizen peasant of Athens, whose quality and ideologies constituted that civilization.

The significance of the non-Athenian origins of the slaves of Classical Athens to the civilization and culture of the era has not figured in the analyses of the above mentioned writers. It cannot be definitively stated whether slaves comprised a social class; this is found to rest upon the conclusion of another, as yet on-going, debate within Marxism, i.e. the social role of the domestic work performed by them.

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