

SLAVES AND SERFS IN MEDIEVAL CAMBODIA
(CIRCA 400—1300 A.D.)

BY

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In my Paper on "*Some aspects of Feudalism in Cambodia*" (Submitted to the Twentysixth Congress of the International Congress of Orientalists, held at Delhi, in January 1964, and published subsequently in the *Journal of the Bihar Research Society*, Volume XLVII, Rahul Sankrtayana Volume), I have traced the development of Feudalism in Cambodia and have also discussed in brief the position of the slaves and serfs in the society. Some Soviet and Czech scholars have also turned their attention to this aspect of the Cambodian history and Mr. L. Sedov of the Institute of the Peoples of Asia, U.S.S.R., Moscow, has recently published two important Papers dealing with the socio-economic history of Cambodia in the Angor period.

Feudalism was a form of socio-economic system throughout the world at a given period of social development in history. The nature of feudalism differed from country to country and from continent to conti-

ment. In Europe, the Industrial Revolution destroyed the last vestige of feudalism, but in Asia the system continues in different forms even today. In Asia too, the nature of Feudalism differs from country to country. So far as Cambodia is concerned, we have at our disposal a vast mass of Sanskrit and Khmer Inscriptions. In my aforesaid study, I had confined myself mostly to the Sanskrit texts and here also I have depended mainly on the same though corroborative Khmer texts (in translation) have also been consulted. Religion played a great part in the daily life of the Cambodian people in the middle ages and the grants, more or less, deal usually with the religious aspect of the question. It is through the study of these grants that we get a glimpse of the social and economic life of the people during our period of review.

In Cambodia we come across different types of land tenure. The question of the actual ownership of land is not yet very clear. The question of ownership needs a separate treatise for better treatment. Both the kings and their favourites issued grants and some of the important officials owed their position to the grace or kindness (*prasada*) of the rulers. The creation of powerful intermediaries in land, the mode of production, and the system of production and distribution is a point to be reckoned with in Cambodia. In a number of Sanskrit and Khmer inscriptions, we have got the actual details about all these things. The slaves and serfs formed an important part of the feudal economy of Cambodia. They seem to have participated in production without any equivalent or appreciative remuneration and a huge surplus was created in the temple or in other properties. The mode of production was, no doubt, primitive but the surplus, thus created, paved the way for a few rich people to grow from more to more. It is they who controlled the economic life-line of the country. The high artistic construction, though rare specimens of art in history, bespeak of the use of forced labour. A critical estimate of the exploitation of the surplus labour, though yet a desideratum, is not within the scope of this paper.

Though the Cambodians were not so much scrupulous with regard to the purity, the duties of the four *varnas*, which often changed with the economic status of a man, were observed. The caste system, though apparently in vogue, underwent change in this region. There was an Officer known as the Chief of the Castes who had to look to the maintenance of the *varna* Law. The Brahmanas were divided into two broad classes—as worshippers of Siva or Buddha. The first again was subdivided into five groups originating mainly from the marriage with lower castes. The Brahmanas sometimes did the same

type of work as assigned to the slaves (*RCM-No. 155*). The Ksatriyas were also divided into five classes. The Sudras are not despised as impure or untouchable. Men of all castes took to agriculture. In Bali, the higher castes enjoyed the same privileges in the law court as their counterparts in India.

Slaves formed a distinct class in the society. Slavery as an institution arose out of the following circumstances :—

- (i) By birth or born of slaves (*Grhaja*)
- (ii) non-payment of debt or fine (*Dandadasa*).
- (iii) Imprisonment in war (*Dhwajahrta*).
- (iv) poverty (*Dridradasa*).
- (v) willingly accepting the status of a slave (*Bhaktadasa*).

The Civil law of Java throws light on the conditions of the slaves and women. The Javanese Civil law permitted a husband to sell his wife. A slave may change his master by purchase, sale, gift, or inheritance. Slaves were regarded as the absolute property of their masters and a master was entitled to the property and issues of slaves. A slave could be given as a pledge. The aristocracy in Cambodia included kings, nobles and official individuals enjoying all privileges, while the lower orders including the peasants were subjected to inhuman exploitation. The insatiable demands for forced labour and military service on the part of the ruler left the country in a state of impoverishment. The porters, the slaves, the *bhrtyas*, garlandmakers, water-carriers and workers of almost all description constituted the gang of galley slaves. The artistic creation of Jayavarmana VII bear testimony to the painful existence of the 'have-nots'. Feudal levies and obligations were not unknown. There were officers in charge of Corvee and slaves. As a result of the nefarious activities of the Chams (Champa), there was influx of slaves among them. Regular slave trade was carried on by the Cham merchants and the slaves formed a prominent element of the population in addition to the aristocracy and commonalty.

We frequently come across with the details of the slaves and serfs in the Kambuja inscriptions as they were also donated to the donees like other articles of gifts. It is thus evident that they were treated as chattels and helots and had practically no social standing. In most cases we have the details of slaves, servants, serfs, female slaves, their Children etc, and their transfer from one master to another. In the feudal economy of Cambodia, this appears to have been a regular feature and these unfortunate persons were employed in all sorts of productive and unproductive humiliating jobs. In the absence of any

escape from this drudgery, they had to compromise with the situation though instances of revolts are not few and far between. Whether the state was the vast labour employing machinery or not it is difficult to ascertain but this much is certain that there was no security for the lower orders against the frequent oppression of their masters, who, for all practical purposes, controlled the economic life. There was a regular sale and purchase of slaves in Cambodia.

The earliest Khmer inscription (609-611) records the dedication of slaves to the temple of Gambhireswara¹. Another Khmer inscription gives us an example of two princes and a personage in their service who has received from them the same marks of honour². It is interesting to note that very often minor officials also make grants and in one case we find a chief holding the authority of a troop of thousand inhabitants. Slaves were also dedicated to the *Bodhisattvas*³. Whenever there was any new assignment, serfs were also donated^{3a}. The famous Pandita, Sivakavalya, is believed to have founded a *Sivalinga* and assigned it to some serfs. By their conduct and loyalty, the servants sometimes won the appreciation and reward of their masters. In one of the Khmer inscriptions we come across a servant named Nasa who inspired confidence by his good conduct and another servant named Nadha became the chief of the army⁴. Parallel examples of this type may be given from histories of other countries. Chivalry and loyalty paid due dividends in feudal society and Cambodia was no exception to this rule. Nadha received high sounding titles like *Nripendravya* and *Prthvinarendra*. Those who assisted the king were amply rewarded by the grant of land and other allied privilege. Slaves formed an important part of the royal or feudal donations both secular and ritualistic. At times a servant was charged by the king to build a rock and other edifices⁵. The inscription of *Prasat Karvan* (921) speaks of a prince named Mahidharavarmana as offering serfs from a Bhimapura. He was a partisan of Jayavarmana IV. A confidant is said to have celebrated the foundation by paying homage to the king⁶. Sangrama was rewarded for his prodigies of valour in combat during the time of Jayavarmana V.

The inscriptions Jayavarmana V bring to light various aspects of the question of feudalism and some of them have been discussed by L.A. Sedov. The donation of land needed scrutiny at several hands. Donations of ornaments were also known. Jayavarmana V also created various new castes⁷. A bilingual inscription records the donation of slaves⁸. Another Khmer inscription of 974 speaks of the donation of land and slaves and fixes the redevances of the land⁹. The reign of Jayaviravarmana forms a landmark in the history of Cambodian

feudalism as most of the inscriptions of his reign relate to the transfer or confirmation of the titles of land. It appears that the germs of feudalism were fully entrenched in the life of the Cambodian people. One Sahadeva, the guardian of the sacred property, was holding the hereditary right over a portion of land. His maternal grandfather was military general and the title to the land in question was acquired by his maternal great grandfather and it had remained in the family ever since. Various fraudulent attempts were made to seize the land but both Jayavarmana V and Jayaviravarmana intervened and the title was confirmed in favour of Sahadeva as is evident from a stele inscription of *Tuol-Prasat* (1003). From a study of this document it appears that it was the king who confirmed the grant finally in favour of Sahadeva and various officials appear to have participated in the presentation of the request. In one case we see that the chief officials of the assembly are called upon to pass on the transfer of land *BE- 37 ;379-413*). The stele inscription of *Prasat Trapang Rum (II)* describes in details the procedure for the transfer of a piece of land. There were hereditary functionaries and heirarchical officials who continued to work even when there were political convulsions at the top. The sacerdotal class went hand in gloves with the royalty. An undated stele inscription of *Tuol Ta Pac*, relates the history of a family of dignitaries in the services of kings since Jayavarmana II. The king seems to have enjoyed the holy royalty.

Even the Khmer inscriptions on the pillar of Gopura of the royal palace contain an oath of fidelity. The text leads us to infer that it was a sort of commendation to the reigning monarch. *Tamvrac* (Lictors, *i. e.*, officials bearing axe and rod) of all categories swear grateful devotion to Suryavarmadeva in presence of the sacred fire, the holy jewel, the *Brahmanas* and the *acharyas* and promise not to revere another king. They further pledged (i) to fight and risk life (if there is war), (ii) devotion to king upto death. In return the king was to look to the maintenance and sustance of their families. Suryavarmana I seems to have stabilised his power. A khmer stele inscription at *Phnom Chisor* tells us of the founding of a monstery in 1015 where gifts of slaves and revenue are also mentioned. The transfer of land and revenue is further confirmed by another inscription of the same king (1019). The land granted by Suryavarmana to the family of Jayendrapandita was confirmed by Udaydityavarmana II. Four hundred male and female slaves were also donated. When the foundation was completed, the king was informed and requested to see that the establishment and slaves

be constituted as gracious liberality in favour of *Sivalinga* Bhadraketan and the request was complied with (*Sdok Kak Thom*-1052).

Revolts in the feudal set up were not unknown. A favourite general, named Kamvau, revolted against Udayadityavarmana II and Barth attributes it to the religious reaction. Kamvau ultimately fell at the hands of Sangrama. While Sangrama was busy with Kamvau, another rebel, Sivat, also revolted. Both these rebels were subdued by Sangrama who offered the captives and the spoils to the king. Udayadityavarmana II was moved at the loyalty and fidelity of Sangrama and the king said—"All these things which you have conquered, deign to keep them : while they are my treasures, they are certainly yours. What makes me forever happy are the striking proofs of your fidelity and not such riches. "Sangrama prevailed upon the king to accept these spoils as a gift to the golden image of *Devaraja* under the vocable of Udayaditeswara. The feudal lords in a number of cases took advantage of the weakness of the central authority. A son of a vassal king, Jayavarmana, is said to have taken advantage of the weakness of Harsavarmana III (1080).

A bilingual stele Khmer inscription at *Phnom Chisor* (1116) commemorates a gift of land, slaves and property to the god of the temple of Suryapavata. A Khmer pillar inscription of *Vat Phu* (1136) records a donation to the god of Lingapur by a man and his son of the country of Bhadreswarapada, and of the corporation of the workers of the *visaya* of Shresthapur¹⁰. The Angkor Vat sculptures also represent feudal elements and if Bosch is to be relied upon, the central tower contained the statute-portrait of the king and nineteen seigneurs. It was under Jayavarmana VII that the Khmer empire reached its zenith and half of the great monuments are credited to him. According to Coedes, his religious zeal surpassed the bounds of all reason and his vanity amounted to megalomania. He impoverished and embittered the people with his tithes and forced labour in building useless monuments to satisfy his personal ambition and that of the feudal seigneurs as is evident from the towers and pavillions of the Angkor sculptures. These were meant to celebrate their memory. He attempted to grind the people into lowest servility to build up monuments to his relatives and friends. The Angkor monument was begun by Suryavarmana II and we learn from the inscription of *Preah Vihar* (IV) that in 1119 he gave order to raise the "corveable workmen of the second, third and probably of the fourth categories". (Cf-*Briggs*-196). The Angkor monuments were built by forced labour, and the vast mass of slave-labour, The TAI states supplied a large part of the slave

labour. They contributed a lot towards the prosperity of Angkor whose rulers satisfied their vanity at the cost of peoples happiness and pleasure. Here in these admirably excellent structures are depicted the daily life and manners of the people of Cambodia. Therein are depicted the warriors with their raised spears, superb gang of galley slaves, the porters carrying load, horses and elephants and many other aspects of daily life. As a result of the waning influence of theology and the loss of revenue, the popularity of the upper strata diminished. Even often the decline of the classical Khmer Civilisation (13th century A. D.), villages and slaves continued to be assigned. With the disappearance of the upper strata of the population and the removal of capital from Angkor, the structures were soon abandoned. Louis Finot has attributed the fall of the Khmer civilisation to the following reasons:—

“The suddenness of this catastrophe; at first surprising, is explained by the heterogenous composition of the Cambodian state.....nothing proves that the people reacted strongly against the aggression; perhaps even they saluted it as a deliverance...the conquerors offered to the conquered ...economic religion, whose ministers, devoted to poverty, contended themselves with a thatch of straw and a handful of rice¹¹. This clearly explains that the highhandedness of the ruling class was responsible for the decline of the Khmer Civilisation at a given period when the Productive forces were disturbed on account of the lack of peoples’ cooperation. In the middle ages all the Cambodian peasantry was in the service of gods and the slaves and villages were granted to the monuments for maintenance. The poor people had lost all genuine interest in the state and the result was disastrous for the country as a whole. The peasantry had so long laboured for the well being of the upper strata without any considerable return. Hinduism was the cult of the upper classes while the people in general were attached to their animistic cults. At times Manu’s law was considerably modified by Buddhism to assuage peoples feeling. Religion in Cambodia was one of the main mediums of economic and political exploitation.

The *Cham inscriptions* show that the Burmese as well as Tai slaves were granted to Cham temples. Chou-Ta-Kuan¹² mentions slaves and concubines. He further states that the official rank determined the kind of dwelling. Slaves were purchased for being employed as domestic servants and well to do persons had more than hundred slaves. Kuan say.” Only the very poor have none at all. They call their master and mistress, father and mother.. If a female slave has a child by unknown person, the master does not trouble about the father but treats the child as a slave. If a slave tries to escape and is retaken, he is marked in blue on the face the savages coming from the moun-

tains are sold as slaves in the market. "He refers to the sale of women and also to the ninety vassal governments. According this Chinese authority, all the people were obliged to fight.

The whole range of Sanskrit inscriptions is replete with the account of the dedication of slaves and serfs in Cambodia. Their specific duties are not invariably mentioned ¹³. The Sanskrit portion of the inscription of Isanavarmana records the gifts of slaves and land by an ascetic Isanabatta to the *Bhagavat*. Names of eleven male and twenty female servants are preserved in the Khmer portion ¹⁴. An official named Suchidatta also donated three slaves ¹⁵ A lady devotee gave twenty servants¹⁶. In one case the *Bhiksus* are seen donating slave to their grand nephew by the order of the king. What is important here is not the donation of slaves but the principle involved—that is, that the king had absolute right over the slaves and any donation of slaves would considered valid only after its approval by the king ¹⁷. A servant of king Jayavarmana I (Saka-595), by the favour of his master (Saswaminaprasadat), became the president of the royal assembly and was honoured with everything including slaves. What a feudal dignitary was equal to in Cambodia? "dust of the feet", a title usually applied to a dignitary ¹⁸. The *Louvek Pillar inscription* (7th. century A. D.) records a royal order to bring four hundred slaves out of which 212 are named. These included five dancers and five musicians. The slaves are described as *Vrau*, the name of an aboriginal people of Cambodia. The slaves are usually mentioned along with oxen, buffaloes, rice fields kitchen gardens, utensils and are treated as property (IC-II. 115 ; 121 ; 135 ; 196). An inscription of Jayavarmana IV (in Khmer) refer to donations to "*Kamratenan Jugat ta rajya*" (royal divinity) by two dignitaries ¹⁹. It included male and female slaves Another Khmer inscription records an order by Jayavarmana IV to a dignitary ²⁰. Another record (in Khmer) refers to the division of the products of lands among the different chiefs of slaves²¹. An inscription of Harsavarmana (Saka-844) records his order addressed to a dignitary relating to the delivery of goods, slaves etc., A Khmer inscription of Rajendrarvarmana (Saka-866) records that an humble petition was presented to him by some *Brahamans* recalling that the pious foundations included among other things slaves, cows and buffaloes etc. A royal order was issued asking the ministers to maintain the integrity of religious property and forbidding their sale or alienation by judicial decree. In one of the inscriptions, the royal donation was made out of the confiscated property²⁴.

We have an interesting record (in Khmer) of the tenth-eleventh century A. D. (IC-III. 72). It records an order (*alaksana*) in respect of a

slave named Sri (SI) Varuna, who with his mother and other relations, was born in the domain of Rajuha. This slave fled but was arrested and the officials cut off his nose and ears. It was stated in the royal order that the slave Si Varuna and his mother and other relations were to be treated as exclusive property of the Rajaguha so that there may be no fraud in the endowments made by the king, Rajendravarma. Another record gives a similar royal order asking to present in person the slaves (who are named) given by the king to sanctuary so that there might be no fraud. All deals were confirmed by the royal order and the judgements, given by the rulers, were preserved²⁵. All grants were confirmed by royal acts. *The Kok Rosec Inscription* of Jayavarmana V²⁶ throws light on the following points :—

- (i) the families which gave their daughters to those holding the supreme power ;
- (ii) the devoted and the faithful servant called *Sanjaka* who guarded the person of the king in the battle; Sanjaka means a chief bound by a special oath to defend the person of a king or the prince. When the Sanjaka was killed, the king showed appreciation of his services in a befitting manner. Not only were the Sanjakas posthumously awarded but their slaves were also installed in the shrines ;
- (iii) their oaths and inalienable property ;
- (iv) the education of the sons of the families which supplied royal officials ;
- (v) various grades and classes of royal officials.

Donation of land, serfs and slaves was a common feature of the Cambodian society. A khmer inscription of the reign of Udayadityavarmana relates to a royal ordinance exempting the slaves of the temples of Chok Gargyar from the duty of the corvee so that they may exclusively serve gods. An inscription of the eleventh century A. D. (*IC-III*. 54) enumerates the slaves offered to the *Sivalinga* by Narapatindravarmana. Slaves were donated along with their children and grandchildren. From the point of view of the study of feudalism, the *Sambour inscription* (Sake-923) is very important.²⁸ Jayavarmana IV had ordered the payment for the ransom of slaves and Dirgha Hor, the guardian of the God at Sambhupur, had received the royal order for their maintenance. It appears that the royal order of manumission, was given effect to only in 1001 A.D.²⁹

The Prasat Kok Po Inscription (Sake-926) gives some interesting details of the procedure of the sale of lands³⁰. A Brahmana purchased land from two officials who sold land in order to acquire the precious objects for the royal service. The Brahmana then made a request

on the subject of the proprietary right in the land. Notice was then issued to the Inspector of Qualities and Defects (*Gunadosadarsi*) and to the assembly to summon the sellers. Full powers were given to Prithvindra Pandita who entrusted the execution of royal order to Inspector of wages, Chief Judicial officer, Superintendent of the Court of Justice, Inspector of the property of Gods, Inspector of the Bailiffs of the Third Class and ordered them to delimit the land and to call the nobles, the elders and dignitaries for assistance in fixing the boundaries and putting the land in possession of the Brahmanas. After all the formalities were gone through, the royal order giving this land to the Brahmanas was notified. Another Khmer document of the time of Jayaviravarmana (Saka-928) gives an account of the procedure for the transference of land by the royal order³¹. Kavindrappandita, in charge of a religious establishment, asked for the gift of a piece of unclaimed land which he proposed to dedicate to god Narayana and the donation was graciously made. The Sanjakas were present as witnesses when the king made this grant. Besides the Sanjakas the following officers are also mentioned :—

- (a) Inspector of Qualities and Defects,
- (b) Chief Acharya, member of the Tribunal,
- (c) Reciter of the *Dharmasastras*,
- (d) Chief of the Store house (First, second and Third class).
- (e) Keeper of the Archives.

A royal official was asked by the king to transfer the land. He explained to Kabindra Pandita the term and Conditions of the gift. The boundaries were fixed in the presence of the elders and notable persons which included a) Chief of the ten villages (*Dasagrama*), b) (*Pradhana*), c) two slaves named Narayana and Hridayabindu and d) the village elder. The land was given as a perpetual gift. Jayavarmana VI commanded a number of high officials to keep watch on the proper upkeep on the monasteries and to see to the regular payment of the daily dues assigned to the officials of the temple. The Guardian slaves of the temple, numbering twenty four, must obey the Chaplains of the first fortnight, the chiefs of the royal corvée, and the officers of the army charged with supervision of the foundation. These slaves belonged exclusively to the foundation established by Laksmindravarmana and were forbidden to work in corvée for other gods. Even the ascetics³² purchased and donated slaves. Slaves continued to be donated till 1327 A.D.

The above details enable us to arrive at the conclusion that slavery was an important aspect of the socio-economic life of Cambodia.

It appears that slaves participated in all types of productive measures. The fact that there was a chief of the slaves in the bureaucratic hierarchy is indicative of the importance of this institution. Similarly there was an officer in charge of the royal corvee. The system had its effect on the political history of the country as we have seen above that when it was invaded the people welcomed the invaders. The reasons are not very far to seek. The social system based on the unscrupulous exploitation of the vast mass of population is bound to collapse. The slaves and serfs, though main props of the state, were subjected to worst form of exploitation and were equated with animals. They could be disposed in accordance with the wishes of their masters and they had no say in the matter. In this respect they were no better than the Russian serfs in the pre-revolutionary Russia. They formed the lowest strata in the social set up. A critical study of the epigraphic records of Cambodia reveal to us that all types of feudal obligations, in one form or the other, were known and corvee was a regular feature. The king was at the top and the serfs at the bottom. The wars, won at the cost of these slaves and serfs, added luxury to the royal palace but nothing for them. There was no remedy against these atrocities except the revolts which occasionally took place. One such revolt is known as peasants' revolt. From the available records it appears that the slaves did not enjoy any social status or standing. Self sacrifice for the sake of monarch was considered sacrosanct. The *Bantay-Chmar inscription* gives a very interesting account of the heroic self sacrifice of the four soldiers of the Sanjaka class who were later deified (*RCM*—pp. 528 -530). This dedication was meant to inspire the slaves and other members of the lower orders to do their work in a spirit of dedication.

N O T E S

1. Inscriptions of *KK Yom* (609) and *Angor Borei* (611)
2. *Ponhear Hor Inscription*
3. Cf;- *Inscription of Vat Prasat*
- 3a. *Inscription of Sdok Ka Thom*
4. *Inscription of Preah Vihar* (1)
5. *Briggs-Ancient Khmer Empire*-p. 126
6. *Ibid.*-131
7. *Stele Inscription of Kompong-Thom* (dated 974)
8. *Briggs*-142
9. *Inscription on the brick temple of Prasat Neak Buos* of 974
10. *Be-II* (3)-241-45-*Vat Phou*
11. *Ibid.*-VIII. 221-233
12. *Ibid.*-II. 123-27 (Pelliot's translation)
13. *ISC*. 47, *Aymonier*. I. 167 ff
14. *RCM*-124.
15. *B-feo* XXXVI. 5 *Aymonier* I.139

16. *RCM*, 27; 28; 50; 52; 54; 55; 57; 73; 139; 221; 222; 223; 285; 309; 311; 343; etc.
 17. *Ibid*-36, *BEFEO-XXIV*. 353.
 18. *Ibid*-43-44, *IC*. 12.
 19. *Aymonier-II*. 444.
 20. *RCM*. 165, 175, *IC*. 28.
 21. *Ibid*. 166, *BEFEO-XXXIII*. 16; *Aymonier-I*. 292.
 22. *Ibid*-167, *BEFEO-XXXIII*. 17.
 23. *Ibid*-178-79.
 24. *Ibid*. 268, *Aymonier-I*. 384.
 25. *Ibid*-269
 26. *Aymonier-I*. 420-423, *BEFEO-XXVIII*. 113.
 27. *IC*-50 ; *RCM* 308.
 28. *Aymonier-I*. 307; *RCM*-309.
 29. *RCM*. 310 ff-
 30. *BEFEO-XXXVII*. 396, *RCM*. 313
 31. *Ibid*. XXVIII. 58.
 32. *RCM*. 425 ff, *Aymonier-II*. III, *BEFEO-XXIX*, 299.
 33. *Ibid* 351, *IC* III. 137, *Aymonier-I*. 192.
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 2. *BE-Bulletin de l'Ecole Francaise d'Extreme Orient* (Hanoi).
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 6. *M. Barth and A. Bergaigne. Inscriptions Sancrites du Cambodge (ISC)*.
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 25. *IHQ—Indian Historical Quarterly*
 26. *JGIS—Journal of the Greater India Society*
 27. *Naodi Asia* (and) *I Africi* (Moscow) for the articles of L.A. Sedov