

A NOTE ON COLEBROOKE'S TRANSLATION OF A STANZA FROM
BHĀSKARA'S *LĪLĀVATĪ*

M. N. CHANNABASAPPA

Department of Mathematics, Karnataka Regional Engineering College,
Surathkal, Karnataka

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The purpose of this Note is to critically examine the incorrect translation of a stanza from *Līlāvati* by Colebrooke, and the consequent unfounded inference, by Rouse Ball, that slavery existed in India during Bhāskara's period. The Note also shows that a simple and straightforward explanation of the situation described in the stanza can be given so that the possibility of drawing any wrong inference is eliminated.

Līlāvati written by Bhāskara II in 1150 A.D. was translated into English by H. T. Colebrooke in 1817 A.D. In connection with the discussion on inverse variation, Bhāskara gives the following example :

प्राप्नोति चेत् षोडशवत्सरा स्त्री
द्वात्रिंश तं विंशतिवत्सरा किम् ।
द्विधूर्वहो निष्कचतुष्कमुद्धा
प्राप्नोति धूः षट्कवहस्तदा किम् ॥

Colebrooke¹ translates the above stanza as follows :

“If a female slave, sixteen years of age, brings thirty-two (*niṣkas*), what will one aged twenty cost ? If an ox which has been worked two years sell for four *niṣkas*, what will one, which has been worked six years, cost ?”

The present discussion pertains to the translation of the first half of the above stanza. The word *strī* (स्त्री) in the stanza is translated by Colebrooke as “a female slave”. This translation is clearly incorrect for two reasons : (i) neither the dictionary nor usage supports if (ii) even by implication the word *strī* (स्त्री) does not signify “a female slave”, because the institution of slavery is unknown to the Indian society. The Indian society of former days was organized on the basis of caste system, the purpose of which was to secure public order and to enforce industrious habits. The members of the lowest class were not in a state of individual subjection (which is the main feature of slavery), though the entire caste was meant to perform only a specified type of work. Thus, slavery in India was never a part of the social system for the simple reason that the Indian society, with its sacerdotal order, just did not need it. Hence the word *strī* (स्त्री) in the above stanza can not even imply “a female slave”.

From the point of view of the mathematical problem presented, Colebrooke's translation does not cause any harm. But from the point of view of History, it does. Rouse Ball² in his book—*A short Account of the History of Mathematics*—discusses Bhāskara's works and writes : "I may add here that the problems in the Indian works give a great deal of interesting information about the social and economic conditions of the country in which they were written. Thus Bhāskara discusses some questions on the price of slaves, and incidentally remarks that a female slave was generally supposed to be most valuable when sixteen years old, and subsequently to decrease in value in inverse proportion to the age....". Rouse Ball's statement that Bhāskara discusses some questions on the price of slaves is wrong because Bhāskara never does it. All that is found in Bhāskara's work about the topic (alleged discussion on prices of slaves) is the first half of the stanza quoted above, whose correct translation is "If a woman aged sixteen gets thirty-two (*niṣkas*), what will one aged twenty get?" The young conclusion reached by Rouse Ball regarding the prevalence of slavery in India during Bhāskara's time is, evidently, based on the faulty translation of the above stanza by Colebrooke. Thus one mistake has led to the other.

The word *strī* (स्त्री) in the above stanza can not even be taken to mean "a maid servant *dāsī* (दासी)", again for two reasons : (i) it is not supported either by Dictionary or usage (ii) there is no necessity for it. Assigning the word *strī* (स्त्री) its natural meaning "woman", we can give a very simple and straightforward explanation of the situation. We can very well interpret the phrase "the amount that a woman gets" used by Bhāskara in the above stanza as *Kanyāśulka* (कन्याशुल्क). *Kanyāśulka* is the fee (in cash or kind) that a bride's father receives from the bridegroom at the time of the marriage, which is normally given back to the bride by her father as a present. The custom of receiving *kanyāśulka* is prevalent in the Indian Society from very early times. For instance, it is found discussed in *Manusmṛti*. After discussing the antiquity of *Manusmṛti*, Bühler³ concludes that the work as it is known to us existed in the second century A.D. Manu expresses himself against the custom of *kanyāśulka* as revealed by the stanza 100, Chapter IX of *Manusmṛti*⁴, but recognizes its prevalence in the society, and gives certain rules to regulate it. These rules are contained in the stanzas 29, 51-54 of Chapter III, and stanzas 93, 97-100 of Chapter IX of the treatise. We quote below Bühler's translation of the stanzas 93 and 94 of Chapter IX (3) as they are relevant to the present discussion :

93. But he who takes (to wife) a marriageable damsel shall not pay any nuptial fee (शुल्क) to her father; for the (latter) will lose his dominion over her in consequence of his preventing (the legitimate result of the appearance of) her menses.

94. A man, aged thirty years, shall marry a maiden of twelve who pleases him, or a man of twenty-four a girl of eight years of age; if (the performance of) his duties would (otherwise) be impeded, (he must marry) sooner.

From the stanza 94 above, it is clear that Manu is for the marriage of girls before they attain the age of maturity. Stanza 93 reveals that the quantum of *kanyāśulka* gets reduced as the age of the girl increases, and in fact, Manu would reduce it to zero when the damsel is to get married after attaining the age of maturity. We must note that the above ideas of Manu pertain to the society of 200 A.D. or an earlier period. With the passage of time, the spectrum of the marriageable age of girls got widened, and consequently the age of maturity could no more remain the dead line for paying no *kanyāśulka*. Parents of brides continued to get *kanyāśulka*, of course, inversely proportional to the ages of their daughters to be married. It is in the context that Bhāskara speaks of a woman of 16 getting a larger *śulka* than one of 20. That the *kanyāśulka* custom prevailed in Bhāskara's time (12th century A.D.) is clear from the following. It is known⁵ that Bhāskara hailed from Vijāpura of Karnataka. *Kanyāśulka* was in vogue in Karnataka during that period, as evidenced by the fact that the word *Kanyāśulka* is found mentioned in *Jaimini-Bhārata* in Kannada of Lakṣmīsa⁶ whose period is placed in the range 1100–1400 A.D.

We have, thus, conclusively proved that Colebrooke's translation of the word *strī* (स्त्री) as "a female slave" is inappropriate, and Rouse Ball's inference (which is based on this wrong translation) that slavery prevailed in the Indian Society during Bhāskara's time is unfounded and unjust.

REFERENCES

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- ² W. W. Rouse Ball, *A Short Account of the History of Mathematics*, Dover Publication, 1960, p. 153.
- ³ F. Max Müller (editor), *Sacred Books of the East*, Vol. XXV, G. Bühler, *The Laws of Manu*, The Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1886. P.CXIV of the Introduction, and p. 343–344.
- ⁴ Vasudevasharma (editor), *Manusmṛiti*, third edition, Nirnayasagara Press, Bombay, 1902, pp. 83, 87–88, 355–356.
- ⁵ D. M. Bose, S. N. Sen, B. V. Subbarayappa, *A Concise History of Science in India*, Indian National Science Academy, New Delhi, 1971, p. 98.
- ⁶ Doddabele Narayan Shastry (commentator), *Lakṣmīsa's Jaimini Bhārata in Kannada*, T. N. Krishnaiah Setty, Bangalore, 1932, p. 752.