

UNIT 49 – UPSC – Abolition of Slavery

India's History : Modern India : Abolition of Slavery throughout the British Empire - 1833

Slavery Act



The common law of England did not recognize anyone as a slave (although in Scotland, which does not have the common law, bondage still existed until the late eighteenth century, when it was abolished by legislation). Slavery, however, existed in a number of British colonies, principally in the West Indies.

The Slavery Abolition Bill 1833 was passed by the House of Commons and by the House of Lords.

It received the Royal Assent (which means it became law) on 29 August 1833 and came into force on 1 August 1834. On that date slavery was abolished throughout the vast British Empire.

The Act automatically applied as new possessions (principally in Africa) subsequently became part of the British Empire.

There were a number of exceptions.

First, its application to the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope (now the Cape Province of the Republic of South Africa) was delayed for 4 months and its application to the Colony of Mauritius (now the Republic of Mauritius) was delayed for 6 months.

Secondly, section 64 excluded Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), St Helena and the territories in the possession of The Honourable East India Company, namely in British India, but the section was subsequently repealed. The Honourable East India Company, in theory, administered large parts of India as an agent for the Mogul Emperor in Delhi.

Subsequently, section 1 of 5 & 6 Vict c 101 was enacted which prohibited certain officers of The Honourable East India Company from being involved in the purchase of slaves, but it did not actually abolish slavery in India. It was the provisions of the Indian Penal Code 1860 which effectively abolished slavery in India by making the enslavement of human beings a criminal offence.

Purposes of the Act

The purposes of the Slavery Abolition Act 1833 were described in the preamble to the Bill as:

1. the abolition of slavery throughout the British colonies;
2. for promoting the industry of the manumitted slaves; and
3. for compensating the persons hitherto entitled to the services of such slaves.

The second purpose was achieved by providing for a period of apprenticeship.

The third purpose was achieved by appropriating 20 million a huge sum in those days to compensate slave owners.

