

Understanding Marginalization with Special Reference to ‘Dalits’

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ABSTRACT: Marginalization is a global problem which has a negative impact on societies across the world. It is a social process by which a person or a group of people are made marginal or become relegated to the edge of the society. The concept of ‘Marginalization’ is not a unitary entity in itself, it has various dynamic dimensions. Marginalization as a concept overlaps with the concepts of Social Exclusion and Social Inclusion. Marginalization is a dynamic process which has been socially reformulated and intellectually redefined with the impact and expansion of capitalism, imperialism, modernization, industrialization, globalization and related processes of social transition. Women, people with disabilities, Dalits, Aged people, children, minorities, poor, sexual minorities, etc. are most vulnerable marginalized groups in almost every society. The marginalization of Dalits impacts all spheres of their life, violating basic human rights such as civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights. A major proportion of the Dalits and lower castes are still dependent on others for their livelihood. Marginalization deprives a large majority of people across the globe from participating in the development. It is a complex problem, and there are many factors that cause marginalization. **Dalits** form around 16.6% of **India's** population. The 2011 census recorded nearly 20.14 Crore people belonging to various scheduled castes in the country. Even though Dalits make up 16.6 per cent of the total Indian population, their control over resources of the country is marginal – less than 5 per cent. Close to half of the dalit population lives under the Poverty Line, and even more (62 per cent) are illiterate. Less than 10 per cent of Dalit households can afford safe drinking water, electricity and toilets, which is indicative of their deplorable social condition. Through this paper, the author makes an attempt to understand the concept of marginalization by focusing on how Dalit community has suffered due to this process.

KEYWORDS: Caste, Dalits, Exclusion, Marginalization, Marginality.

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I. INTRODUCTION:

Marginalization is a process and a state that prevents individuals or groups from full participation in social, economic and political life and from asserting their rights.² **Rights** are legal, social, or ethical principles of freedom or entitlement; that is, **rights** are the fundamental normative rules about what is allowed of people or owed to people. Human rights are those rights which are the most essential for every human being, irrespective of race, caste, ethnic affiliation, gender, age, creed and so forth. These rights protect people from any form of discrimination and exploitation, promote their personality and interests and restore their dignity and respect. People equipped with better resources have easy access to these rights, but those who are vulnerable and have remained traditionally exploited, degraded and deprived of their access to the existing socio-economic resources need their human rights to be protected by the state. The deprivation and oppression of certain groups and communities can be explained and understood through the concept of marginalization. Marginalization is a multidimensional, multicausal, historical phenomenon.³ Marginalization is “a form of acute and persistent disadvantage rooted in underlying social inequalities” (The EFA Global Monitoring Report 2010). There are end numbers of marginalized groups across the country such as Women, Scheduled Castes/Dalits, Scheduled Tribes, Ethnic and Religious Minorities, Refugees, Senior Citizens etc.

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² “Defining the Marginalized”, 2015. Available at: <https://wfto-asia.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Literature-Review-Summary-Defining-the-Marginalized.pdf>

³ https://shodhgangotri.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/123456789/3320/2/02_introduction.pdf

There is difference between marginalization and marginality. '**Marginalization**' is a **process** whereas '**Marginality**' is an **involuntary position and condition** of an individual or group at the margins of social, political, economic, ecological, and biophysical systems, that prevent them from access to resources, assets, services, restraining freedom of choice, preventing the development of capabilities, and eventually causing extreme poverty" (Gatzweiler et al. 2011).⁴ Hence, marginalization is a process and marginality is an experience.

In the field of Sociology, the concept of marginality was first introduced in 1928 with an essay by Robert Park titled "Human Migration and the Marginal Man" (Park 1928) in which Park described the cross-pressures experienced by immigrants through the overlapping of different cultures. The resulting lack of integration and the status as an "outsider" with respect to dominant cultures, Park termed "Marginality".⁵

'Dalits' as a Marginalized Group: The caste system – a system of elaborately stratified social hierarchy – distinguishes India from most other societies (Bayly 1999).⁶ Caste system has been prevalent in India since ages. The roots of caste system can be traced back to the Vedas and various other sacred texts. There were primarily 4 Varnas i.e. Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras. There has been the existence of conflicts among people of these Varnas in terms of superiority and domination. The problem of caste based discrimination and oppression has been continued till today. Caste based marginalization is one of the most serious human rights issues in the world today, adversely affecting more than 260 million people mostly reside in India. This form of discrimination is badly affecting the minority groups. Dalits are among these minority groups who have been down trodden since ages. If we go back to historical times, many movements have been led by people. Dalits are considered to be the descendents of pre Aryan Indians who claimed to have autonomous and egalitarian culture. In India, these people were considered even beyond the pale of castes and were known by different names such as chandalas, atishudras, avarnas, panchamas, antayas and antyavasan. Many different personalities have put their efforts to improve the condition of Dalits. Mahatma Gandhi had tried to raise the status of Dalits and tried to remove the stigma attached to Dalit people. He preferred to call them 'Harijans. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar considered caste system as the root cause of 'untouchability'. 'Dalit' does not refer to a caste but suggests a group who are in a state of oppression, social disability and who are helpless and poor. Dalit is a self-designation for a group of people traditionally regarded as lower class. They are a mixed population of numerous caste groups all over South Asia and speak various languages (Geetanjali, 2011).⁷ "If proletarian consciousness is essentially rooted in material deprivations...dalit consciousness is a complex and compound consciousness which encapsulates deprivations stemming from inhuman conditions of material existence, powerlessness and ideological hegemony".⁸

- T.K.Oommen

The Dalits or Scheduled Castes representing 16.6% (Census, 2011) of the total population in India have traditionally suffered from untouchability and numerous other forms of discriminations in social, cultural, economic and political spheres. Marginality is associated even with their origin as a corporate status group or caste or community. Even of the constitutional provisions in the form of reservation or protective discrimination policy and allied schemes, there is a very small group of scheduled caste people who have benefited of these provisions. Their vast majority still remains underprivileged and marginalized. 'The Scheduled Castes as a whole are regarded marginal in terms of their outcaste image, cultural diversity with structural or positional "inferiority" of their culture and, hence, lack of their full integration (unity) in the Hindu society.....' (Ram, 1995: 211).⁹

Caste and Occupation: One of the most distinctive factors of the caste system is the close link between castes and occupations, especially in rural India. The traditional village economy revolved around a

⁴ Barn, J. V. and Gatzweiler, F. W. 2013. "Marginality – An Overview and Implications for Policy". Available at: https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-94-007-7061-4_1

⁵ Bernt, M. and Colini, L. 2013. Exclusion, Marginalization and Peripheralization: Conceptual concerns in the study of urban inequalities. *Leibniz Institute for Regional Development and Structural Planning*, pg. 14. Available at: www.irs-net.de/download/wp-exclusion-marginalization-peripheralization.pdf

⁶ Gang, I., Sen, K. and Yun, M. 2012. Is Caste Destiny? Occupational Diversification among Dalits in Rural India. *IZA Discussion Paper No. 6295*, pp. 2 – 3.

⁷ Hans, V.B. 2016. Dalits in India: From Marginalization to Inclusion. *JMSG: An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal*, 1(4), pp. 450-451, Doi: 10.2139/ssrn.2323268

⁸ Kumar, V. 2005. Situating Dalits in Indian Sociology. *Sociological Bulletin*, 54(3), pp. 514-532. Available at: www.jstor.org/stable/23620623

⁹ Nandu, R. 2013. *Marginalized Groups and the State of Human rights in India: An Overview*, Jaipur: Rawat Publications.

hereditary caste hierarchy that prescribed individuals' occupations (Anderson 2011). In Indian Subcontinent, Occupation is assigned by the religious social order, based on Caste. There is a correlation between caste and occupation. The Indian caste system divides whole society into four Varna's on the basis of their sacred origin as - Brahmins came from Mouth of sacred Male; Kshatriyas originated from Arms, Vaishya evolve from thigh and Shudras come from feet.¹⁰ There used to be Jajmani system in earlier times which was the system of hereditary patron – client relationship. The Dalit community tried to break this Jajmani System and tried to re – negotiate the relationship between dominant class and rural social structure. In today's time, there is no such jajmani system existing in India. But lower caste people have very low representation in high income jobs. They do not enjoy access to the opportunities as much as enjoyed by upper caste people. Within the dalit community, there are many divisions into sub-castes. Dalits are involved in certain types of works such as leather work, street sweeping, cobblers, agricultural work, and manual "scavenging".¹¹ The plight of 'Dalit women' is even worse than Dalit men. Occupational mobility and migration of Dalit women is very less. Dalit women are compelled to go for various economic activities due to their poor economic conditions. Most of the Dalit women serve as daily laborers.

An estimated 1.3 million Dalits (the lowest group in the Hindu caste hierarchy) in India make out a living through the most degrading practice of manual scavenging, an occupation which involves cleaning open toilets and dry latrines and carrying human excreta with bare hands. In cities and towns, Dalit workers are often employed in the maintenance of sewer systems, sweeping of roads and collection of garbage. Apart from being employed to clean toilets in individual households, they are also engaged in cleaning community dry latrines, roadside open toilets, railway stations, government hospitals and other public places.¹² They are forced to work under poor and filthy working conditions which most of us cannot imagine.

The Valmiki (a sub-caste from the Dalit community), labeled as Bhangis (a derogatory term for manual scavengers) have been one of the most excluded, exploited and marginalized group in Gujarat. They are victimized both by the higher castes and the state agencies. For centuries, the Valmikis have been assigned the menial task of cleaning dry latrines. With the arrival of the sewer system, the manual scavengers were employed as sewerage workers and municipality cleaners. Instead of cleaning the dry latrines, now they have to go down to clean blocked sewers filled with human excreta and other hazardous wastes. They work with bare hands, and expose themselves to all kinds of dirt, pollution and dangerous bacteria. People still call them Bhangis and prohibit them from participating in social functions and religious rituals.¹³

Health of Dalits: The World Health Organization defines health as a "state of complete physical, mental, social and spiritual well-being and not just the absence of disease and infirmity". In the Indian context the facts clearly indicate that historically to date the Dalits have suffered discrimination at the cost of the Brahmanical obsession with "purity and pollution". Initially the form of discrimination was very visible and normative (which is still alive in rural India) and now urbanization has made this discrimination more sophisticated especially in towns and cities.¹⁴ In 2000, the Infant Mortality Rate (child death before the age of 1) in SC's was 83 per 1000 live births as against 61.8 for the others, and the Child Mortality Rate (child death before the age of 5) was 119.3 for 1000 live births as against 82.6 for the others. These high rates among the SCs are closely linked with poverty, low educational status and discrimination in access to health services.¹⁵ When one takes Dalit women into account, the situation is worst. Women have been confronting tons of problems in their day to day life. But a woman faces additional problems when she belongs to lower caste. There are many studies conducted by NFSH (National Family Health Survey) which stated that one in every four Dalit women aged from 15 to 49 is undernourished, according to their Body Mass Index.

India is investing significantly into providing universal health services to its citizens but a new study suggests that these services are far from equitable. Sobin George, in his study (October, 2019) published in the Economic and Political Weekly, explored how caste impacts the interaction between public health service providers and patients. The author found that caste manifests itself formally and informally in the village's public health system. In terms of infrastructure, caste discrimination is obvious. The village has separate health

¹⁰ https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/262407/9/09_chapter-3.pdf

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² George, P. T. 2013. "The Untouchables: Dalits Workers' Struggles". Available at: <https://www.ritimo.org/The-Untouchables-Dalit-Workers-Struggles>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Menon, S. and Contractor, Q. "Dalits and Health". Available at: <http://www.cehat.org/cehat/uploads/files/a140.pdf>

¹⁵ <https://www.cpim.org/problems-of-dalits>

centers for different social groups with the centers meant for Dalits having poor facilities. Most health officials in the village are also not Dalits.¹⁶

A Story of Dalits' Homes burning: A dozen Dalit houses were torched after electoral defeat of 'upper' castes in Odisha village (August 11, 2017). The police, instead of making arrests, are protecting the accused. "There was nothing to eat," says an elderly woman sitting at the threshold of her house, or what are now the hollow remains of her house. 12 Dalit homes were burned down by members of 'upper' caste communities in Kumarpur in Odisha, following clashes over religious processions, political differences and assault.¹⁷ In this way, Dalits have been suffering a lot of problems both at physical and mental level.

Dalits and Their Religious Identity: India is one of the most diversified states as far as religion is concerned. **Freedom of religion** in India is a **fundamental right** guaranteed by the Constitution. It ensures that all citizens have the right to practice and promote their religions. On the other side of the coin, there have been many incidents of religious intolerance with respect to Dalits. Since ages, Dalits have never been allowed to practice mainstream Hindu religion. Due to the lack of proper recognition in the mainstream of Hindu religion, Dalits have been adopting religions such as Christianity and Buddhism.

The expression '**Socialist & Secular**' was inserted in the preamble by the Constitution (42nd Amendment) Act, 1976. The object of inserting this expression was to spell out expressly the high ideals of socialism and secularism and the integrity of the nation. The right to freedom of religion or belief is enshrined in several international instruments, such as Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR; Malcolm, 2012).¹⁸ In Bothli village, Chhattisgarh, on 25 June 2006, an eight-month pregnant woman was injured, police refused to take action against the perpetrators, claiming they had received orders not to register complaints from Christians (AICC, 2007a).¹⁹ These kinds of examples clearly put a light on the issue of religious intolerance.

Applying Sociological Theories to Dalits

'Stigma Theory' by Erving Goffman: Stigma is an attribute that conveys devalued stereotypes. Erving Goffman defined stigma as "an attribute that is deeply discrediting." For Goffman, stigma is a general aspect of social life that complicates everyday micro-level interactions—the stigmatized may be wary of engaging with those who do not share their stigma, and those without a certain stigma may disparage, overcompensate for, or attempt to ignore stigmatized individuals. Stigma can be understood as both cause and effect: it justifies exclusion of devalued others.²⁰ In the same way, one can understand the kinds of stigmas attached to Dalit Caste people and their identity. In the era of 21st Century, still there are cases of discrimination against Dalits on the basis of their caste. Today, 72 years after Independence, Dalits continue to bear the brunt of violence and discrimination.

Case 1: The tragic suicide of **Rohith Vemula** (Dalit by caste), a Ph.D student in the Hyderabad Central University who hanged himself, blaming his birth as a "fatal accident" in a chilling final note is an example of how this evil practice of caste discrimination has been ingrained in higher education these days.²¹

Case 2: There is one more example related to caste discrimination. On June 17, 2019, Prashant Solanki, a Dalit man in his late 20s, was on his way to his wedding riding a colorfully decorated horse, when he was ambushed by a group of upper-caste villagers. They insisted that riding a horse was an upper-caste privilege and threatened to attack Mr. Solanki and his family.²²

¹⁶ Alexander, S. 2019. "How caste affects public health services". Available at: <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/how-caste-affects-public-health-services-11570609511853.html>

¹⁷ Samal, A. K. 2017. "Dalit Homes Burn While 'Upper' Caste Arsonists Roam Scot Free". Available at: https://www.videovolunteers.org/dalit-home-burned-in-odisha/?gclid=Cj0KCQjw0PzfBRCOARIsANi0g0tQWhHufiDeODi4hNt6fcUB6iFxyEpdgol68bi4SlcON_XLI376yHcaAhXnEALw_wcB

¹⁸ Kesalu, S. V. 2019. "Dalits and Their Religious Identity in India: A Critical Look at Existing Practices". Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2455328X18822909>

¹⁹ *ibid*

²⁰ Clair, M. 2018. "Stigma". Available at: https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/matthewclair/files/stigma_finaldraft.pdf

²¹ Jha, A. K. 2016. "The Dalits". Available at: <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/the-big-story/story/20160215-dalits-untouchable-rohith-vemula-caste-discrimination-828418-2016-02-03>

²² "The Indian Dalits attacked for wearing the wrong shoes". Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-44517922>

G. S. Ghurye on Caste in India: Cambridge educated G.S.Ghurye (1893-1983) was the foundational figure of Indian sociology. He had strong views about **Caste as a derivative of 'race'**. Ghurye also reiterates the racial interpretation of Varna as color and the idea that the 'dasas' described by the Aryans were the 'dark' and 'snub-nosed' natives they encountered when they entered India (1969:165). Caste derives from the Varna classification of the early Vedic age, which referred to skin color and differentiated the 'Arya' and the 'Dasa'. The caste system originated as an endogamous institution as the Indo-Aryan Brahmins attempted to maintain their purity by keeping themselves apart from the local population (1969:125).²³ According to G.S. Ghurye, there are six main characteristics of caste system. These are – segmental division of society, hierarchy, restriction on feeding and social-intercourse, civil and religious disabilities, lack of unrestricted choice of occupation and restriction on marriage.²⁴

Constitutional Provisions to Dalits: The Indian Constitution, in its bill of rights guarantees of all citizens basic civil and political rights and fundamental freedoms. In addition, the Constitution has special provisions prohibiting discrimination on the basis of caste.

- **Article 15:** Prohibition of Discrimination on Grounds of Religion, Race, Caste, Sex or Place of Birth
- **Article 16:** Equality of Opportunity in Matters of Public Employment
- **Article 17:** Abolition of Untouchability
- **Article 29:** Protection of Interests of Minorities
- **Article 42:** Provision for Just and Humane Conditions of Work and Maternity Relief
- **Article 243D:** Reservation of Seats for SC's and ST's. (Part 6th)
- **Article 330:** Reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the House of the People (Special Provision)
- **Article 338:** National Commission for Scheduled Castes

There are various other provisions which provide safety and social security to minorities such as SC's and ST's. There are certain laws and acts which favor minorities such as Caste Disabilities Removal Act 1950, Protection of Civil Rights Act 1955, The Bonded Labor System (Abolition) Act 1976, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989, Protection of Human Rights Act 1993 etc.

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