MARGINALIZATION ACROSS AGES: FROM *ADIVASIS* TO MODERN SOCIETY

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Abstract

Marginalization, from an academic view, is a conscious process of excluding people based on systemic social, political, and economic structures that prevent individuals or groups from living with dignity. This paper examines the historical, cultural, and sociological aspects of marginalization, tracing its roots from early human societies through the Vedic era to modern times. It stresses how power groups, caste systems, and cultural misrepresentations keep inequality alive, especially for Adivasis and minority communities. By engaging with thinkers, anthropologists, and social workers, the study shows that marginalization is not a natural state but a systemic injustice deeply embedded in social, political, and economic systems. The paper concludes that breaking down these exclusionary practices requires moral reforms and collective effort.

Keywords: Marginalisation, Social Exclusion, *Adivasis*, Power Structures, & Inequality.

INTRODUCTION

Marginalization refers to the deliberate process by which individuals or groups are systematically kept from full participation in social, economic, cultural, and political life. It is not merely a passive condition but an active denial of rights, privileges, and opportunities. Essentially, marginalization involves relegating people to the edges of society, stripping them of dignity and recognition. This form of exclusion manifests in many ways—social, cultural, religious, and economic—where marginalized individuals are denied access to resources, justice, and equal treatment. Recognizing these systemic injustices should motivate the audience to feel a moral obligation to advocate for ethical reforms and a shared responsibility to eliminate such exclusions.

Philosophical Reflections on Inequality and Freedom:

The philosophical discussion on inequality often begins with questioning whether disparities among people are natural or socially constructed. Thinkers like Rousseau argued that inequality is not based on natural law but results from human institutions and choices. In early societies, instinct and simplicity guided human life, with basic needs and minimal division of labor. As societies developed, hierarchies, property rights, and power structures emerged, leading to conditions of servitude and exclusion. Therefore, freedom becomes a central issue in the debate about marginalization. Unlike animals, humans can think and choose, enabling them to improve themselves and their communities. However, systemic inequalities often restrict this freedom. The challenge is to regain freedom not by leaving society behind but by addressing its injustices—ensuring all people can live with dignity and respect.

Aim of the Study:

This paper examines the causes, forms, and solutions of marginalization across different eras and contexts. It traces its historical roots from early human societies to the Vedic age and discusses its ongoing presence in modern times, emphasizing how cultural, economic, and political structures sustain exclusion. Contributions from philosophers, anthropologists, and social workers are included to understand the experiences of marginalized communities better. The study highlights that effective social justice requires specific reforms, such as inclusive policies, affirmative action, and community empowerment, that are rooted in ethical principles and historical awareness. The main goal is to show that

marginalization is a human-made injustice rather than an unavoidable condition, and it can be addressed through targeted ethical reforms and collective effort.

HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS
Early Societies: Instinct-Driven Equality Before Division of Labour:

In early humanity, life was guided by instinct and simplicity. Needs were few, and communities lived in relative equality without the complexities of property ownership or social classes. Rousseau reflects on this state of nature, suggesting that inequality was not part of natural law but developed when humans forsook their free condition and began to divide labor and gather property (Rousseau). This instinct-based equality fostered a sense of freedom and dignity, with minimal exclusion, as survival and cooperation were shared responsibilities.

Rise of Kingship and Dynastic Rule as Sources of Inequality:

The transition from instinct-led societies to organized states marked a crucial point in the history of inequality. Kingship and dynastic rule introduced layered structures that concentrated power in the hands of a few. Dynasties often justified their authority through divine approval or hereditary rights, placing ordinary citizens in subordinate roles. This system formalized marginalization, as access to resources, privileges, and justice depended on a person's position within the hierarchy. The rise of kingship thus transformed marginalization from isolated incidents into systemic exclusion built into governance.

Marginalisation as a Recurring Historical Phenomenon:

Marginalization has repeatedly appeared throughout history, changing forms depending on cultural and political contexts. In ancient India, the jati-varna system formalized exclusion by placing certain communities, such as Adivasis and lower castes, in subordinate roles. Similarly, mysticism and Brahminical dominance during the Vedic era reinforced marginalization by fueling fear and denying spiritual enlightenment to those outside elite groups (Manu; Kautilya). Across different civilizations, whether through dynastic rule, caste hierarchies, or cultural labels, marginalization has remained a persistent phenomenon—an ongoing reminder of how power structures maintain inequality and encourage people to stay vigilant and committed to change.

CONCEPTUAL DIMENSIONS
Intellectual, Emotional, Religious, Cultural, and Ethnic Marginalisation:

Marginalization is layered, extending beyond economic hardship to include intellectual, emotional, religious, cultural, and ethnic aspects. Intellectual marginalization happens when certain groups are denied access to education or knowledge, limiting their ability to participate in societal development. Emotional marginalization appears through the denial of dignity and recognition, often reducing individuals to stereotypes or labels. Religious marginalization is evident when dominant groups exclude others based on faith, while cultural marginalization occurs when the traditions and practices of minority communities are dismissed as inferior. Ethnic marginalization similarly relegates entire communities to secondary roles based on language, race, or heritage. These aspects demonstrate that marginalization isn't just one issue but a complex web of exclusions affecting all facets of life.

Marginalisation is defined as "Exclusion from Honourable Life":

At its core, marginalization is the denial of the right to live an honorable and decent life. This definition highlights the deliberate nature of the process: individuals or groups are intentionally deprived of opportunities to live with dignity. Such exclusion is not accidental but systemic, rooted in social structures that favor certain groups while oppressing others. The

denial of an honorable life is evident in how marginalized communities are prevented from accessing property, education, healthcare, and political representation, which continues cycles of disadvantage and powerlessness.

Social Exclusion Through Denial of Rights and Cultural Misrepresentation:

Social exclusion is one of the most common forms of marginalization. It involves denying social rights—such as the right to take part in civic life, access resources, and receive equal treatment under the law. Cultural misrepresentation worsens this exclusion by portraying marginalized groups as "uncultured" or "inferior." Nehru noted that culture is mainly homemade, passed down within families, yet society often dismisses the traditions of marginalized communities as primitive or backward (Nehru). This false portrayal not only denies recognition but also reinforces stereotypes that justify exclusion. Therefore, social exclusion is both a denial of rights and a distortion of identity, perpetuating marginalization across generations.

SOCIOLOGICAL AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES
1960s Research Interest Due to Economic Disparities:

The 1960s marked a turning point in sociological research on marginalization. In India, rapid economic growth under the Five-Year Plans raised questions about whether prosperity was shared equally. Nehru's vision of planned development was challenged by evidence that wealth was concentrated among elites, while rural and marginalized communities remained excluded. Paidipaty's study of India's economic planning in the 1960s shows that, despite ambitious reforms, benefits mainly went to urban elites, leaving rural populations and marginalized groups behind.

Anthropologists' Focus on Language, Habits, and Behaviour:

Anthropologists emphasized how cultural and linguistic differences contribute to marginalization. Communities that speak minority languages or follow unique traditions are often excluded from mainstream society. Kale and Acharya's work demonstrates how identity markers such as language, caste, and religion serve as bases for discrimination, reinforcing exclusion in education, healthcare, and employment (Kale and Acharya). These studies show that marginalization is not only economic but also deeply rooted in cultural and social practices.

Unequal Distribution of Property and Privileges in Societies Like India:

Economic inequality in India has deep structural roots, shaped by colonial land tenure systems and post-independence development policies. The destruction of artisan classes and the concentration of land ownership created a landlord class that perpetuated exclusion (Sociology Institute). This unequal distribution of property meant that marginalized groups were denied access to resources, reinforcing cycles of poverty and exclusion. Anthropological studies confirmed that marginalization was systemic, affecting access to education, healthcare, and political representation.

POWER GROUPS AND EXCLUSION
Dominant Groups Defining Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria:

Marginalization often happens when dominant groups establish criteria for inclusion or exclusion. These groups—such as political elites, wealthy classes, or cultural majorities—control access to privileges, resources, and recognition. Sociologist T.K. Oommen's work on pluralism and minorities illustrates how power groups in India have historically shaped citizenship and belonging, often excluding Dalits, Adivasis, and other minorities from mainstream participation (Ansari).

Religious, Cultural, and Lifestyle-Based Exclusions:

Religion and culture have served as powerful tools for exclusion. Communities practicing different faiths or lifestyles were often labeled as "uncivilized" or "inferior." Ishwar Modi's sociological analysis emphasizes that exclusion in India is not only economic but also cultural, where minority practices are delegitimized by dominant traditions (Modi). Such exclusions reinforce stereotypes and justify systemic marginalization.

Education and Ethics as Tools of Exclusion:

Education, although a means of empowerment, has historically been used to exclude. Upper-caste elites limited access to learning, thereby monopolizing knowledge and reinforcing hierarchies. Ethical frameworks were similarly manipulated to define "worthy" citizens, marginalizing those who did not conform to dominant norms (Ansari)—this exclusion at the individual level perpetuated cycles of disadvantage.

MARGINALISATION IN ANCIENT INDIA
Adivasis as Original Inhabitants, Living Without Hierarchy:

Adivasis, often called the "original inhabitants," lived in egalitarian communities without strict hierarchies. Their social systems were based on cooperation and harmony with nature. But as state formations grew, Adivasis were pushed to the margins, denied land ownership, and labeled as "primitive" (Marinescu; Ziyauddin).

Emergence of *Jati-Varna* and Caste-Based Exclusion:

The *jati-varna* system institutionalised exclusion by relegating certain groups to subordinate positions. Caste hierarchies defined social worth, with upper castes monopolising privileges while lower castes and tribal groups were denied access to resources and recognition (Marinescu).

Vedic Age - Mysticism, Brahminical Dominance, and Fear Psychosis:

During the Vedic age, mysticism and Brahminical dominance reinforced social exclusion. Spiritual authority was held mainly by Brahmins, who used rituals and fear to control other groups. This established a system in which exclusion was justified by religious approval (Ziyauddin).

Dharmashastras and Artha Sastra Reinforcing Exclusionary Practices:

Texts like the Dharmaśāstras and Artha Sastra codified exclusionary practices, legitimizing caste hierarchies and restricting access to privileges. These texts institutionalized marginalization, embedding it into the moral and political fabric of society (Marinescu).

CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE
Marginalisation Persists Despite Economic Progress:

Despite significant economic growth in many countries, marginalized communities still face exclusion. In India, rapid development has not led to a fair distribution of resources. Studies show that Dalits, Adivasis, and other marginalized groups remain excluded from mainstream economic benefits, enduring persistent poverty and social discrimination (Deshpande and Sharma). Therefore, economic progress has not eliminated systemic inequalities; instead, it has often worsened them by favoring dominant groups.

Advanced Nations Also Exhibit Exclusion in Subtle Forms:

Marginalization is not limited to developing countries; advanced economies also face exclusion, though in subtler ways. Migrant communities, racial minorities, and economically disadvantaged groups in Europe and North America confront systemic barriers in education, employment, and healthcare. Yuval-Davis and Anthias argue that even in multicultural societies, exclusion persists through institutional practices that favor majority identities while marginalizing minority cultures (Yuval-Davis and Anthias). Therefore, marginalization remains a global issue, extending beyond just economic development.

Citizenship, Rights, and Multiculturalism as Modern Challenges:

In modern societies, citizenship and rights are central to discussions about marginalization. Multiculturalism, while encouraging diversity, often struggles to achieve true inclusion. Minority groups may be officially recognized but still face practical exclusion due to systemic biases. Bhattacharyya emphasizes how citizenship systems in India and elsewhere fail to fully incorporate marginalized communities, leaving them vulnerable to exclusion despite constitutional protections (Bhattacharyya). The challenge today is to harmonize multicultural ideals with the real experiences of inequality and exclusion.

CONCLUDING REFLECTION

Marginalization, as seen throughout history, sociology, and today, is not an innate trait but a systemic injustice built into human institutions. In early societies, a form of equality driven by instinct existed before the division of labor and property created inequality. The rise of kingship and dynasties formalized exclusion, while the jati-varna system and Brahminical dominance in ancient India codified marginalization through religious and cultural validation. Texts like the Dharmaśāstras and Arthaśāstra reinforced societal hierarchies, making exclusion a core part of society's moral and political structure.

Sociological and anthropological perspectives from the 1960s onward revealed that marginalization was not solely economic but also cultural and linguistic, with unequal distribution of property and privileges perpetuating cycles of disadvantage. Power groups—whether political, religious, or educational—set rules for inclusion and exclusion, keeping marginalized communities on the fringes of social life. These exclusions were intensified by cultural misrepresentation, where minority traditions were labeled as inferior.

In modern times, marginalization persists despite economic growth. Dalits, Adivasis, and minority groups in India still encounter systemic barriers, while wealthy nations subtly exclude them through institutions that favor the majority. Citizenship, rights, and multiculturalism remain debated topics, where official acknowledgment often fails to lead to real inclusion. The ongoing marginalization across generations shows its deep roots in power structures and social systems.

The analysis of historical, sociological, and current insights shows that marginalization is a deliberate act of exclusion by dominant groups intended to maintain their privileges. Fixing these issues involves dismantling exclusionary systems, ensuring equal rights, and promoting ethical change. Ultimately, marginalization is not an unchangeable condition but a human-made injustice that can be addressed through collective effort, social justice, and recognizing our shared humanity.

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