

# Marginalized People in Ancient India as depicted in Early Literary Texts

## Abstract

A large number of literary texts we have in Ancient India which mostly emphasized on the description about the different dynasties, kings and their activities, administrative measures and cultures. But a very few number of them speaks about the contemporary society and the people especially who were belonged to marginalized class in ancient India. Basically historians preferred to mention the socio – cultural conditions and the rules adopted by the kings than that of the common people. The marginalized class had been received less importance in the writings of most of the historians. However, a number of critics and analysis, although scattered about the social position and condition of marginalized group in ancient India. The present paper highlights the social, cultural, economic and political roles of the marginalized section of people in ancient India as depicted in the early Indian literary texts.

**Keywords:** Marginalized, Sudras, Untouchables, Slaves, Social Status.

## Introduction

If we deeply analyze the literary texts of ancient India in which social systems have been analyzed then it could be observed that many marginalized communities had been living in India since earliest time [from Vedic period]. These communities were mentioned in early literary texts such as *Vedas, Smriti Sastras, Dharma Sastras, Artha Sastra*, Buddhist and Jain literatures as 'Dasa' [slave], 'sudras', 'Chandalas', 'Nishadas', 'Adivasis' etc. They were exclusive from the main stream of society during the ancient times. They had no social status and equal opportunities in education, occupation and cultural milieu of early society. They were non privileged and deprived community lived outside of the main village. A Pali literature mentioned five type of marginalized people such as 'Chandala', 'Nishada', 'Beha', 'Rathakara', 'Pukkushu'.<sup>1</sup>

## Aim of the Study

This study will help us to understand about the marginalised people lived in Ancient India and their social & economic condition & position in society.

The following objectives are laid Dow for the study of the marginalized people I Aciet India.

1. To study the nature and characteristic of marginalised people in our country.
2. To analyse the social status and living condition and culture of the marginalized people in Ancient India.
3. To analyse the categories of the marginalized people identified by the historian in Ancient India.
4. To analyse the literally texts I which the living style and social conditios of marginalized people have been depicted ad discuss.

## Review of Literature

Review of research study and literature is most pertinent in the field of any research work and project. And therefore, as a part of research study the review of earlier research work have been made critically. In this study, the history of marginalisssed people during Ancient India has been selected. Therefore the study and literature on marginalized people have been taken for review. All though very few studies were conducted on the marginalised people in Ancient India but number of study conducted on the marginalized people during British and Post Independence India.

Chaudhary, S.N. (2016). Marginalized Groups: Status and Challenges,

In this article the author discussed and analysed about the origin and conditions of Marginalized people in present India. He also discussed their status in society and how they are facing challenges.

Saksena, Debesh. (2014) The problems of Marginalized Groups in India,



**Hasibul Hoque**

Assistant Professor,  
Deptt. of History,  
Visva Bharati University,  
Santiniketan, Birbhum  
W.B.

## Remarking An Analisation

In this article the author explained the definition of Marginalization and some categories of Marginalized people such as women, SC (Dalits), ST, People with disabilities, and sexual minorities etc. in the present social context. He also identified their causes of suffering and problems.

Mittal, Abhishek. (2016). A Brief History Of The Cast System And Untouchability in India

The author in this book discuss the origin of cast system chronologically and untouchability in India. He also analysed the reform in modern India.

Although, the authors have been discussed and analysed about the marginalized people in India. But this is on the present context. The author of this paper highlighted about the marginalized people in Ancient India as depicted in early literary texts.

### The Body

The root of beginning of marginalization started from Aryan conquest in India. They defeated indigenous people were called as 'Dasa' [slaves] and 'dasi' (women slave); they were considered as indigenous community in the name of 'Anasa' [blunt nose], *Krishna tracho* [black colour] 'Mrdhravāc'<sup>2</sup> [language which was unable to understand] etc [Rgveda]. The Rgveda mentioned about the origin of four Varna system, where Sudras were placed at the bottom of Aryan society. In the origin of the four Varna the Brahmanas were created from the mouth, Kshatriyas from shoulder, Vaishya from thigh and Sudras from the feet of Brahma<sup>3</sup> of the lord of the creator. Though Sudras were Aryans but later on they gradually lost their status and became dasa (slave). In later Vedic period 'Nisadha' were regarded as marginalized community. Women also lost their freedom, "the born of women is unfortunate," is mentioned in Rgveda. Maitralani Samhita considered to the women as injurious as liquor as dice. Women could not participate in Sabha, Samiti as they could. Sati system was also in practice in those days. A woman should be considered as a prostitute if she was not married at her adult age. (Vishnu Smriti, 24/41).

### Slaves

Slavery was an important social institution prevalent in ancient India. There is lot of positive evidences in regarding the existence of slave system. Ancient literary texts speak of different type of slaves. One of the literatures Arthasāstra

Kautilya mentioned 8 types Dasa (slave) and laws on their concerned (Chpater 13, Section 65)<sup>4</sup>. Such as

1. "Grihajata" - (Slave by birth).
2. "Kritadasa" – (Slave by brought).
3. "DhajahataDasa" – (Slave by war captive).
4. "LabdhaDasa" – (Slave by the gift of other).
5. "Atmabrikrita" – (Slave by sell himself).
6. "DayagataDasa" – (Slave for debt).
7. "DandhaPranita" – (Slave by committed offence).
8. "AhitakDasa" – (Slave by steal money).

Manu Smriti also mentioned seven types of slaves.<sup>5</sup> such as –

1. "DhajahataDasa" – (Slave by war captive).
2. "Grihajata" - (Slave by born).
3. "Kritadasa" – (Slave by brought).

4. "DatrimaDasa" – (ASlave gifted by master to other).

5. "DandhaDasa" – (Slave by committed offence).

6. "DhaktaDasa" – (Slave for food/ service).

7. "Paithrika" – (Being slave by as successor).

Buddhist text Jatakashas also speaks of four types of slaves same as referred in Arthasatra and Manu Smriti. Mahabharata also referred two kind of slave namely

1. "DhajahataDasa" – (War captive slave).

2. "Grihajata" - (Slave by born).

There were mainly three types of slaves in Ancient hindu society such as

1. Domestic Slaves (Slaves in household).

2. Agrarian Slaves (Slaves in Agricultural field).

3. Temple Slaves. (Slaves of temple institutions).

### Untouchables

Untouchable is one kinds of evil social system. It is the ugliest manifestation of man's inhumanity to man. In Hindu social system they were worsely treated by the upper caste of the community. They were prohibited not only from touching the superior class but also approaching them with in prescribed distance.

In Hindu social system Chandalas were considered as untouchable class. Evidence can be found in early literary texts for understanding the position of Chandalas. There were two kinds of Chandalas such as 'Karma' and 'Janma' Chandalas; one is by works and other by birth. According to Manu Smriti "those who are guilty of a Brahmin's murder, theft of Brahmin's gold or drinking of spiritual liquor, he will become an untouchable."<sup>6</sup> According to Apasthamba "to touch or seen any chandala. It is a sin."<sup>7</sup>

Jain texts also speak about three types of untouchable Such as "JatiJungitas" (untouchable by birth), "Karma jungitas" (untouchable by conduct) and "SarreaJungitas" (untouchable in body) who were marginalized people lived at the bottom of Hindu social system. Hunters, painters, fishers, tailor and acrobets are mentioned as "JatiJungitas", on the other side rearing of bird and fowls animal and barbers are considered as "Karma Jungitas" and Dumb, Crippled, hunch, backed person, dwarf, one eyed man were treated as "SarreaJungitas".

Buddhist texts also considered Chandalas as Hinajatis, besides Venas (Basket maker), Nisadas (hunters) are regarded as marginalized people. Thus the concept of Chandalas found in the Dharma sastras are corroborated with Buddhist and Jain literary texts.

By the Anulomā and Pratilamā marriages number of Varna Samkara Jatis were increased. Vedic literature mentioned eight types of Varna Samkara Jatis. Vasistha, Boudhayana, Goutama, and Manu have mentioned number of Varna Samkara such as ten, fifteen, eight and ten respectively. Amarkosh also mentioned ten types of Chandalas in Gupta Period.<sup>8</sup> As a result of Varna Sankara the number of marginalized people were increased in early Indian society.

**Social Condition**

In Early Vedic period Sudras were included in four Varna systems of Hindu Society. But *Dasa* or *Dasi* were excluded from the main stream of Aryan society. They were regarded as slaves. But in later Vedic period the Sudras and women become deprived and lost their social status and they were considered as low caste in the society. They were considered as unclean by Manu. They had no right to take part in education. *Griha Sutra* mentioned that it should not be right to talk with women and Sudra for an educated man. i.e. Brahamins. According to *Dharma sutras* Sudras and women were remained slave still to death. During the time of *Probajja* [receive education] listening the teacher should not be looked any women, Sudra, dog and black colour birds because they are symbol of falsehood.<sup>9</sup> Sudras must have to serve as a slave because God has created them to serve to the other class i.e. Brahamins.<sup>10</sup> *Manu* and *Yajñabalkha* did not believe in women freedom. They said that women should be protected in her childhood by her father, in adult by her husband, in old by her son.<sup>11</sup> It says that in their whole life women should be under the control of menfolk. The condition of Chandalas in society was very pathetic. They were considered as untouchable and lived outside the cities or villages. They were regarded as marginalized not only for their works but also for their languages, dress, foods, customs, etc. In the Hindu social system in Ancient India untouchables were treated worsely by the high caste people. They were prohibited from touching the superior class people, having any social intercourse with the high caste and even prohibited from approaching them within prescribed distance. They had no civil rights such as participation in social and religious function, entering temples, using public roads, tanks, utilizing ponds, etc.

**Economic Condition**

Although the marginalized people were deprived every aspects of society, but they were the majority in the society and were the backbone of all the economic activities. They were appointed in agriculture, royal palaces, house servant, manual scavenging, etc. They involved in different types of economic activities such as making of pottery, construction of roads and buildings, art and craft, oil production, iron weapons and tools, leather works, etc. *Narada Smriti* mentioned two types of work which have been done by the slaves. One was holy works and other was unholy work; cleaning of roads, temples were holy works and manual scavenging were unholy works. Although agriculture was mainly done by peasants in Maurya and Gupta period and slaves and Sudras were involved mainly in household works. But on the basis of evidences we can't say that Indian society was slave society in compare to the Greek and Roman society. In ancient Greece and Rome agriculture and other works were done by the slaves.

Sudras could be involved in trade and crafts mentioned by *Manu* and *Yajñabalkha*.<sup>12</sup> Domestication was the main job of Sudras.<sup>13</sup> *Milindho Pañho* viewed that trade and agriculture was to occupation not for Sudras as it was for Vaishyas. The

main occupations of Chandalas were to bury dead bodies, beheaded of guilty persons and *Pukkusha* were cleaning of temples, Nishadas were the hunter.<sup>14</sup> If we deeply analysis *Rgvedic* texts relating to ritual activists we can find that the economic condition of Sudras was not always same. They were sometimes considered as peasant and sometimes they were household, agricultural labours and slaves.

Women also involved in lot of economic activities such as weaving cloths, domestication of animals, art and crafts, agriculture etc. The economic condition of women and marginalized people was not very sound. They always struggled to survive although most of the economic activities have been done by them in society. In that case upper classes depended on them. But they had no right, neither on lands nor on properties. Yet some early literary texts speak about the property of Sudras and women such as "*Godhana*" [cattles] and "*Stridhana*" [property right of women]. "Sudras have many cattle" mentioned in *Maitrayani Samhita* and *Panchabingsha Brahmana*.<sup>15</sup> The term "*Dasabhoga*" indicated that Dasas has property.<sup>16</sup>

**Social Status**

Though marginalized people were deprived but it is also true that they were not such deprived as was in Greece and Rome. In ancient India slave were in far more better condition than ancient Greece and Rome. From the evidence of *Smritisastras* a slave can be free from his bondage by many acts such as a slave can be free if he saved the life of his master; a slave can be free if he paid his debt in case of slave for debt; a woman slave can be free if his master commit sex with her. According to *Apasthambha Dharma Sutra* women and Sudra have the right to listen and receive suggestion from *Artharaveda*.<sup>17</sup> The Aryan peoples those who have defeated in war become slaves yet they can take part in Vedic rituals because they were included in upper caste.<sup>18</sup>

Heterodox religion such as Buddhism and Jainism played a significant role in wipe out social discrimination. They showed sympathy and liberty not only for slaves but also for women and Sudras. Gautama Buddha first stroke on the caste system and social structure. He opposed this evil inhuman caste system and gave permission of participation not only lower caste people but also women in Buddhist Sangha. He first gave the social status to women. The doctrine of "*ahimsa*" (nonviolence) played a significant role in the proliferation of untouchables in India. Emperor Ashoka also ordered his official to be liberal and showed well behavior on *Dasa* [slaves]. He tried to reduce social discrimination and introduced equality (*Babohar Samatā*) in administration and in punishment<sup>19</sup> (*Dañda Samatā*). Kautilya also sympathized on slave. He said an Aryan never be a slave. A son of slave can be acquired father's property. If a person becomes slave for his debt his son cannot be considered as a slave. An Acharya must be respectable where he is chandala or *Pukkusha*.<sup>20</sup>

**Conclusion**

Though marginalized people deprived from every aspects of life in society but they played many

## Remarking An Analisation

significant roles not only in social life but also in economic field. All economic activities were done by them, without them Indian economic should be static. They made deep impact on society and economy. In ancient India, people were mainly categories by birth as depicted in *Smritis* such as the son of a Brahmin will be Brahmin and accordingly the son of a Sudra designated as a Sudra. Since then a section of people were denominated as marginalized such as Sudra, Chandalas, slaves, women, Nishada, cultivator and so on. They were socially deprived and exclusive from main stream of society. They had no right of any opportunity on social status. Yet most of economic activities they have done and they were backbone not only in society but also in economic activities. We can find many marginalized and untouchable people in every corner of Indian society. It is our responsibility to wipe out those evil systems and made our society free from discrimination.

### References

1. Altekar, A.S. (1959). *The Position Of Women In Hindu Civilization*. Delhi: MotilalBanarsidass Publication
2. Ambedkar, B.R. (2017) *Who Were TheSurdas?* New Delhi: Kalpaz Publication
3. ——— (2017). *The Untouchables*. New Delhi: Kalpaz Publication
4. Ayanger, K.V. Rangaswami. ( 1949). *Aspects Of The Social and Political System Of Manusmriti*. Lucknow : Madras Law Journal Press
5. Banerjee, N.C. (1930). *Slavery in Ancient India*. Calcutta: Calcutta Review
6. Basham, A.L. (1967). *The Wonder That Was India*. London: Sidgwick & Jackson
7. Bhattacharya, Sukumari.(2015). *Women and Society in Ancient India* Calcutta: National Book Publishing.
8. Buhler, G. (1879). *ApathambaDharmasastra*. (Eng Trans) London: Oxford.
9. ——— (1882). *Rg-Veda*(Eng. Trans). London: Oxford
10. Chanana, Dev Raj. (1990). *Slavery in Ancient India*. Calcutta: People's Publishing House
11. ——— (1959). *The Sudras, TheDasa And Manu*. Bombay: IJSW
12. Chalkadar, H.C. (1990). *Social Life in Ancient India*. New Delhi: Asian Education Services
13. Das, Gurucharan.(1411 Beng Era) *Manu Smriti*. Chap II. (Beng. Trans.) Calcutta: Sanskrit PustakBhandar
14. Das, S.K.(1944). *The Economic History of Ancient India*. Calcutta: Vohra Publisher
15. Dutta, N.K. (1931). *Origin and Growth of Caste in India*. Vol-I London: K.P.T.T.&Co. Ltd.
16. Kane, P.V.(2006)*History Of Dharmasastra*. Vol-II Pune: B.O.R.I
17. Kangle, R.P.(1963). *The KautilyaArthasastra*.(Eng. Trans) Part II Bombay: Bombay University Press
18. Sharma R.S.(2011). *Perspective in Social and Economic History Of Early India*. ( Beng. Trans.). New Delhi: Orient Blackswan
19. ———(1989). *Sudra in Ancient India*( Beng. Trans). Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi and Comp.

### Endnotes

1. *MajimNikaya*, 3<sup>rd</sup> chap. PP, 169 -78.
2. *Rgveda*, 8/29/10 and 1/174/2, Translation by R.K. Kangle, Bombay University, PP .271 - 273.
3. *BrahmanashaMukshMasidashurajanyaKritaluruTudashabaishapadrangSudraajayatall*, *Rgveda* 10/90/12. R.S. Sharma, *Sudra in Ancient India*, P. 26 and D.K. Ganguly, *Bharat ItihaserSandhane*, P.156.
4. *Kautilya'sArthasastra*, Book 3, Chap – 13, Sect – 65 (3.13.1 -75).
5. *DhajahritaBhaktadasagrihajaKritadatrimoPaitrika dandadaschaSaptetadasyonayo*, *Manu Smriti*, 8/415.
6. *Manu Smriti*, Chap – 2 , Translation by Gurucharan Das, *Sanskrit PusthakNahandar*, Calcutta, 1411(Bens) PP . 10 – 11
7. *Apathamba Dharma Sutra*, 2/1/2/8 .
8. "Plaba, Dibakriti, Janamgam", *Amarkosh*, 2/10/20 .
9. *StriSudraShakrishnan: Sukuri stamina Prekelete – SatapathBrahmana* 2.8.3.
10. *Sudrang the KarheyasangKritamgKritame be Dashabaibuu hi Srista so BrahmanashaSyanghubha : Manu Smriti*VII. 413.
11. *PitarakhatiKoumarevarltarakhatiyoubah----- Manu Smriti IX.3 R.S. Shrama, Perspective in Social and Economic History of Early India*, PP, 64 – 66 .
12. *Manu smriti*, Chapter 10.
13. *Yajgabalkhasmriti*, Chapter 1.
14. *Mahabharata*, KuntiParba.
15. the term "Bohuposhu" used in *PanchabingshaBrahmana*, 6/1/11, *Sudra In Ancient India* by R.S. Sharma , P- 39.
16. *VinayaPitaka*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Chap, P -136 .
17. *StrisūSudresūJaVidyāsaNisthāSamapti – Apathamba Dharma Sutra* edited by Bullar.
18. R. S. Sharma, *Perspective in Social and Economic History of Early India* by, PP 45 - 46.
19. *Pillar Edic 4*, Delhi – Topara, line – 15 .
20. *Jataka*, 4<sup>th</sup> chap, P. 200.