

PROBLEMS OF MARGINALIZED GROUPS IN INDIA: A STUDY

Prof. A. K. Paricha

Emeritus Fellow, Political Science
Berhampur University

Marginalization is a slippery and multi-layered concept. Whole societies can be marginalized at the global level while classes and communities can be marginalized from the dominant social order. Similarly, ethnic groups, families or individuals can be marginalized within localities. To a certain extent, marginalization is a shifting phenomenon, linked to social status. So, for example, individuals or groups might enjoy high social status at one point in time, but as social change takes place, so they lose this status and become marginalized. Similarly, as life cycle stages change, so might people's marginalized position. Marginalization lies at the core of all social, political and economic conflicts wherein vulnerable groups undergo victimization. Women, people with disabilities, Dalits, Aged people, children, minorities, poor, sexual minorities, etc. are most vulnerable marginalized groups in almost every society.

The concept of marginality was first introduced by Robert Park (1928). Marginalization is a symbol that refers to processes by which individuals or groups are kept at or pushed beyond the edges of society. The term *outsiders* may be used to refer to those individuals or groups who are marginalized.¹ The Encyclopaedia of Public Health defines marginalization as, "to be marginalized is to be placed in the margins and thus excluded from the privilege and power found at the centre".² Ghana S. Gurung and Michael Kollmair mention that the concept of marginality is generally used to analyse socioeconomic, political, and cultural spheres, where disadvantaged people struggle to gain access to resources and full participation in social life. In other words, marginalized people might be socially, economically, politically and legally ignored, excluded or neglected and therefore vulnerable to livelihood change.³

Peter Leonard defines social marginality as 'being outside the mainstream of productive activity and/or social reproductive activity'. This includes two groups, firstly a relatively small group of people who are voluntarily marginal to the social order - new age travellers, certain religious sects, commune members, some artists, for instance. Here, however, we are concerned with a second group, those who are involuntarily socially marginal. Leonard characterises these people as remaining outside 'the major arena of capitalist productive and reproductive activity' and as such as experiencing 'involuntary social marginality'.⁴

The concept of marginality rose to its high prominence while modernism held its sway in the world during 19th century and: "Man, as the Renaissance slogan had it, was the measure of all other things in the universe: while the Western norms of dress, behaviour, architecture, intellectual outlook and so on provided a firm centre against which deviation, observations, variations could be detected and identified as other and marginal".⁵

Indian society witnessed a multilayered marginality during colonial period and in the postcolonial scenario in the 20th century. When India emerged as a nation-state, the western concept of marginality began to melt slowly, yet a profound question -whether the subaltern can speak- kept the nation haunting. Gayatri Chakraborty rightly elaborated on the issue through her epoch making post colonial discourse, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' and she meant that the subalterns are still at the periphery and Dattani in his dramatic discourse attempts to give voice to the voiceless while letting them a push from the margin toward the centre.⁶

Historical background of Marginalized Groups:

Richard Morrock in his 'Heritage of Strife: The effects of colonialist "Divide and Rule" strategy upon the colonized peoples' defines "divide and rule" as the "conscious effort of an imperialist power to create and/or turn to its own advantage the ethnic, linguistic, cultural, tribal, or religious differences within the population of a subjugated colony".⁶ The basic tactics of "divide and rule" as practiced by Western colonialists were to create differences within the conquered population; to exploit those differences for the benefit of the colonial power and then to politicize those differences so that they were carried over into the post-colonial period. The creation of differences can come about in several ways: first by playing one ethnic group against another; secondly, by throwing hostile ethnic groups together; thirdly, by magnifying linguistic or cultural differences; and fourthly by religious conversion.⁷

Meaning of Marginalized Groups:

In general, the term 'marginalization' describes the overt actions or tendencies of human societies, where people who they perceive to undesirable or without useful function, are excluded, i.e., marginalized. These people, who are marginalized, from a Group or Community for their protection and integration and are known as 'marginalized groups. This limits their opportunities and means for survival. Peter Leonard defines marginality as, "being outside the mainstream of productive activity and social reproductive activity".

Latin observes that 'Marginality' is so thoroughly demeaning, for economic well-being, for human dignity, as well as for physical security. Marginal groups can always be identified by members of dominant society, and will face irrevocable discrimination. These definitions are mentioned in different contexts and show that marginalization is a concept which needs discussion. Marginalization has aspects in sociological, economic, and political debates. Marginalization may manifest itself in forms varying from genocide/ethnic cleansing and other xenophobic acts/activities at one end of the spectrum, to more basic economic and social hardships at the unitary (individual/family) level.

Marginalised groups in India:

Women

Women have low status as compared to men in Indian society. They have little control on the resources and on important decisions related to their lives. The early marriage and childbearing, miscarriages, multiple pregnancies create serious health hazards for women's.⁸ About 28 per cent of girls in India get married below the legal age and experience pregnancy. These have serious repercussions on the health

of women. It has been noted earlier that women in India who are uneducated and poor are the most vulnerable to disease and ill health during their lifetime.⁹ They experience different types of mortality including reproductive problems, aches, pain and injuries; weakness, nutritional problems, fever, respiratory problems; problems in the gastro intestinal tract; skin, eye and ear problems and a residual category of 'other' problems.¹⁰ Domestic violence is also observed as a common phenomena particularly in the rural areas.

SCs and STs:

Marginalization of certain groups or classes occurs in most societies including developed countries and perhaps it is more pronounced in underdeveloped countries. In the Indian context, caste may be considered broadly as a proxy for socio-economic status and poverty. In the identification of the poor, scheduled caste and scheduled tribes and in some cases the other backward castes are considered as socially disadvantaged groups and such groups have a higher probability of living under adverse conditions and poverty. The health status and utilization patterns of such groups give an indication of their social exclusion as well as an idea of the linkages between poverty and health.¹¹

Caste in Indian society is a particular form of social inequality that involves a hierarchy of groups ranked in terms of ritual purity where members who belong to a particular group or stratum share some awareness of common interest and a common identity. Structurally the lower castes were economically dependent on the higher castes for existence. The Scheduled Caste (lower castes) remained economically dependent, politically powerless and culturally subjugated to the upper caste. This kind of dominance of higher castes on the lower castes effects their overall lifestyle and access to food, education and health.¹²

In a caste-dominated country like India; Dalits comprise more than one-sixth of the Indian population (160 million approx.), and stand as a community whose human rights have been severely violated. Structural discrimination against these groups takes place in the form of physical, psychological, emotional and cultural abuse which receives legitimacy from the social structure and the social system. Physical segregation of their settlements is common in the villages forcing them to live in the most unhygienic and inhabitable conditions. All these factors affect their health status, access to healthcare, and quality of health service received. The scavenger community among the Dalits are vulnerable to stress and diseases with reduced access to healthcare. Studies on nature of exclusion and discrimination faced by Dalit children in using public health services in rural areas are very limited; however there is indirect evidence which is reflected in indicators related to health. Mortality, for example, is an important indicator of health status and it is seen in India, infant mortality rate for Dalit children is high (88 per 1000) when compared to children from the 'other' social group (69 per 1000).¹³ Structural discrimination directly impedes equal access to health services by way of exclusion. The negative attitude of the health professionals towards these groups also acts as a barrier to receiving quality healthcare from the health system. The scheduled tribes and the scheduled castes face structural discrimination within the Indian society. Unlike the scheduled castes, the scheduled tribes are a product of marginalization based on ethnicity.

Children

In India, children's vulnerabilities and exposure to violations of their protection rights remain spread and multiple in nature. The manifestations of these violations are various, ranging from child labour, child trafficking, to commercial sexual exploitation and many other forms of violence and abuse. With an estimated 12.6 million children engaged in hazardous occupations, for instance, India has the largest number of child labourers under the age of 14 in the world. Those children working in the brick kilns, stone quarries, mines, carpet and zari industry suffer from occupation related diseases.¹⁴

Persons with Disabilities

Disability poses greater challenges in obtaining the needed range of services. Persons with disabilities face several forms of discrimination and have reduced access to education, good health employment and other socio-economic opportunities. In India, there is an increase of proportion of **disabled population**. Disability includes loco-motor disability, visual, mental, speech and hearing, learning disabilities etc.¹⁵ It has been noted that there are more than 650 million people worldwide suffering from one or another form of disability (two thirds of whom live in developing countries), most have long been neglected and marginalized by the state and society. They are victims of physical, sexual, psychological and emotional abuse, neglect, and financial exploitation, while women with disabilities are particularly exposed to forced sterilization and sexual violence.

Aged

In India, the population of the elderly is growing rapidly and is emerging as a serious area of concern for the government and the policy planners. Lack of economic independence has an impact on their access to food, clothing and healthcare. Among the basic needs of the elderly, medicine features as the highest unmet need. Healthcare of the elderly is a major concern for the society as ageing is often accompanied by multiple illnesses and physical ailments. Pain in the joints, followed by cough and blood pressure, piles, heart diseases, urinary problems, diabetics and cancer are the common ailments reported among elderly.¹⁶ One out of two elderly in India suffers from at least one chronic disease which requires life-long medications. Providing healthcare to elderly is a burden for especially poor households. Visual impairment, hearing problem, loco-motor problem (difficulty in walking) and problems in speech are common forms of disability among elderly. Senility and neurosis is common mental illness reported among elderly.¹⁷

Marginalized Groups and Power Resources:

The empowerment of marginalized groups, through the acquisition of varied bases of power is a challenging task. They are denied access to the power resources and their struggles have been against the structures of domination as manifested in the protest struggles of downtrodden castes. Empowerment, for them, coincides with emancipation from structures of domination. It implies a process of redistribution of power within and between families/societies and a process aiming at social equality, which can be achieved only by disempowering some structures, systems and institutions. Empowerment, however, is not simply a mechanical process of sharing, distribution or redistribution of power. Rather, it involves far wider changes in social and economic institutional arrangements, political ideologies, traditional practices and even in the mindset of the marginalized people through conscientization. Historical evidence shows that such changes are possible only through sustained grassroots mobilization, social movements, selfless interventions of civil societies (NGO's, people's cooperatives and progressive institutions) and well articulated attractive policy formulations and their execution with a political commitment for the redressal of power imbalances at the grassroots.¹⁸

Role of Society in empowerment of marginalized groups:**Social movements:**

Social movements play a crucial role in the empowerment of marginalized groups. Empowerment is a continuous process and this process should be generated from within society itself and be sustained through a process of continuous mobilization of the marginalized groups of the society. This process must be generated from the inbuilt urge for freedom and collective action against domination. Social movements, as agents of grassroots sustained mobilization, play a crucial role in the creation of new social identity and empowerment of marginalized groups. Through collective mobilization and a reorientation for change, they try to bring about reforms in the existing living conditions of the people. As M.S.A Rao observes 'a social movement essentially involves sustained collective mobilization through either informal or formal organization. A social movement is generally oriented towards bringing about change, either partial or total in the existing system of relationships, values and norms, although there are efforts, which are oriented towards resisting change and maintaining status quo.'¹⁹

Non-Government Organizations:

(NGOs) Non-government organizations play a vital role in modern society as far as social, economic and political development are concerned. It is usually claimed that NGOs are effective in mobilizing marginalized groups, that they are participatory in their approach, flexible, bring sustainability in the societal development programmes and their development initiatives are cost efficient.²⁰ This observation is made in the context of the ineffectiveness of the governmental projects and programmes for the weaker sections which are not often producing positive results due to bureaucratic delay, corruption, inefficiency etc. Moreover, in the present scenario of economic reforms and globalization, state itself is withdrawing from many welfare activities thereby enabling the involvement of NGOs. As an alternative empowerment strategy, NGO activism has acquired momentum in the current development discourses. Many international funding agencies and governments have no hesitation to support NGOs in different parts of the globe. Together with the state, they act as the agents of social development and social change. They educate the community on many social evils and irrational practices. Moreover, as agents of mobilization at the grassroots level, they strengthen the political empowerment of weaker sections. In India a large number of NGOs are doing commendable work in reaching the marginalised groups.

Civil Society:

The concept of civil society is an endeavour which strengthens the grassroots mobilization and empowerment of marginalized groups. It is described as the capacity of self-organization on the part of a political community or the capacity of a society to organize itself without being organized by the state. It consists of the multitude of private non-profit sector including voluntary organizations, NGOs, local community groups, social services agencies, self-help groups etc found in different parts of the globe. As Manoranjan Mohanty states, 'civil society has come to refer to those organized groups who pursue their demands in the pluralist democratic process'.²¹ It is the space where individual members of society voluntarily come together, in formal or informal gatherings, groups, associations or organizations to participate in public life.²² The evolution and growth of civil society is attributed to the reduction of the role of state in the welfare and development of the people. At the same time, a variety of groups and associations have emerged outside the control of state and market, to provide citizens opportunities in different facets of social life. Civil society has a major economic and social presence in terms of employment opportunities offered and provision of social services. There is an argument that the state in the third world has become inefficient, corrupt and bureaucratic and therefore civil society should assume the task of development.²³ Thus the strengthening of civil society creates 'social capital' that helps to sustain democratic process, socio-economic development and other aspects of citizenship. A strong civil society can thus be associated with a high level of citizen empowerment and a weak civil society with a less empowered citizenry.²⁴ As far as the empowerment of the marginalized sections is concerned, interface with the civil society is a powerful means to achieve the goal. Simultaneously, it is also reminded that though the role of the state has been criticized in bringing up the weaker sections of society, its pivotal role cannot be underestimated as the legitimate agency entrusted with the task of carrying out the multifarious phases of developmental programmes for them. As an institution entitled to protect public interests, the state has a special responsibility to look into the problems of the lowest strata of society and to chalk out welfare measures for them by checking vested interests.

Conclusion

Thus it can be concluded that marginalised groups are defined as those who are subject to unfair treatment or are, relative to other age groups or sections of society, more dependent on others and therefore find it difficult to maintain their subsistence on their own and protect their rights. Besides this, certain groups in society are also subject to discriminatory treatment and feel marginalized. They need special attention to avoid exploitation. In India the women, children, scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, persons with disabilities, migrants and aged are regarded as marginalised or vulnerable groups. These people are socially, economically, politically and legally ignored and excluded in Indian society.

From a human right perspective, all citizens should receive adequate health, education, food and nutrition, housing, participation, equal treatment, and freedom from discrimination and violence. However these marginalised groups (STs, SCs, children, disabled and elderly) are often marginalized over looked in the public delivery system and also subject to multidimensional problems whose underlying factors are intertwined. Sometimes these people have to suffer from double jeopardy.

No doubt the Indian government has framed and established the laws and rights for these marginalised groups at different times but due to lack of proper attention towards their rights and improper implementation of their laws they have to face number of problems in Indian society. Thus there is the need of some new policy measures to improve their conditions and to prevent them from discrimination and exploitation in our society.

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