



Marginalized and Marginalization in ancient India

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Abstract

This paper shifts from colonial and nationalist narratives to a Marxist-Subaltern framework in analysing institutionalization of marginality in ancient India. The shift from pastoralism to a sedentary agrarian economy required immutable social hierarchies, it argues, which were codified by Brahmanical normative texts such as the Manusmṛti. Thus, Varnaśaṅkara becomes a legal fiction the exploration of which reveals how it was groups like Caṇḍāla and Mleccha who were removed in order to preserve ritual purity and, by extension, economic sway. further revisits the Transition from Slavery (dāsa) to State's indebted requirement of a forced labor for surplus extraction (Viṣṭi). Using Brahmanical patriarchy as a vantage point, this work demonstrates that the control over female sexuality and property was crucial for maintaining caste endogamy. Finally, recognising that this Heterodox movement presented an ideological charge against the arrangements of the time, the paper finds that these changes mostly worked within economic boundaries. In the end, marginality becomes more a cultural socio-economic construct whose purpose is to maintain elite hegemony and the predatory nature of early Indian state.

Keywords: Ancient Indian historiography, social stratification, slavery, untouchability, forced labor

Introduction

After all, for over a century or so it was colonial and elite nationalist vision that had almost exclusively dominated the reconstruction of ancient Indian history. The colonial telling of the story, with its orthodox Brahmanical informants and translated legal codices, tended to be so confident that early India was a stagnant, hyper-religious society marked by political inertia. In response, nationalist historians brought back to India a classical 'Golden Age' which could endow the nation with an arsenal against British (imperial) derision, focusing on royal dynasties and political statecraft as well as Upanishadic metaphysics. Therefore, the existence and social struggle of most human beings, the majority not even subalterns but unfree labour no more slaves than in slave conditions or semi-slave relationships as mythically productive classes nonproductive by Warriors have necessarily continued outside demonstration.

Only from mid twentieth century with Marxist and subaltern historiography from D.D. Kosambi onwards, one intellectual cascades after another turning historical axis towards modes of production and material culture and socio-economic conditions in lower strata; it wobbled once then back again to anthropology, ethnicity and social formations^[1]. These historians argued, Such constructions of grand political superstructures in early India were ritually predicated on dispossessed surplus labour. Furthermore, in order to reconstruct the 'real' history of subordinate/marginal groups, the dāsas (slaves), caṇḍālas (untouchables), mlecchas (outsiders/foreigners), and women, a detailed method for reading Brahmanical normative texts must be developed as modern historian Aloka Parasher Sen has suggested^[2].

The Making of Marginality

Social/ideological marginalisation does not depend on a specific moment (the Aryan invasion for instance) but on processes that were part of complex ideological and economic superstructures, which took centuries to develop. During the early Vedic age (c. 1500–1000 BCE), although

most Indo-Aryan tribes were semi-nomadic pastoralists. Social stratification was extensive but along lines culturally, ritually and linguistically defined. The oldest stratum of text in the Rigveda invokes warlike deities like Indra to distinguish between Ārya, or the noble, human/ritual-performed insider and Dāsa or Dasyu, ritual less outsider often dark-skinned. We will witness a lot of prayers and hymns invoking the violent subjugation of these Dasyus or, in some versions, the expropriation of their wealth in cattle one of the chief markers of prosperity at that time^[3]. As most astutely observed by the historian Romila Thapar, "the schism had little to do with rigidified formalised caste hierarchies and everything to do with an existential contest between invading agro-pastoral groups moving in on paleolithic natives who pushed back against their spread^[4]." But the society itself changed relatively from a mobile pastoralist economy in the north-west, to agrarian sedentary ways into the Gangetic plains during late Vedic times (c. 1000–600 BCE); thus, its socio-economic imperatives have transformed. Sedentary agriculture needed the agrarian intending which called for a very big, regimented and continuous provide of very big part of human labor to entice it to process the earth yield an agricultural surplus. Such overproduction could only be absorbed this way, and the labor force regimented, within a frame of social hierarchies that were rigidly formalized. This corporeal deformation, so sorely needed up to this point, was the one which hammered Varṇa structure.

This fourfold hierarchical set-up was ultimately statu-fied and vivified only by the sanktion of a deep transcendent divine law through the famous Puruṣa Sūkta hymn. It pictured the four varṇas crudely but poetically mythologized by it as arising directly from the dismembered body of the cosmic primordial person Brāhmaṇa out of his mouth, Rājanya (Kshatriya) out of his arms, Vaiśya out of his thighs and Śūdra out of his feet^[5]. What they did to erect an ideological edifice of eternal subordination was reconcile social status and occupational duty with cosmic creation, which the orthodox theologians imposed upon themselves.

It was a political and economic hegemony, which had transmuted into an involuntary religious law with great success.

The Origins of Institutionalized Untouchability

As early Indian society became increasingly complex post Vedic urbanization and specialized craft guilds are obvious examples, though one can hardly not mention a virtually unbroken stream of ornamentation through avowedly non-Vedic tribes into the deep folds of the agrarian economy. It began to become evident that this theoretical four-varna model was a gross oversimplification of social forms in the generality. The mixing of varnas presumably Even if we are to solve this great demographic predicament with stabilization of Hierarchy Brahmanical orthodoxy lawgivers invented the most elaborate but constricted model called varnasamkara.

Providing this legal fiction and its most concise articulation, such as found in texts like the Manusmṛti, there had been no natural evolutionary progressiveness between the marginal, subordinate and “impure” groups within society; they were instead formed through sexually benighted unions of males and females across primary varna. Later, this was elaborated and transformed into an intentional and genius ideological tool of the orthodoxy in re-integrating these tribes-updated art forms -and artisanal formations- into the lower, servile segments of agrarian society, sending them a psychic shaming reminder at their point of access simultaneously [6]. The legal texts distinguished these different types of mixed unions as anuloma (hypergamous: a man from a higher varna marrying up to a woman of the lower order which was somewhat tolerated) or pratiloma (hypogamous: an inferior-varna man engaging in sexual relations with a superior-varna woman, universally condemned). It is the renegotated space of recovery of thinking and in that pure court of caste clubbing had the high concept, by which the idea of ‘purity and pollution’ was sustained itself, taking its first ideological weapon to mark extreme marginalization.

Even the cases, the people who belonged to groups that were outside of the order and in social status especially because of their “polluting” based occupational profiles: hunting; tanning (i.e. leather working); sweeping (water-lifting?)) or disconnected from or above the community those who moved skeletons, treated corpses or disposed of carcasses, legally qualifying as Antyaja (non-touchables). Thus, the Caṇḍāla comes to appear in the legal texts as the paradigmatic ultimate marginal figure. To justify their extreme level of degradation theoretically, the Manusmṛti contends that Caṇḍāla is born to a male Śūdra and female Brāhmaṇa. Thus, the absolute lowest of all possible that is to say “the most condemned union” of any pratiloma unions [7].

To realize this ideological impurity on the ground and in everyday life, the Orthodox law books insisted on brutal spatial and social separation of such groups. The Mahājanapada is made of villages and this house of a Caṇḍāla and dog-eaters marks its location as outside all crossroads at the edge of a corpse burning site. The law ominously went on to say that as compensation for their degraded status before all the world, they could own nothing but dogs and donkeys; their garments must be rags tattered from corpses; their food must be served in front of them on broken dishes; and the ornaments they wore were to be black iron instead of gold or silver [8]. Their violent spatial

and material segregation was a bodying forth of their persistent social degradation, confining them as invisible but degraded subjects whose economic servitude ensured the ritual hygiene of adjacent upwardly mobile precincts.

The Institution of Slavery

This substantive contribution needs to be read alongside more wrought accounts of the term dāsa, always in understanding how servitude got institutionalized. Based on its usage, especially in his own magnum opus Slavery in Ancient India, it is clear that dāsa had no economic slave connotation whatsoever, historian Dev Raj Chanana writes. In the oldest part of Vedic literature, it was primarily a cultural and ethnic term which denoted the autochthonous enemies of these invading Indo-Aryan groups [9]. But as the pastoral economy evolved into a maddeningly stagnant agrarian society, those who were taken captive in inter-tribal wars could accrue value through extra economic usefulness. Not totally gotten rid of but becoming more and more absorbed as the unfree domestic and agrarian industrious workers in patriarchal domiciles. By the later Vedic period, however, the term dāsa and its feminine form, dāsī had undergone a radical semantic shift that devoured all ethnic implications, it referred simply to any servile servant or chattel slave who could be legally given away handed over, sold off or commercially transacted like property [10].

By the time of the Mauryan Empire (fourth–third centuries B.C.E.), they had engineered an expansive centralized agrarian economy that depended on a marginalized labor force to till and expand it. The Arthaśāstra, the ancient treatise par excellence of statecraft so famous today, mentions among other things wide-spread and intensive usage of dāsas (slaves), karmakaras (wage laborers) and bhṛtakas hired hands), this cheap unfree labour was needed for both clearing large untouched tracts of forest and work on sate owned agricultural estates (sītā) which not only proved to be lucrative but was indeed crucial in the very infancy stages sustenance to Mauryan urban centres [11]. But unlike practices of chattel slavery in the Greco-Roman world, where a slave one could fairly say hypothetically had all legal subjectivity stripped from her, been rendered into that of a speaking tool alone at the level of an entity conditions across ancient India recognized far, more complex and stratified gradations overlapping both legally as well as socially around slavery. To make a longer story short, the bluntest and clearest markup around slavery of an Ārya (an orthodox four varnas) vs Mleccha foreign / tribal / outcaste is super clear. Arthaśāstra is clearly shown that a Mleccha can also be punished eg. slavery was an extremely punishable crime although could last for decades and crossing generations without legal punishment. Slaves coming from an Ārya background must never have to find themselves at any time in unrestricted slavery/ they cannot be shackled long term [12].

In addition, the master-slave relationship was restricted by a large body of legal proscriptions that had to be articulated and enforced very carefully in order to safeguard not only the ritual purity but also fundamental rights of the Ārya slave. Masters could not demand the Ārya slaves undertake especially ‘impure’ things under state law cleaning reputation, hoovering up corpses or eating their leftovers. The legal texts also instituted particular financial practices and rights regarding their manumission or release, one allowing an enslaved Ārya to earn money privately without interfering with his master’s labor [13].

The agrarian base and economic exploitation of viṣṭi

The ideological sidelining of subordinated social groups was not merely some crude religious or ritual prejudice, it is counterpositionalized with early Indian state form economic logics in ways that showcases brutality. As R.S. Sharma meticulously explored in his magisterial social history, the Varna system was really a very effective and an extremely coercive system of economic extraction and rigorous control of manual labour among Śūdras in Ancient India [14]. The load of surplus production in agriculture and the state via the taxation and agri-business miracle developed through back-breaking work by a labor-intensive agriculture was mainly shouldered / supported by farmers/peasant (Vaiśyas) as well as manual worker/crafter/artisans (Śūdras). The earliest theological texts reveal the exploitative state zero less than, classifying the Śūdra (literally “the laborer”) as “the servant of another” that can be turned upon at will by those in power [15].

Then the texts of orthodoxy layered down immutable laws above all those whom the lower strata could physically, pedagogically or economically threaten: in this way agrarian elite and state machinery always had a steady sample of unfree labor available for compliance. The Manusmṛti explicitly prohibited the Śūdras from accumulating surplus wealth, to prevent even the possibility of upward social mobility or political contestation from below. Another rather infinite reasoning in this logic was that therefore if a wealthy man is born into the caste of a poor Śūdra then he has been endowed with such prideful phenomena that will inevitably cross cosmic boundaries and eventually would end up oppressing even more the Brāhmaṇas [16]. In addition, if that slave or other vile had property somehow the law most clearly gave it almost acht to wife and son and slave they own should have no property of their own; whatever they earn will in-law rightly belong to him who owns/ shares them [17].

But when that did rear its head in those hoary days and got infinitely more characteristic was a new form of economic oppression, which, in mature form, was institutionally copied over the centuries by these post-Mauryan or Gupta sensibilities: Viṣṭi, forced unpaid corvée labor. That is, it meant that subordinate groups were not only taxed in agricultural output but both legally obliged to provide unpaid physical labour for the state or the local landlord whether through lifting roads, digging water tanks or being asked into the army as it passed through their villages [18].

Gender and Marginality

Indeed, no history on subordination in early India could even dream of being inclusive unless the systemic marginalization of women, as only she can always be seen intersection ally, is considered. The feminist historian Uma Chakravarti has made a memorable intervention in this respect when she introduced the analytical category of “Brahmanical Patriarchy” to describe this very specific historical entanglement of caste and class, gender and state power [19]. Within the orthodoxy of this ideological paradigm, all Varna hierarchy prescribed was rigorous endogamy (i.e., denoting or relating to groups that tend to marry only within their own kind). It was crucial for the patriarchal order to maintain primary, unquestioned power over female sexuality and reproductive potential in order to ensure “purity” of bloodlines and prevent caste-mixing. And, as Aloka Parasher Sen reminds us in Seeking History

that normative texts not only diagnosed female subordination; they codified it into law via emulative strident legislation [20]. The Manusmṛti, for example, explicitly stated that the woman should always be protected and guarded first by her father when she was a child, next by her husband as an adult and finally (when grown) under the protection of the male descendants. Under the law, it was a clear message that freedom for a woman is never earned [21].

There was economic, as well as ideological, subordination. Under the agrarian feudal economy of India, property rights were vested in ancestral lands, and wealth and socio-political power was typically inherited through a male lineage thus, women were systematically denied equitable inheritance. For a woman, her economic agency was far limited to strīdhana (wealth given to a woman upon her marriage; in fact, it consisted of ornaments and household utensils). But, as we have noted with strīdhana, its very conditions of applicability were closely sewn together by the patriarchal home. Men obtained access to a wife’s strīdhana (for the wealth had been defined in administrative terms) and/or wealth only through female service, time periods of disease, famine or religious acts so that women could never mobilise even this attenuated form of wealth against men because the law was clear [22]. And thus, the ideological construction of the ‘ideal,’ submissive and self-sacrificing woman was therefore not just a cultural trope but an anatomical structure in its own right at the end of this story, holding everything up as part of what had to be built as part of the ‘Basis’ for social and economic stratification.

Forest Dwellers, Tribes and Mlecchas: The Temporal Margin

Outside the relatively circumscribed borders of these more or less orderly, taxpaying agrarian settlements (grāma) and fortified urban centres lay the araṇya (forest), a vast untamed spatial realm that Brahmanical discourses routinely materialized in their imagination as the dark dangerous inverse place of civilization and as the inhabitants of these territories they are referring to them here by the names of Aṭavikas or Niśādas or Bhillas and Śabaras did not partake in fourfold Varna system. They were born to now widely finitized Mleccha (barbarian) community who consumed every domestic animal and their meat, a godless people who did not adhere to the then prevailing orthodox rites and communicated in collocated dialects largely incomprehensibly of Sanskrit. If any of you make “impure use” of Mleccha tongue [23].

According to Parasher Sen, in her dense historiography of Mlecchas, early Indian state viewed forest tribes spectively. suspicion and fear with a volatile mix of utilitarian pragmatism. As the Ashokan inscriptions concisely stated [24]. Such an agrarian tax base and valuable forests resources (timber, elephants and iron ore) were required by the empire. The Aṭavikas, “forest tribes,” were one such threat to the state described in Arthaśāstra; their fierce independence and intimate knowledge of its treacherous landscape rendered them a true internal threat able to challenge and disrupt the state from within [25]. So empires used a double, contradictory strategy of marginalization, brutal military repression to clear away the land but also their sometimes outspoken acceptance as surplus savage mercenaries at the edges of the royal army [26]. Ashoka the pacifist emperor made a thinly disguised, horrific threat to

the forest tribes (Atavis) in his Major Rock Edict XIII as understood post-Kalinga, warning them of his imperial right and capacity to punish them should they fail to repent sufficiently or be integrated into him and whatever his own particular vision of Dhamma entailed ^[27].

Culturally, epic made such spatial marginalization normal. Ekalavya's tragic episode reads not simply as a tale of devotion this remarkably adept son of Niṣāda beats the Kaurava princes at their own game, possessing and even surpassing Arjuna's skills in weaponry when his guru Drona makes it clear what sort of fee he'll accept as a teacher saying should this student ever ask to learn from him, they shall cut off such hand ^[28]. It represented to these tribal groups the systematized provision list, combative and violent environmental frame-through not having alternative provisions of food sovereignty, their credential system set up as martial power growth upward mobility with its concomitant relations as consequence they became not just out numbered but disarmed out of Kshatriya-Brahmana solidarity.

Pragmatic Limits and the Heterodox History

Orthodoxy, the Brahmanism of the exploitative pyramidal order that is our feudal caste system has not gone without opposition. During the dazzling dawn of the sixth century BCE, settler narratives emerged about deviant subaltern figures, whose fictive terms were challenged by heterodox Śramaṇic movements comprising Buddhism and Jainism. The Varna system was thus philosophically rejected by Buddhism, which cosmic & divine sanction. During the Buddha's time this was open debate; and in fact, he always maintained that an individual's worth must be determined solely by karma (kamma), not whether or how one was born (jāti) a miracle ^[29]. The institution of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha offered low caste women an unprecedented institutional channel to liberation from domestic bondage. The verses composed by early nuns appear in the Therīgāthā and convey an almost visceral sense of both physical and spiritual liberation, a literal loosening from the backbreaking labor of mortar and pestle, and total subjugation to her husbands ^[30].

But in addition to the hopey-changeey political angle, practical limits to this heterodox challenge must also be acknowledged, with all due and dispassionate respect for the rigorous demands of modern historiography. But there was no violent overturning of the material economics underlying slavery or wage labor, and Buddhism offered extraordinary ideological and spiritual egalitarianism within that reality. And this sinful wish of some basic harmony with state and elites which composed mainly of high mercantile class of Setṭhis who were before the highest monetary benefactors of monasteries expressively prohibited escape slaves (dāsas) as well as deserters from military ranks not to mention debtors to come down on some monastic order, chosen by a bodhi winning monk now became main entity but also long list what was in hugest part expelled from Buddhist sangha ^[31]. While Buddhism did provide some sort of insurance against ritual pollution for alms givers on the margins of agrarian society, their economic conditions were never materially improved; namely, because Buddhist cosmology would arguably been kept as much in opposition to ritual that is, its removal as an operative alternative option than a revolutionary dismantling meant to remove field and hearth specific means of production.

Conclusion

This marginalization was profoundly intersectional. It pressed itself unquestioningly through all divisions of caste; signified the institutionalized "subjugation" of women by a state-backed, masculinity, the regulation and 'control' over women's sexuality as well as property rights thereby cementing the very scaffolding of patrilineal classes. Similarly found external spatial 'others,' the Atavikas and other indigenous tribes are all imagined repeatedly in barbaric forms, as Mleccha forces to be dutifully defended against, incorporated into the state only at the cost of extreme violence and modes of appropriation. And while heterodox traditions Buddhism, for one served as powerful ideological counters, and also played vital social mitigating roles, it was the broader normative, legal and economic frameworks that grew in the wake of these elite-blended antecedents that would serve to crystallize rigid caste orders within Indian subcontinent society for centuries. Listening for silences in ancient texts is the way to begin uncovering what was really going on in such communities, and marginality is not a feature that can be taken for granted as characterising all of ancient India. It was a carefully concealed contradiction, one in which an immense, predatory civilization existed primarily to violently subjugate the millions, so that wealth and purity and privilege could be preserved among chosen elites.

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