UNDERSTANDING MARGINALISATION

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▶ WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE SOCIALLY MARGINALISED ?

1. To be marginalised is to be forced to occupy the sides or fringes and thus not be at the centre of things.

2. In the social environment too, groups of people or communities may have the experience of being excluded. Their marginalisation can be because

   (a) They speak a different language

   (b) Follow different customs .

   (c) Belong to a different religious group from the majority community.

   (d) They are poor, considered to be of 'low' social status and viewed as being less human than others.

3. Sometimes, marginalised groups are viewed with hostility and fear. This sense of difference and exclusion leads to communities not having access to resources and opportunities and in their inability to assert their rights. They experience a sense of disadvantage and powerlessness vis-a-vis more powerful and dominant sections of society who own land, are wealthy, better educated and politically powerful. Thus, marginalisation is seldom experienced in one sphere. Economic, social, cultural and political factors work together to make certain groups in society feel marginalised.

▶ WHO ARE ADIVASIS ?

◈ **Characteristics :**

1. Adivasis – the term literally means 'original inhabitants'– are communities who lived, and often ontinue to live, in close association with forests.

2. Around 8 per cent of India's population is Adivasi and many of India's most important mining and industrial centres are located in Adivasi areas – Jamshedpur, Rourkela, Bokaro and Bhilai among others.

3. Adivasis are not a homogeneous population: there are over 500 different Adivasi groups in India.

4. Adivasis are particularly numerous in states like Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal and in the north-eastern states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura.

5. A state like Orissa is home to more than 60 different tribal groups.

6. Adivasi societies are also most distinctive because there is often very little hierarchy among them.

7. This makes them radically different from communities organised around principles of *jati-varna* (caste) or those that were ruled by kings.

◈ **Religious Practices :**

1. Adivasis practise a range of tribal religions that are different from Islam, Hinduism and Christianity.

2. These often involve the worship of ancestors, village and nature spirits, the last associated with and residing in various sites in the landscape – 'mountain-spirits', 'river-spirits', 'animal-spirits', etc.

3. The village spirits are often worshipped at specific sacred groves within the village boundary while the ancestral ones are usually worshipped at home.

4. Additionally, Adivasis have always been influenced by different surrounding religions like Shakta, Buddhist, Vaishnav, Bhakti and Christianity.

5. Simultaneously, Adivasi religions themselves have influenced dominant religions of the empires around them, for example, the Jagannath cult of Orissa and Shakti and Tantric traditions in Bengal and Assam.

6. During the nineteenth century, substantial numbers of Adivasis converted to Christianity, which has emerged as a very important religion in modern Adivasi history.

◈ **Language :**

1. Adivasis have their own languages (most of them radically different from and possibly as old as Sanskrit), which have often deeply influenced the formation of 'mainstream' Indian languages, like Bengali.

2. Santhali has the largest number of speakers and has a significant body of publications including magazines on the internet or in e-zines.

◈ **Adivasis & Stereotyping :**

1. Adivasis are invariably portrayed in very stereotypical ways – in colourful costumes, headgear and through their dancing.

2. This often wrongly leads to people believing that they are exotic, primitive and backward.

3. Often Adivasis are blamed for their lack of advancement as they are believed to be resistant to change or new ideas.

◈ **Adivasis and Development :**

1. Forests were absolutely crucial to the development of all empires and settled civilisations in India.

2. Metal ores like iron and copper, and gold and silver, coal and diamonds, invaluable timber, most medicinal herbs and animal products (wax, lac, honey) and animals themselves (elephants, the mainstay of imperial armies), all came from the forests.

3. In addition, the continuation of life depended heavily on forests, that help recharge many of India's rivers and, as is becoming clearer now, crucial to the availability and quality of our air and water.

4. Forests covered the major part of our country till the nineteenth century and the Adivasis had a deep knowledge of, access to, as well as control over most of these vast tracts at least till the middle of the nineteenth century.

5. This meant that they were not ruled by large states and empires. Instead, often empires heavily depended on Adivasis for the crucial access to forest resources.

6. In the precolonial world, they were traditionally ranged huntergatherers and nomads and lived by shifting agriculture and also cultivating in one place. Although these remain, for the past 200 years Adivasis have been increasingly forced – through economic changes, forest policies and political force applied by the State and private industry – to migrate to lives as workers in plantations, at construction sites, in industries and as domestic workers. For the first time in history, they do not control or have much direct access to the forest territories.

7. Forest lands have been cleared for timber and to get land for agriculture and industry.

8. Adivasis have also lived in areas that are rich in minerals and other natural resources.

9. These are taken over for mining and other large industrial projects. Powerful forces have often colluded to take over tribal land. Much of the time, the land is taken away forcefully and procedures are not followed.

10. According to official figures, more than 50 per cent of persons displaced due to mines and mining projects are tribals. Another recent survey report by organisations working among Adivasis shows that 79 per cent of the persons displaced from the states of Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Orissa and Jharkhand are tribals.

11. Huge tracts of their lands have also gone under the waters of hundreds of dams that have been built in independent India.

12. In the North east, their lands remain highly militarised and war-torn.

13. India has 54 national parks and 372 wildlife sanctuaries covering 1,09,652 sq km. These are areas where tribals originally lived but were evicted from. When they continue to stay in these forests, they are termed encroachers.

14. Losing their lands and access to the forest means that tribals lose their main sources of livelihood and food. Having gradually lost access to their traditional homelands, many Adivasis have migrated to cities in search of work where they are employed for very low wages in local industries or at building or construction sites.

15. They, thus, get caught in a cycle of poverty and deprivation. 45 per cent of tribal groups in rural areas and 35 per cent in urban areas live below the poverty line. This leads to deprivation in other areas.

16. Many tribal children are malnourished.

17. Literacy rates among tribals are also very low.

18. When Adivasis are displaced from their lands, they lose much more than a source of income. They lose their traditions and customs – a way of living and being.

19. There exists an interconnectedness between the economic and social dimensions of tribal life. Destruction in one sphere naturally impacts the other. Often this process of dispossession and displacement can be painful and violent.

➤ MINORITIES AND MARGINALISATION

1. The Constitution provides safeguards to religious and linguistic minorities as part of our Fundamental Rights.

2. The term minority is most commonly used to refer to communities that are numerically small in relation to the rest of the population.

3. It encompasses issues of power, access to resources and has social and cultural dimensions.

4. The Indian Constitution recognised that the culture of the majority influences the way in which society and government might express themselves.

5. In such cases, size can be a disadvantage and lead to the marginalisation of the relatively smaller communities.

6. Thus, safeguards are needed to protect minority communities against the possibility of being culturally dominated by the majority.

7. They also protect them against any discrimination and disadvantage that they may face.

8. Given certain conditions, communities that are small in number relative to the rest of society may feel insecure about their lives, assets and well-being.

9. This sense of insecurity may get accentuated if the relations between the minority and majority communities are fraught.

10. The Constitution provides these safeguards because it is committed to protecting India's cultural diversity and promoting equality as well as justice.

11. The judiciary plays a crucial role in upholding the law and enforcing Fundamental Rights. Every citizen of India can approach the courts if they believe that their Fundamental Rights have been violated.

◈   **Muslims and Marginalisation :**

1. According to Muslims are 13.4 per cent of India's population and are considered to be a marginalised community in India today because in comparison to other communities, they have over the years been deprived of the benefits of socio-economic development.

2. Recognising that Muslims in India were lagging behind interms of various development indicators, the government set up a high-level committee in 2005. Chaired by Justice Rajindar Sachar, the committee examined the social, economic and educational status of the Muslim community in India. The report discusses in detail the marginalisation of this community. It suggests that on a range of social, economic and educational indicators the situation of the Muslim community is comparable to that of other marginalised communities like Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. For example, according to the Report the average

years of schooling for Muslim children between the ages of 7-16 is much lower than that of other socioreligious communities.

3. Economic and social marginalisation experienced by Muslims has other dimensions as well.

4. Like other minorities, Muslim customs and practices are sometimes quite distinct from what is seen as the mainstream. Some not all – Muslims may wear a *burqa*, sport a long beard, wear a *fez*, and these become ways to identify all Muslims. Because of this, they tend to be identified differently and some people think they are not like the 'rest of us'. Often this becomes an excuse to treat them unfairly, and discriminate against them. This social marginalisation of Muslims in some instances has led to them migrating from places where they have lived, often leading to the ghettoisation of the community. Sometimes, this prejudice leads to hatred and violence.

➢ **CONCLUSION**

1. There are different reasons for each of these communities being marginalised. Each experiences marginalisation in different ways. We have also seen that marginalisation is linked to experiencing disadvantage, prejudice and powerlessness. In India there are several more marginalised communities, like Dalits, of whom you will read more in the next chapter. Marginalisation results in having a low social status and not having equal access to education and other resources.

2. Yet, the lives of marginalised people can and do change. Thus, no one is marginalised all the time in exactly the same way. The marginalised groups have a long history of struggle and resistance. Marginalised communities want to maintain their cultural distinctiveness while having access to rights, development and other opportunities.