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## Shifting stands: Discrimination in the global context

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### Abstract

The term oppression, a globally disturbed term played a major role in classifying or diverting human beings from one to another. There was an intense fight from the time eternal to show who is superior to another and it continued and continued in several manifestations in the ancient world, there was a division of class and the class become identity and that identity further separated from one to another and that continued leading to dominance over the other. In this paper, I aim to locate a few major manifestations of oppression that played a major role in creating a line between two human beings.

**Keywords:** Society, oppression, class, black, white, subaltern, caste

### Introduction

Society, which may be defined as “*the aggregate of people lives together in a more or less ordered community*”. To be more precise, society is a group of people living in the same geographical or social territory characterized by different forms of relationship among its people. Since every human being is different, it is not possible in a society for its people to have everything the same; this is where the idea of social division begins and the most common dividing tools in the society are colour, race, tribe, and gender. In general, a large society witnesses dominance and divisions among its people. When the idea of society is established, there comes the concept of culture by which people of the society define themselves. In a broader sense, culture is the way of living, behavior and beliefs of a particular group of people in the society. So society is a broader concept on which certain cultures take part. The vehicle on which the concept of culture and society runs is the language i.e. on which the communication process takes place. As we know language changes after every twenty miles, it takes a major role in developing the culture of the people of the society. Language, culture and society are all interlinked and Culture in a broader sense is responsible for divisions in a society.

The discussion of society and culture remains incomplete without the discussion of division of people in the society which stands on hierarchical model and in this paper I am aiming to discuss the origin of marginality in different societies of the world. The identification of the marginal or weaker section in a society is not a stringent one; rather it differs from one society to another. Now the question comes: who are these people? Why are we labeling them as weaker sections? How have they gained this identity? Unified answers of all these questions are not possible since every society is different from each other; and to find the answers we need to go through the history of different societies of the world.

To begin with America, the aborigines lived there for more than thousands of years. But only after the discovery of this land by Columbus in 1492 becomes familiar with the rest of the world. And from then on the white people from Europe began to settle in there with the possibility of farming and owning natural wealth. When the European people shifted to the new land they brought their maid/servants mostly from African descendent/black, who came there willingly with their masters. But the huge portion of vacant land made the Europeans greedy and they forced their servants to work in the field as they did not have any other options but to work there on. In course of time their masters made them slaves and they were not paid anything in return. Even they could not escape from there. As the numbers of workers in the field were not sufficient, the Europeans started importing the blacks from Africa. The first of this import was in the year 1619. It was by the Dutch who sold 19 African servants to the Englishmen at Point Comfort (today’s Fort Monore), Virginia.

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With this, the whites found a way to fulfill the demand of laborers and began to import the blacks from mainly West Africa by ships across the Atlantic Ocean.

During 1650 to 1700 the demand of the blacks increased a lot and they initiated importing the black from other regions of Africa i.e. North Africa and South Africa. The whites were the owner of lands and the Blacks were the slaves under the landowners and were saleable according to the wish of their owners. In 1641 Massachusetts first made slavery a legal one. The children of these slaves were also slaves by inheritance and by the time of 1750 the numbers of slaves were increased to fulfill the demands of the white masters by both ways– birth and import.

At the time of the American Civil war, most of the blacks were American by birth and the freedom of America from the British Empire in 1776 did not bring any change to the social status of the black people. An important inclusion in this concept of black was the 'free blacks'. Free blacks were not slaves, they were workers on ships and had the license to buy lands unlike black slaves, but their numbers were very few. Though they were free but were not allowed to share the same status as whites, they did not have the voting right and their children were not allowed to go to the schools. During 1800, the Free Blacks made a Church for their own people; this was an important step for Black consciousness. People started visiting the Church, and there was not any division between free Blacks and Black slaves, and the Church soon became an institution of social exchange and education centre for the Blacks. On getting the education, the blacks started to make revolution against the whites and the ending of slavery became their prime focus.

On 1<sup>st</sup> January 1863 President Abraham Lincoln took a huge step for the abolition of slavery and transformed almost 3 million of Slaves into free blacks. And in 1865 the slavery had been abolished by law. The 1866 civil Rights Act made the Blacks entirely U.S citizens and in 1868 the 14th amendment granted the African-American U.S citizen and 15th amendment in 1870 gave the black males right to vote. But this was not accepted happily by the white land owners. Due to shortage of slaves, their empire began to fall. Though the blacks acquired a position by the then society, they were not accepted by the white in the same society. Blacks were then treated as "other", and social segregation was always there. Several attempts had been made by the Black people to abolish this discrimination; such as - Niagara movement of 1905 which demanded equal rights for the black American and a brotherhood among all Blacks and Whites. The Blacks participated in the two great wars and fought shoulder to shoulder with the whites but still unable to achieve equal social status and remained as interior to the so called cultured white society. After the WWII, when America had already advanced in the field of science & technology they were not able to abolish the racial segregation among them. The status of Blacks could best be understood with leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. who was an activist of the civil rights movement in America, becoming popular playing a major role in the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott for the equal rights for the blacks and founded the Southern Christian Leadership conference in 1957. The main aim of that organization was to establish equity. A famous speech which Martin Luther King Jr. delivered in Washington in March 1963 made a clear sight about the condition of Black even during that period. His Speech was titled as "I have as dream" and here I need to

mention some lines from his speech to make the picture clearer:

"...I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character..."

(Martin Luther King Jr.)

Though the slavery had been abolished legally almost a hundred years ages from that famous speech, men got the right to vote, but the equality between whites and the blacks was merely a dream to the American Society in 1963.

America had seen many divisions among its people on the basis of the colour of their skin. The basis of all this discrimination was the economy. The whites imported the blacks from far away only because of farming and had no other intention.

In European context this oppression is based mostly on economic level and has been described as the 'subaltern'. The term 'subaltern' was first adopted by Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, in his prison notebooks. The General view is that Gramsci used the term as a similar to Marx's concept Proletariat to go through the censorship. To understand the actual meaning of subaltern which Gramsci used in his note book, we need to look back the Marxist theory of power relation, which describes the 'class' In Marx's view, the class is a group of people which shares a common interest among themselves whether it is social economic or cultural. He sees the means of production is the root of the creation of a class. To Marx, the society has been divided into two major groups: Capitalist and the Worker. Thus, Capitalists or Bourgeois are the ones who own the power of production and own the labor. And proletariats are the workers, who do not own any means of production but sell their own labor to the Bourgeois as a means of production, and create an opposite binary relation of Capitalist and Workers. The creation of class makes a consciousness among the people of that particular class, which Marx labeled as class consciousness. The capitalists or the Bourgeois are the driving force to run the society and the proletariat does not have any other option but to obey them. But as soon as the consciousness becomes large, the proletariat tries to revert the position of the society through revolution, by their own ideas. Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist used this same theory in a different way by calling the proletariat as the Subalterns in his *Prison Note Books*. To him the subalterns are not only the proletariats / working class but anyone who stands on the lower rank of the hegemonic class division stays exactly on the opposite position from the dominant class.

The white people set their colonies in the other region and transforming the natives as marginalized are common pictures of the world. In South Africa this segregation was known by 'Apartheid', the literary meaning of which separateness is or being apart. In S.A also the whites lived in a different place the blacks and blacks were not allowed to set up their homes at whites' locality, they used to have separate church, separate park, Separate way for waking etc. All these, segregation and discrimination to the blacks were based on the ethnic differences, which resulted in the different colored skin and were therefore the 'other' from the whites.

In Australia and New Zealand the Europeans made their colony and transformed the aborigines as marginal. As per the British law no one can hold more than a certain portion of land unless it is used for farming and the aborigines of Australia and New Zealand did not know farming and with this trick the British ruled snatched away their land and made them marginalized.

The concept of marginality is totally different in India from other parts of the world and it has thousands of years old history. Here the origin of marginality is not only based on colour of skin and economy but also on various factors such as religion, anthropology etc. The source of the concept of oppression lies in the construction of Hinduism. In Hinduism there are 'Varnas'(class), which first appeared in Rigveda and played a key role in dividing human beings into classes. In Rig Vedas the division i.e. Bramhans, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas based on the occupation but in latter Vedas this 'Trivarnik' (three fold) division became 'Chaturbarnik' (four fold) based on the myth that four kinds of people were born to lord Vishnu. Those born from His mouth, are the 'Brahmins', those born from His arms are the 'Kshatrias', the soldiers, those born from His thigh are the 'Vaishas', the traders and ultimately those born from His feet are the Sudras, whose duty was to serve all thee Varnas. This division among human beings has been documented in the Sanskrit text "*Manusmriti*". In 187 BC. Pushyamitra Sunga, a senapati (Army chief) of the Maurya Empire, defeated, Brihadratha Maurya, the last Mauryan king and projected himself as the king and established Brahman rule, the Shunga Empire. Manu, a courtier in Sunga's court in writing 'Manusmriti' took reference from '*Purusha-Sukta*'. '*Parusha-Sukta*' is the hymn of the Rigveda, which dedicated to the 'Purusha', the 'Cosmic-Being'. The concept of 'Purusha' is a complex one. Klaus K. Klostermanir in the book *A Survey of Hinduism* clarifies the concept of Purush as the Cosmic Being which has been changed into an abstract essence of the self, Spirit and the Universal principle that is eternal, indestructible, without form and is all pervasive. Theos Bernard in his book *The Hindu Philosophy* explains the concept of Purusha more clearly by saying:

"Purusha is the Universal principle that is unchanging, uncaused but is present everywhere and the reason why Prikriti charges, transforms and transcends all of the time and which is why there is cause and effect."

Swami Krishnananda in his Daily Invocations says Purushahas depicted as a being with thousands of heads, eyes, and legs, enveloping the earth from all sides and transcending in all ten directions. All manifestations in past, present and future are held to be the Purusha alone. Critics have traced down that Purusha is none other than the Lord Vishnu Himself. The reason for this relation is based on the '*Vishwaroopa Darshana*' of Lord Vishnu. In *Manusmriti*, Manu talked about class division though these divisions are not created by him but he made this division strong in his work. This division was present even in the *Bhagavad Gita* and Manu got the Knowledge from the words of lord Vishnu. In the chapter IV of *Bhagavad Gita* where Sri Krishna taught Anjuna about Guna and Karma, He speaks: *Chaaturvarnyam mayasrishtam gunakarmavibhaagashah; Tasyakartaaramapimaamviddhyakartaaramavyayam.*

(Trans: The fourfold caste has been created by me according to the differentiation of Guna and Karma; though I am the author thereof, know me as the non-doer and immutable).

This shows that the fourfold class division – The Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra has been created by Lord Vishnu Himself on the basis of 'Guna' and 'Karma'. 'Guna' is the quality and 'Karma' is the kind of work. Both Guna and Karma determine the class of human beings with this brief analysis it is clear that the root of this division of classes lies in the core principle of Hinduism itself. This division also has a political angle. Without the slave there cannot be any proper ideal economy and the need for the slave was deeply felt to run an ideal economic society. The Brahmins were at the upper level of the social hierarchy, and religion needs a mediator for worship, since knowledge belonged only to a certain group of people i.e. the Brahmins and thus the knowledge became heredity and began to deliver hereditically and other Varnas started to transfer their working capabilities hereditically. Pushyamitrasunga through Manu made this Chaturvarnik system a ritualistic one. By the process, certain works belong to only certain groups of people and the division of class started becoming the 'Caste'.

In Indus valley civilization, there were also social divisions, but this division was only based on class or skill in profession. In the main city there were only the leaders but the slaves had their quarters outside the city, they came in the city, worked and had to go back to their quarters outside, and not a single evidence of caste was witnessed there.

Based on the anthropological view it can be said that the Aryans were from the central Asia regarded themselves as culturally superior and they were very much anxious to maintain the racial purity of their blood as they won over the native Indians and in order to be lord over the Indians, the Aryans formulated a social hierarchy.

From the foregoing observation, it is clear that the concept of marginality in societies was there from the onset of civilization and with the change of time this concept of marginality manifested in different ways. The marginal people have shouted for equal social status and to gain so they even involved in many movements; laws have been made by the state, people advanced in technology but the concept of marginality is still present today and it will continue to work until the so called upper-class people stop seeing the marginal people as 'other'.

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