

**INDIAN ASSOCIATION FOR WOMEN'S STUDIES**  
**XV National Conference on Women's Studies**

Sub-theme:12

**Marginal Communities and Citizenships**

*Overview*

India as a society stands on many contradictions. On the one hand, the Indian Constitution recognises all persons as equal in law and society but in practice hierarchy and differentiation based on caste, tribe and gender distinctions continues to govern social-political-economic-cultural relations and associations in the society.

The sub-theme titled, "Marginal Communities and Citizenships", is seeking to explore the socio-political-economic dimensions of marginalisation and the relationship between marginalised communities and citizenship. Marginality as a concept is broad and inclusive of discrimination as well as oppression. Marginalisation can be experienced by an individual or a social group in ways which may not be measurable or even visible, and it is a challenge to define it adequately. For the purposes of this sub-theme, we limit ourselves to marginalities which we can observe and track to a certain extent, and study in a social scientific way. These social groups could be adivasis, religious minorities, women from the north-east who face challenging situations when they migrate to metropolises for work, people who have got displaced because of 'development' or warlike situations where they live, e.g. extremist or terrorist related violence ridden areas, or migrants from rural areas into cities, elderly people...there are myriad possibilities.

The sub-theme seek to investigate the contested relationship between marginalised communities and the state. What does being a citizen in a nation-state entail for women from the socially marginalised communities? Papers are invited to explore the constant contestation and negotiation with

citizenship rights that is a reality of many communities. The sub-theme will include analyses of the daily economic, social political and cultural negotiation of these marginalised communities in their various and specific locations, with a focus on women and an emphasis on the gendered aspects and nature of such processes.

What will be welcome however is to trace the issue historically as well as comparatively. What makes a particular work or social group 'marginal' to the mainstream, and how did it happen over a period of time? What do we learn from comparing one marginalized group with another, in case the parameters for assessing are roughly the same, e.g. socio economic status, or geographic proximity?

Additionally, if papers are able to tie up more than one kind of marginality with another, and show that there is a complex and overlapping play within the concept of marginality itself, it will be very useful.

*Special Focus: Stratification Within the Marginalized: Contemporary Denotified Communities*

Among the marginalized communities, this sub-theme will have a special focus on 'Denotified Communities'. The denotified communities are those who were notified as 'criminal tribes' under a notorious piece of colonial legislation called the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871. A large proportion of these communities were nomadic. When the Act was repealed upon independence, the notifications declaring them criminals became null and void, and thus these communities were now 'denotified'.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> It is important to mention here that though the government of India officially refers to them as 'denotified tribes', these groups ought to be addressed as communities, and not 'tribes' as the word tribe has a very specific meaning in anthropology.

The independent Indian state, however, has not been able to give these nearly two hundred communities, running into crores of people, their due citizenship rights. They have lost their traditional occupations over the last century and a half, and many are now grossly destitute. Moreover, they still continue to be regarded as hardened criminals by the administration.

These attitudes are shared by Indian rural and urban communities as well. As a result, denotified communities who may be partially nomadic now live in temporary shelters at the outermost margins of villages, and often on peripheries of cities and towns. Women are particularly vulnerable to pretexts for sexual harassment by the police and a state of perpetual homelessness again makes women very vulnerable in terms of physical safety.

At the outset, however, it must be said that the nomadic lifestyle of these communities, has also exposed them, especially the women, to much more of the world than their counterparts in sedentary communities. In addition, having to constantly deal with inhospitable terrains as well as hostile people frequently makes them extremely resilient and resourceful. They often display unusual boldness and ingenuity, and many are tough survivors under subhuman living conditions.

But the particular personal qualities which the denotified community women may be forced to cultivate do not dispute harsh and unsavoury social realities on the ground. Papers around this sub theme can engage fruitfully with the following broad areas of concern:

1. Interface between the Indian state, especially the police administration, and the women of these communities. From the point of view of these communities, how do the policies of a supposed welfare state as well as excesses of a police state impact them?

2. Interactions with mainstream communities, and equally, with other marginalised sections.

Research shows that new hierarchies have emerged within the larger body of marginalized communities (which include SCs, STs, OBCs or poorer sections of religious minorities), wherever there is sharing of geographic space with denotified communities, or wherever there is an uneasy assimilation of these communities within a milieu constituted by a number of other deprived communities. Moreover, since these communities are often included within the SC, ST or OBC category, there is discrimination practiced against them by the more advanced members of the reserved categories, leading to an abysmal record of benefits obtained by denotified communities from reservations. Research also shows that untouchability is practiced against the members of denotified communities by not just high caste communities, but in some cases even *by dalits*.

Are the communities being Hinduised by the far right as a way of offering integration? Are there conversions to other religions? Where this has happened, how does this impact girls and women?

3. Worsening situation of the women *within* these communities over the decades.

There is some indication through research that though these societies used to be largely patriarchal as well, there were certain features and practises which tended to a greater degree towards egalitarianism than those amongst sedentary communities. Some of those customs seem to be getting lost, and new norms and value systems are emerging which may have a retrograde impact on the situation of girls and women.

Not all, but some denotified communities have almost all male caste panchayats which are very strong and have considerable authority

within the community. What is the role of these panchayats for making decisions, enforcing them, and regulating the community through rewards and punishments? How are they constituted? How are girls and women affected by them?

Are these communities prone to *sanskritisation* when they settle down, in an attempt to garner respectability, to ward off unwelcome attention from being culturally different or for being 'outsiders', or simply as a way of social mobility? The shift from traditional practices mostly seems to have had a retrograde impact on women, though women often voluntarily participate in the process. Generally, both vulnerable as well as stronger sections of these communities, for different reasons, may give up the previous relatively egalitarian practices of the community, and voluntarily adopt undesirable practices of the mainstream communities regarding their women. These shifts need to be accurately documented.

4. Representation of the communities in popular media, both print and electronic, and their self-representation.

In recent years, particularly the last decade, these communities have attracted a lot of media attention, and have been written about in popular press. Documentaries and films have been made about them, as much out of concern for their welfare as to warn the civil society about their ferocious criminality. These narratives as well as those about the *self-image* of these communities remain an important area of research. Due to the absorption of the prevailing, unfavorable, hegemonic point of view, a negative self-image and a mistaken sense of their place in history is being frequently formed. Interestingly, self-representation of denotified communities as dangerous criminals in the distant past, by communities themselves, is quite common. In the absence of knowledge of historical facts, a number of denotified

communities' members seem to believe that their ancestors *were* criminals during the British period, and that is what explains to them the wretchedness of their situation today, including unrelenting police harassment.

5. Changing livelihoods and new balances of power within family and community.

In a number of cases, partly because men are absent, or unemployed, or in police lock ups in disproportionate numbers, denotified community women have become the main breadwinners of the family, though earlier livelihoods had to be given up, or can be practiced only partially.

What kinds of livelihoods are the women (and men) engaged in today, given that traditional nomadic livelihoods are no longer feasible, or do not give adequate income to the families? How does this impact the power relations within the family and community?

6. Organizing by these communities for citizenship rights, in isolation or in partnership with other marginalized groups.

In a few cases, the concerned communities have become a part of larger democratic movements for equality and dignity, and have become quite assertive. The women are often important driving forces in such cases.

Papers are invited to cover *any and every aspect* of the denotified communities' lives through a 'gendered lense'. Those along the research areas outlined above will be especially welcome.

**Coordinators:**

Meena Radhakrishna  
Retd. From Dept. of Sociology  
Delhi School of Economics

Dyuti A.  
Research Officer  
National Campaign for Dalit  
Human Rights (NCDHR)

[iaws2017marginalities@gmail.com](mailto:iaws2017marginalities@gmail.com)