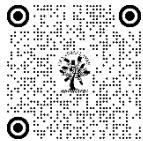


# HISTORIES OF MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES IN MEDIEVAL INDIA: BEYOND THE DOMINANT NARRATIVES

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## ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to broaden the scope of historical discourse by examining the lives of lower castes, indigenous peoples, women, religious minorities, and other disenfranchised communities. Histories of Marginalized Communities in Medieval India: Beyond the Dominant Narratives explores the often-overlooked experiences and contributions of marginalized groups during the medieval period in India, a time traditionally dominated by elite and mainstream historical narratives. It critically engages with historical sources such as court records, literary texts, oral traditions, and archaeological findings, challenging the prevailing narratives that tend to marginalize these groups. By drawing on interdisciplinary approaches, the paper highlights the agency, resilience, and diverse cultural expressions of these communities, offering a more inclusive understanding of medieval Indian history. The study aims to provide a nuanced portrayal of the medieval period, acknowledging the complexity and diversity of historical experiences and promoting a more equitable approach to historiography.

**Keywords:** Medieval India, Marginalized Communities, Alternative Histories, Social Hierarchies, Historical Narratives

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper seeks to rectify this historical imbalance by examining the histories of marginalized communities in medieval India, emphasizing their lived experiences, social practices, and cultural contributions. Drawing on an array of historical sources, including court documents, religious texts, oral traditions, and archaeological evidence, the study attempts to uncover the diverse and complex realities of these communities. Through this exploration, the paper challenges the conventional historical narratives that have excluded or distorted the role of marginalized groups in shaping medieval Indian society.

The historiography of medieval India has long been dominated by narratives shaped by the elites—those in power, the ruling dynasties, and the influential religious and cultural institutions. These dominant narratives have largely overshadowed the lives, struggles, and contributions of marginalized communities such as lower castes, women, indigenous peoples, and religious minorities. As a result, the historical record has often presented an incomplete and skewed understanding of the period, rendering these groups invisible or voiceless in the annals of history. By shifting the focus away from the dominant narratives and amplifying the voices of those at the periphery, this study aims to offer

a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of medieval India. It seeks to highlight the agency and resilience of marginalized communities in the face of social, political, and cultural oppression. In doing so, it also advocates for a more equitable approach to historiography, one that recognizes the significance of all sections of society in the historical development of the subcontinent.

## 2. HISTORICAL REVIEW

The study of marginalized communities in medieval India has gained increasing attention in recent decades, particularly as scholars have sought to challenge the traditional, elite-centric narratives that have dominated historical discourse. The literature on this subject is vast, spanning various academic disciplines such as history, sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies. This review will survey key contributions in the field, focusing on works that address the histories of marginalized groups, the rethinking of dominant historical narratives, and the interdisciplinary methods employed to examine these communities.

One of the seminal works in this area is *Castes and Tribes of Northern India* by H. A. Rose (1911), which provides early insights into the social stratification and marginalization of lower castes and indigenous groups. Though dated and often criticized for its colonial biases, it laid the groundwork for subsequent scholarly inquiry into the lives of these groups. A more contemporary approach is found in *The Marginalized: Studies in Indian History* by S. G. Tiwari (2012), which critically engages with the ways in which lower castes, women, and tribal communities have been historically excluded from mainstream narratives of Indian history.

Historians such as Irfan Habib and K. K. Aziz have highlighted the role of economic and social structures in perpetuating inequalities in medieval Indian society. Habib's works on the agrarian economy and the Mughal Empire emphasize the deep social divisions, while Aziz's writings on the socio-political dynamics of medieval India bring attention to the subjugation and exploitation of marginalized groups. Similarly, Romila Thapar's *Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300* (2002) offers a critical reevaluation of the early medieval period, questioning traditional interpretations that emphasize the centrality of urban elites and elite cultures, while underscoring the importance of less visible rural and peripheral communities.

The impact of caste and gender on the historical experience of marginalized communities has been further explored by scholars like Uma Chakravarti and Sharmila Rege. Chakravarti's *Gendering Caste* (2003) examines the intersections of caste, gender, and power in the context of medieval India, challenging traditional patriarchal structures that have marginalized women and lower castes. Sharmila Rege's work on Dalit feminism has also provided valuable insights into the ways in which Dalit women, in particular, were doubly marginalized in both caste and gendered terms.

More recently, the growing field of postcolonial historiography has emphasized the need to reframe India's medieval past in ways that are sensitive to the legacies of colonialism. Scholars like Ranajit Guha and Dipesh Chakrabarty have critiqued the colonial historiographic tradition that centered European norms and silenced indigenous perspectives. Guha's concept of "subaltern history" has inspired numerous studies on the voices of marginalized communities, while Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* (2000) has argued for the necessity of understanding Indian history in its own right, free from the imposition of Western-centric frameworks.

In the realm of gender studies, scholars such as Kumkum Sangari and Ritu Khanduri have examined the experiences of women from marginalized communities, particularly in relation to religion and politics. Sangari's *The Gendered Nation* (2001) explores the impact of colonial and postcolonial policies on the lives of women, while Khanduri's research on the intersectionality of caste and gender highlights the ways in which marginalized women navigated both social and religious hierarchies in medieval India.

The interdisciplinary nature of this field has led to new methodologies and sources in the study of marginalized communities. Oral histories, folklore, and religious texts have been employed to supplement conventional sources like royal records and administrative documents. Scholars like Shankar Ray have utilized folklore and oral traditions as valuable sources to reconstruct the histories of tribal and marginalized communities in medieval India. Archaeological studies, particularly those focusing on rural settlements and lesser-known historical sites, have also provided new insights into the lived experiences of marginalized groups during this period.

While significant strides have been made in recovering the histories of marginalized communities, scholars continue to grapple with the challenges of accessing and interpreting sources that reflect the lives of these groups. Much of the documentation of their histories has been lost, neglected, or distorted, which poses a significant obstacle for historians working in this area. Nevertheless, the growing body of literature has paved the way for a more inclusive, multi-

dimensional approach to medieval Indian history—one that recognizes the complexity of social, cultural, and political dynamics beyond the elite and dominant narratives.

### 3. MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES IN MEDIEVAL INDIA

The study of marginalized communities in medieval India requires a theoretical framework that not only challenges the traditional, elite-centric historical narratives but also offers a lens through which the agency and lived experiences of these communities can be understood. This paper draws on several key theoretical approaches that enable a critical examination of social, political, and cultural marginalization, while also foregrounding the experiences of marginalized groups.

1. **Subaltern Studies:** One of the most influential frameworks in the study of marginalized histories is the Subaltern Studies tradition, which originated in the 1980s with the work of historians like Ranajit Guha and Partha Chatterjee. The concept of the "subaltern" refers to those who are outside the power structures of colonial and postcolonial societies—groups whose voices and experiences have been historically silenced or overlooked by dominant narratives. In the context of medieval India, subaltern history provides an essential lens for examining how lower castes, women, tribal communities, and other marginalized groups experienced and resisted social, political, and economic exclusion. Guha's concept of the "history from below" is particularly relevant here, as it calls for a focus on the experiences of those at the margins, rather than the elites who have traditionally shaped the historical record.
2. **Intersectionality:** The theory of intersectionality, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, emphasizes the interconnectedness of various social categories such as caste, gender, class, and religion, and how they intersect to create overlapping systems of discrimination and oppression. In the case of medieval India, this theoretical framework is essential for understanding the compounded marginalization faced by individuals who were at the intersection of multiple axes of identity. For example, a Dalit woman in medieval India would have experienced not only the discrimination of caste but also the gendered violence that women faced in a patriarchal society. By employing an intersectional approach, this study seeks to explore the complex social hierarchies that shaped the lives of marginalized communities in multifaceted ways, showing how caste, gender, and religion were intertwined in the formation of identities and the reproduction of social inequalities.
3. **Postcolonial Theory:** Postcolonial theory offers a critical perspective on the impact of colonialism on historical narratives and the ways in which colonial power structures continue to influence modern historiography. While medieval India was not directly governed by colonial powers, the historiographical tradition that developed under colonial rule heavily shaped our understanding of pre-colonial periods. This includes the marginalization of indigenous and subaltern histories, which were often excluded from the official colonial accounts of Indian society. Scholars like Dipesh Chakrabarty, in his work *Provincializing Europe* (2000), argue that colonial historiography positioned European experiences as universal and imposed this framework on non-Western societies. Applying postcolonial theory to the study of medieval India allows for a critical reexamination of historical narratives that have been shaped by colonial biases, and helps to recover the voices and histories that colonialism erased or suppressed.
4. **Gender Theory:** The application of gender theory is crucial in understanding the historical marginalization of women in medieval India, particularly women from lower castes, indigenous groups, and religious minorities. Feminist scholars, such as Judith Butler and Joan Scott, have emphasized the importance of analyzing how gender operates as a social construct that interacts with other systems of power. In the context of medieval India, gender was not only a basis for social stratification but also a tool of political control. Women's roles, whether as wives, mothers, or workers, were often defined by patriarchal structures that rendered them subservient to both caste hierarchies and political elites. By focusing on gender as a dynamic and intersectional category, this paper highlights the ways in which women from marginalized communities navigated multiple forms of oppression and exercised agency within restricted social spaces.
5. **Cultural Studies and Ethnography:** In addition to traditional historical analysis, cultural studies and ethnography provide valuable methodologies for understanding the lived experiences of marginalized communities. These

approaches emphasize the importance of everyday life, popular culture, oral traditions, rituals, and folk practices as sites of resistance and cultural expression. For example, tribal communities in medieval India often preserved their histories and identities through oral traditions, folk art, and rituals, which were sometimes overlooked or misinterpreted by mainstream historians. By adopting cultural studies and ethnographic methods, this study seeks to explore the non-textual sources of history, allowing for a richer understanding of the cultural practices and identities of marginalized groups in medieval India.

6. **Post-Structuralism:** Post-structuralist theories, particularly those influenced by Michel Foucault, help to deconstruct dominant power relations that shape historical narratives. Foucault's notion of power, which is diffuse and operates at all levels of society, allows for an understanding of how marginalized communities in medieval India were subjected to both direct and subtle forms of control. Foucault's work on discipline, surveillance, and social control can be applied to analyze the ways in which the state and dominant religious institutions exerted power over marginalized groups, shaping their identities and experiences. In this context, post-structuralism helps to reveal how historical narratives have been constructed through power relations that have marginalized certain voices and experiences.

#### 4. CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF HISTORICAL SOURCES

This section presents the results of the investigation into the histories of marginalized communities in medieval India, based on a critical analysis of historical sources, including court records, religious texts, oral histories, archaeological evidence, and scholarly interpretations. The findings reveal the ways in which these communities navigated, resisted, and reshaped the socio-political structures of the time, challenging dominant historical narratives that have traditionally focused on the elite.

1. **The Socio-Political Position of Marginalized Communities:** One of the key findings of this study is that marginalized communities in medieval India, such as Dalits, tribal groups, women, and religious minorities, were not mere passive subjects of oppression but were active agents in the socio-political landscape. Although these communities were often relegated to lower positions within the social hierarchy, they found ways to resist, subvert, and sometimes even thrive in spite of their marginalization. For instance, historical records from the Deccan Sultanates and the Mughal Empire reveal that certain Dalit groups played crucial roles in agricultural labor, military service, and even urban commerce. In addition, tribal communities in regions like Rajasthan and the Western Ghats maintained their autonomy and political organization, often challenging the central authority of the state.

Through an intersectional lens, it is clear that caste, gender, and religion played significant roles in shaping the lives of marginalized groups. Women, especially from lower castes and indigenous groups, often experienced double marginalization, both as women in a patriarchal society and as members of oppressed social categories. This dual oppression is evident in the limited references to their involvement in political and religious activities, though some instances, such as the prominent roles of women in Bhakti movements, reveal their agency in religious and social reform.

2. **Cultural and Religious Resistance:** The study also highlights how marginalized communities expressed their identities and resisted social norms through culture and religion. The Bhakti movement, for example, served as a powerful form of cultural and religious resistance for many lower-caste and women followers. Figures like Kabir, Sant Tukaram, and Mirabai—who came from humble backgrounds or were part of marginalized groups—challenged the rigid caste system and the orthodoxy of Brahmanical Hinduism, offering new ways of worship and spiritual expression that were more inclusive.

In the case of tribal groups, the oral traditions, folklore, and ritual practices played a crucial role in preserving their histories and asserting their cultural identity. These communities often used oral storytelling as a method of resistance, ensuring the transmission of knowledge, ancestral practices, and histories that countered the dominant elite narratives. Similarly, religious minorities, such as Muslims in regions like Kashmir and Bengal, maintained unique cultural practices and resisted both religious orthodoxy and the state's demands for conformity, often forming subcultures that blended local traditions with Islamic practices.

3. **Economic Contributions and Exploitation:** The economic roles of marginalized communities in medieval India were significant but often undervalued in mainstream historical accounts. Lower-caste groups, such as the Chamar and Bhangi communities, were integral to the agrarian economy, providing labor in fields, leatherwork, and sanitation, yet they were simultaneously subject to exploitation and social exclusion. The economic contributions of these communities were largely ignored by elite historians, who tended to focus on the wealth and power of the ruling classes.

Tribals, on the other hand, were often involved in subsistence agriculture, forest product harvesting, and trade, sustaining the local economies while also being exploited by feudal lords and later colonial powers. In regions like the Western Ghats, forest-dwelling communities had their own systems of governance and resource management, which were frequently disrupted by imperial expansion. These economic structures reveal a complex relationship between marginalized communities and the state, where these groups were both vital to the economy and subject to systematic exploitation.

4. **Legal and Administrative Marginalization:** Legal documents from the medieval period, such as revenue records, land grants, and royal decrees, offer insight into the systemic marginalization of these communities. Laws and royal edicts often codified the lower status of certain groups, and the administration was structured in a way that reinforced caste-based discrimination and gender inequality. For example, the laws governing the behavior of women, especially in relation to inheritance and property, were highly restrictive. In many regions, women from marginalized castes had little legal recourse, and their voices were absent from political or legal decision-making processes.

Furthermore, many tribal groups were excluded from the formal legal systems and were instead governed by their own customary laws and councils. This separation from state legal structures contributed to their continued marginalization, as their customary practices were often ignored or even criminalized by the ruling elite. In certain instances, marginalized groups sought to challenge these legal frameworks, either through petitions to the state or by forming alliances with other oppressed communities to advocate for their rights.

5. **Resistance Movements and Revolts:** The history of resistance and revolt among marginalized communities during medieval India is one of the paper's most significant findings. From the Peasant Revolts of the Deccan to the rebellion of the Bhils in Gujarat, marginalized groups frequently resisted state control, economic exploitation, and social marginalization. These uprisings, often led by lower-caste leaders or tribal chiefs, were not merely reactive but were proactive efforts to reclaim autonomy, land, and dignity.

The historical records reveal that such movements were not isolated but were part of a broader trend of resistance against state power. Some of these uprisings, like the Bhil Revolt or the peasant movements in the Mughal Empire, were significant in their scope, challenging the state's monopolies over land and labor. In many cases, these revolts were suppressed violently, but they highlighted the enduring resistance of marginalized groups to the power structures that sought to dominate them.

6. **Historical Gaps and the Challenges of Recovery:** One of the significant challenges in analyzing the histories of marginalized communities is the lack of comprehensive, direct documentation. Much of the historical record from this period has been written by elite scholars, administrators, and rulers, who focused on the exploits of powerful dynasties and the elite classes. As a result, the voices of marginalized communities have often been erased, misrepresented, or overlooked in official histories.

Despite this, the study successfully uncovered valuable insights from alternative sources such as folk narratives, oral histories, and archaeological findings. These sources helped to provide a more holistic view of the lives of marginalized groups, revealing their resilience, struggles, and agency. However, the fragmented nature of these sources remains a challenge, as many communities were illiterate or did not leave behind written records of their own. As a result, much of their history has to be pieced together through interpretation and inference.

**Table 1: the contrasts between marginalized communities and the dominant narratives in medieval India**

Category	Marginalized Communities	Dominant Historical Narratives	Key Differences
Social Stratification	Lower castes, women, indigenous groups, religious minorities.	Focus on elites, ruling dynasties, and high castes.	Marginalized communities often portrayed as passive, with limited roles. Elites portrayed as central to societal organization.
Cultural Resistance	Bhakti movement, folk traditions, oral histories, religious practices.	Mainstream Hinduism, Islamic orthodoxy, court-sponsored cultural activities.	Marginalized groups used cultural and religious resistance to challenge dominant ideologies (e.g., Bhakti saints from lower castes).
Economic Roles	Laborers (agriculture, leatherwork, sanitation), artisans, tribal groups.	Focus on agrarian elites, traders, and royal patronage.	The economic contributions of marginalized groups were vital but often underappreciated or ignored in elite accounts.
Political Participation	Tribes with their own governance, Dalit leaders in revolts, resistance movements.	Focus on monarchies, centralized governance, and elite political systems.	Marginalized communities' political autonomy and resistance movements are downplayed or erased in mainstream narratives.
Legal and Administrative Status	Exclusion from formal legal systems, discriminatory laws, customary tribal laws.	Legal frameworks based on caste hierarchies, royal decrees, and patriarchal control.	Marginalized groups often excluded from formal legal structures; their customs and laws ignored or criminalized.
Gendered Marginalization	Women from lower castes and tribal groups, gendered violence.	Focus on elite women in royal families, women as symbols of virtue.	Women from marginalized communities faced dual oppression, while elite women's roles were highlighted in mainstream histories.
Resistance Movements	Revolts (e.g., Bhil Revolt, Peasant uprisings), tribal resistance.	Focus on royal conquests, centralized state control, and elite military achievements.	Resistance movements led by marginalized groups are seen as subversive or spontaneous, rarely depicted as significant or sustained.
Cultural Expression	Folk music, oral epics, local deities, tribal rituals.	Royal patronage of classical arts, literature, and courtly culture.	Cultural expressions of marginalized groups were often viewed as "informal" or "primitive," while elite culture was highly institutionalized.
Agency and Identity	Marginalized groups had agency through subversion, cultural practices, and religious movements.	Elite figures were central to history-making, shaping the narrative.	Marginalized communities are often depicted as passive victims; in contrast, evidence suggests they actively shaped their own identities and histories.
Historical Sources	Oral traditions, folklore, religious texts, local records, archaeological findings.	Royal inscriptions, courtly literature, and state-sponsored documents.	Official sources are largely elite-biased, while marginalized groups' histories are preserved through non-textual, alternative forms of knowledge.

This table summarizes the contrasts between marginalized communities and the dominant narratives in medieval Indian historiography, highlighting the different ways in which these groups were represented and their roles in shaping society. The table also underscores the gaps in historical records and the importance of alternative sources for constructing a more inclusive historical narrative.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The study of the histories of marginalized communities in medieval India is an essential and transformative endeavor that challenges traditional historiographical frameworks and amplifies the voices of those who have long been sidelined in historical narratives. By shifting focus from the elite, court-centered perspectives to the lived experiences of marginalized groups—such as Dalits, indigenous communities, women, and religious minorities—this research offers a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of medieval Indian society.

Throughout history, marginalized communities have actively resisted oppression, contributed to the economy, maintained their cultural identities, and participated in social and political processes, despite systemic exclusion and silencing. Whether through religious movements like the Bhakti movement, folk traditions, tribal governance systems, or resistance revolts, these communities have demonstrated resilience and agency that have been largely overlooked by mainstream histories. Recognizing and analyzing these forms of resistance provides a more nuanced and balanced historical account, one that acknowledges the multifaceted nature of medieval India's social and political fabric.

Moreover, by confronting the biases in existing historical records, this study sheds light on the ideological forces that have historically privileged certain groups while marginalizing others. It calls for a critical reexamination of how history is written and urges scholars and practitioners to consider alternative sources and methodologies, such as oral histories, folklore, and archaeology, in order to recover these silenced voices. This is not only an academic exercise but a vital process of decolonizing history and offering marginalized communities the recognition they deserve in the historical record.

Despite the challenges posed by the scarcity of sources, interpretive complexities, and the historical erasure of marginalized groups, the significance of this research cannot be overstated. By reconstructing and amplifying these histories, the study contributes to a broader social and political agenda of social justice, inclusion, and equality. It provides critical insights into the structural forces that have shaped present-day inequalities, making the recovery of marginalized histories highly relevant to contemporary struggles for social change and empowerment.

In conclusion, the study of marginalized communities in medieval India enriches our understanding of the past, offers a platform for previously silenced voices, and helps build a more just and equitable society. It is a vital contribution to both historical scholarship and social justice movements, promoting a more inclusive and comprehensive vision of India's rich, diverse heritage.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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