

# Depiction of marginal society in mahabharata essay



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The mainstream Hindu society in Mahabharata comprised of mainly four castes: Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. Apart from these four basic orders, there were other castes that emerged from either the intermixing of these four classes, came in during foreign invasions or were celestial beings and Nagas.

Such communities were not included in the mainstream Hinduism and thus remained marginal to it. There are various depictions of these marginal societies in Mahabharata and their constant interaction with the four main groups. The famous marginal tribes that have been mentioned over and over again in the epic are Kiratas, Nishadas, Sakas, Pallavas, Shabars, Barbaras, Yavanas, Dramids and Mlechchas. Some marginal castes were also based on their profession, like fishermen, milkmen, Aranyacars, while some were on the basis of their character, like Nagas. Celestial beings included Gandharvas, Apsaras, Gods et cetera who lived in heaven (swarga lok-in the sky) and demons (asuras/danavas) and genies (daityas) were either found in dense forests or below the ground (paatal lok). The existence of various marginal tribes in India is explained in the form of various stories depicted in Indian literature. One of the most famous accounts that we come across in Mahabharata is the abduction of Vashishta's magical cow Nandini by Vishwamitra. To fight the army of Vishwamitra, Nandini gives birth to various tribes mentioned in the introduction, from various derogatory parts like her urine, backside, dung and foam.

This in itself shows that though these tribes were a part of the society, their status was still lower to the four mainstream classes. We have several accounts like the death of the Nishada woman and her five sons in the <https://assignbuster.com/depiction-of-marginal-society-in-mahabharata-essay/>

Lakshyagraha fire, where Pandavas being the Kshatriyas, easily justified the killings by stating that their lives were important than the lives of Nishadas. Also the case of Satyvati where she was merely used by Parashara to satiate his own lust and desire for sex, can bring us down to the conclusion that people from such marginal tribes were used and abused every so often by the higher Hindu classes. All these stories speak of the injustices and oppressions these marginal tribes faced and of the inferior status they had in the Kshatriya society. The story and character of Eklavya in Mahabharata tells us a lot about the condition of the forest tribes. They were the uncivilized and dispensable groups in Hindu society, they lived in completely different locations from Kshatriyas and followed a completely different culture, they were illiterate and their appearance was rustic. They were portrayed as naïve and raw individuals who in the first place, weren't even assumed to have a worthy opinion that could be considered by the Kshatriya clan. Therefore, we can conclude that they were physically (in terms of their location) and culturally distant from the mainstream.

They had no say in any of the matters and mixing of Kshatriya blood with them was generally avoided. This also brings me to my second point where I'd like to point out the gender roles where only women and not men of lower castes could marry with people of higher classes. Women were considered to be the assets/commodities of the family and were never married off to lower caste men. In any case if that happened that marriage became the act of Pratiloma which was demeaned and looked down upon by the society. Also when we talk about the status of these people in Kshatriya society; one interpretation why Eklavya cut off his thumb and gave it to Dronacharya can

also be that he being part of a lower tribe would have gained the actual status of being called the student of the great Brahman who teaches the great Pandavas and Kauravas. This was probably the only way a skilled tribal could have gained some status in a society where Kshatriyas were probably presupposed to be the greatest of the warriors and no tribal was ever given a chance to compete with them. There is also the mention of Shiva's story where he disguises as a Kirata archer who Arjuna supposes easy to defeat just because he is a tribal. Shiva teaches Arjuna the lessons in humiliation and acceptance, when he finally couldn't defeat him.

To sum up the whole thing, I'd say that these tribes were basically the silent and unheard voices who suffered ill treatment and injustice with no end to it; their sons however skilled were not assimilated in the Kshatriya clan or were even eligible to gain higher positions in the court; there were no real laws to protect them from abuse by Kshatriyas and they were merely used in armies as soldiers and had no real say in any matters of the State. There are also depictions of constant interaction of celestial beings with higher mortals, usually the great Kshatriya kings. Apart from their unions with apsaras and daanvis, there are stories like the one, of the forest of Khandava where Gods took help of these powerful Pandava kings to fight the evil forces. Also the accounts of Chitrasena, a Gandharva, who fought with both Pandavas and Kauravas are of significant importance in the epic. Similarly, the incident of Duryodhana where he was taken to the paatal lok by the demons and was persuaded to fight a war against Pandavas shows the 'interdependence' between these celestial beings and the mortals. These people possessed mystical and supernatural powers, the maidens in the heaven were

extraordinarily beautiful, demons had their own tantrik skills and magical weapons and both evil and good thus perpetually existed in the early society. They are showed to be in constant friction with each other; the good keeps winning over the evil time and again and Kshatriyas (mortals) are persistently involved in it. We consider celestial beings a marginal society too because even though they constantly interact with the mortals, they are also not included in the mainstream because of their super bloodline.

They are, in my opinion, not even a part of the society directly. They keep visiting the Earth but go back soon after the accomplishment of their task and usually don't stay with the mortals permanently. We consider them a part because of their dependence on the mortals as means to achieve a higher good and their unions with them that lead to the birth of children with unusual talents and skills. As a conclusion, I'd like to say that the subordinate and marginal groups are depicted as either foreigners or barbarians (in context of the various tribes that existed during that period) or as supernatural beings who granted boons and gave a super bloodline to the Kshatriya class(in context of the celestial beings). They mostly supported the existence of the kings while daityas and danavas symbolized evil and supported wicked kings like Kauravas. The tribes though contributed a lot to the society invariably, just because they were foreign, were not included in the mainstream Hinduism and remained a totally different and usually secluded section of the society. On one hand, where I find the tribes facing discrimination and bias in the whole epic; on the other, the status of the Godly celestial beings was much higher and respected among the Kshatriya

kings. The demons were hated by all those who worshipped Hindu Gods and believed in doing 'good' and abided by 'dharma'.

The asuras got support only from the 'villains' in Mahabharata, who lose the war finally, thus signifying victory of good over evil in the end.