

Structural Social Work: An Approach to Bring Subaltern Discourse in Social Work in Indian Context

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Abstract

This paper discusses the process of bringing subaltern discourse of marginalized communities for inclusive development through structural social work in India. The hegemonic ideology of dominant communities in India always excluded and systematically marginalized dalits, women and indigenous communities from the mainstream development. The efforts made by the post-colonial government couldn't help much to bring an inclusive development process. Social aspects in democracy should address social relations with equality. Nevertheless, caste and gender were always threats for Indian society and now for a largest vibrant democracy. Though the constitution promotes the right to freedom of expression, one needs to analyze whether these marginalized have equal say in democratic process. Representation and participation of discriminated and excluded groups in governance is the central element of inclusive policy and building inclusive society. However, the situation is status-quo in reality. Post-colonialism and neoliberalism promotes accumulation of wealth and resources which dispossess these communities which leads to disengagement of these communities from the development process. There is a strong need to build the capacities of these communities and empower them for inclusive development. The roots of this marginalization are deeply rooted in societal structure. Inadequate social and economic arrangements are predominantly responsible for the plight of marginalized communities. Empowering these communities for inclusive development would only be possible by challenging the structural issues and existing social arrangements. The seldom efforts had been made by social work professionals 'paternalistically' to engage these disengaged communities. Therefore, social workers have to facilitate the process building capacities of these communities for challenging the existing hegemonic power structure. The structural social work approach tries to change the social and

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economic systems by conscientizing marginalized communities. This paper will also throw light on the process of building critical consciousness among these communities viz a viz response of social workers.

Keywords: Social Work, Structural social work, Caste, Marginalization, Subaltern

Introduction

According to the UGC's Second Review Committee in 1975, it was acknowledged that there existed a discernible need to shift the emphasis of social work education from the remedial to developmental roles. Additionally, it was deemed imperative to expand the scope of training beyond urban areas to encompass rural and tribal communities, in order to address the needs of the majority within our population (UGC Second Review Committee, 1975). It has been over forty years since the committee provided recommendations regarding the necessity for a paradigm shift in social work courses. The social work curriculum has undergone infrequent modifications, often involving the expansion of specialized areas of study or, in certain instances, a continued emphasis on generalist social work education. The majority of social work schools at the graduate and postgraduate levels provide a comprehensive education in the field of social work without specialization. One of the advantages of a generic social work degree is the acquisition of a comprehensive awareness of many topics at a peripheral level. However, upon careful examination of the evolving dynamics of society and its associated challenges, it is imperative to cultivate a specialized understanding of certain difficulties. It is noteworthy that the complexity of these issues is progressively increasing over time. Hence, there exists a discourse within the realm of social work academia and practice regarding the merits of offering generic versus specialized social work education at both the graduate and postgraduate levels.

The Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), which holds the distinction of being the oldest institution of social work in India, has undertaken an endeavor to broaden the scope of its social work curriculum by introducing additional specialities at the school level. Certain specialities within the field of social work continue to adhere to the clinical approach when implementing interventions, whereas only a limited number of specializations have been developed from a critical perspective. The specialization or concentration in Indian context, such as Dalit and Tribal Social Work (DTSW) and Women-centered social work, places emphasis on the important dimensions of structural social realities pertaining to caste and patriarchy. The approach employed by these specializations in examining social issues is grounded in the structural perspective, which posits that the underlying cause of such challenges lies in the structural arrangement of society. The adoption of

these specialities in the social work curriculum in the Indian setting might be observed as a paradigm change, as suggested by the second review committee.

It is crucial to recognize that social work education should center on pathological approaches that include a functional viewpoint for issue resolution. The emphasis in this context is mostly placed on the individual's 'problem'. This method persists in the realm of social work education and practice, exerting a significant influence on the process of situating social work within the specific local environment. The persisting challenges in contemporary society are inherently linked to its underlying structure. To address these challenges, it is imperative to prioritize the consideration of structure as a fundamental reference point for social work intervention. Therefore, it is imperative to alter the strategy of social work intervention by placing greater focus on structural social work.

This paper aims to provide light on the practice of structural social work in order to effectively engage with marginalized populations. The challenges faced by excluded communities can be attributed to a societal system characterized by inequality. This study aims to examine the concept of structural social work as a means of integrating the concerns of excluded populations into the broader discourse of social work.

Understanding Indian Society: Assessing Marginality and Exclusion

The overarching objective of our nation is to establish an exemplary society founded upon the principles of liberty, equality, and brotherhood. India, as a nation, exhibits diversity in various aspects such as culture, socio-economic orientation, political philosophy, area, and religion. Despite these distinctions, India asserts itself as a community that upholds unity. The preamble of the constitution commences with the phrase "We-the people of India," signifying the inclusive unity of all individuals within this sovereign nation, regardless of their shared characteristics or orientations. Notwithstanding the existence of societal divisions, certain segments of the population experience uneven treatment due to factors such as caste, gender, class, and religion. The major cause of oppression and exclusion of individuals stems from the hierarchical and dehumanizing structural arrangements inside society. The phenomenon of oppression and exclusion can be comprehended through the application of the Marxian parallel of fundamental and superstructure.

Marx's conceptual framework involves the classification of society into two distinct components: the basic structure and the superstructure. According to Marx, the basic structure refers to the economic organization of society, which plays a pivotal role in determining the social class of individuals. On the other hand, the superstructure encompasses other non-

economic aspects of society, including culture, education, religion, and other related elements. The individual posited that the fundamental framework of society dictates the subsequent development of its many components within a hierarchical system. The aforementioned structure serves as the fundamental framework behind various forms of marginalization and exclusion experienced by the working class group within a class-based society. By employing this analogical framework within the Indian context, we may elucidate the phenomenon of marginalization experienced by specific segments of Indian society, which can be attributed to both primary and secondary structures. To commence our analysis, it is imperative to get a comprehensive comprehension of the basic and secondary structures within the context of Indian society.

Primary structures refer to the fundamental structural arrangements that are firmly ingrained in the fabric of a society. On the other hand, secondary structures encompass the systems that comprise the functional components of the society. The influence of the Caste system on Indian society, characterized by a hierarchical structure of several social groupings, is well acknowledged. In spite of the presence of various anti-caste initiatives and constitutional restrictions, the concept of caste continues to persist inside the collective consciousness of Indian society, permeating everyday existence (Pathania et al., 2023). Caste is a pervasive social phenomenon in India that categorizes individuals into hierarchical groups, resulting in pronounced inequalities within society. The social institution of caste in India has substantial ramifications for social legislations, affirmative action, and programs aimed at the development of specific groups (Pal, 2020). It assumes a significant part in various aspects of human existence, including social, economic, political, and cultural domains. The caste system governs an individual's social interactions with other members of society. Symbolic connections among individuals have a significant impact on the social, economic, and political structures of a given community. Caste plays a vital role in shaping an individual's involvement in the 'public sphere', which, within the Indian context, is widely regarded as the domain where individuals collectively deliberate and make decisions regarding their societal progress and advancement. The Gramsabha, or village level assembly, serves as a significant public forum where decisions pertaining to the development of the community are made. Nevertheless, dalits, as a result of their marginalized position within the social hierarchy, are consistently subjected to exclusion, which can be categorized as both "active" and "passive" exclusion, as described by Sen (2000).

Moreover, it is evident that in addition to caste, gender also significantly influences the extent to which these communities are able to engage in the broader decision-making process. One could posit that caste and gender exert significant influence in impeding individuals' access to the mainstream

development process. Therefore, the intricate structure of Indian society, characterized by the caste system and gender dynamics, gives rise to social inequity, oppression, and marginalization, ultimately influencing individuals' interactions in various aspects of life.

Contextualizing Social Work in India Context:

Social work, a profession that was originally borrowed from western countries in the year 1936, has now evolved into an established academic discipline inside mainstream academia in India. However, India boasts a rich historical legacy of engaging in social work through voluntary efforts rooted in religious ideologies. In addition to the religious emphasis that motivates individuals to engage in charitable deeds, social institutions also play a crucial role in addressing the needs of vulnerable populations such as the elderly, the sick, and those who are otherwise unable to care for themselves (Gore, 1965). It is evident that social work in the Indian setting has existed since ancient times, albeit its practice lacked formal organization. The concept of assisting individuals facing distressing circumstances in adapting to the prevailing socio-economic environment has persisted for approximately eight decades following the professionalization of social work education and practice in India. The curricula and direction of social work education and practice mostly focused on topics related to metropolitan settings. There exist two underlying factors contributing to this phenomenon, with the initial factor being the origin of professional social work. The social work educational procedures have consistently been affected by the ideology and approach taken from western countries. During the initial period, the curriculum implemented was largely derived from Western countries with few modifications. Another contributing factor was the geographical placement of social work institutes during their initial stages, predominantly in urban regions. Consequently, their interventions primarily focused on addressing urban-related concerns.

The underpinnings of professional social work education and practice in the Indian context were established upon a traditional framework that emphasizes assisting individuals experiencing distress in developing familiarity with the societal structures in which they reside. The conceptual underpinnings of social work education were rooted in the principles of charity and welfare, a perspective that was also evident in the design of the curriculum. As a result, social work educators and practitioners in the early stages of the field saw poverty as the primary underlying factor contributing to a majority of social issues. Consequently, poverty assumed a significant role in the design and implementation of social work interventions. The social work profession has historically been associated with assisting individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds in breaking free from the cycle of poverty.

In the Indian context, traditional social work has historically demonstrated limited consideration for the structural factors that contribute to the existence of poverty. In the realm of social work education and practice, inquiries pertaining to poverty, such as the identification of impoverished individuals and their origins, have historically occupied a peripheral position. In contrast, social work education and practice place a significant emphasis on the ramifications of poverty. The examination of socio-economic and political factors will yield insights indicating that poverty is not a fundamental cause, but rather a consequence of the inequitable allocation of essential rights and resources necessary for sustenance. The phenomenon under consideration is a result of the process of exclusion and marginalization, and it has a clear correlation with the susceptibility experienced by some segments of the population. In order to achieve the ultimate objective of social work experts, namely social change, it is imperative to address matters pertaining to exclusion, marginalization, and vulnerability.

As stated by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), the central objective of the social work profession is to augment the overall welfare of individuals and address the fundamental human necessities of all individuals, with a specific focus on the needs and empowerment of individuals who are susceptible, marginalized, and experiencing poverty (NASW, 1999). According to the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2000), the objective of social work encompasses the facilitation of social change, as well as the empowerment and emancipation of individuals in order to improve their overall well-being. According to the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) in 2014, an additional definition posits that Social Work is both a profession grounded in practical application and an academic field that advocates for societal transformation and progress, fostering social unity, as well as the empowerment and emancipation of individuals. The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2014) asserts that social work is fundamentally guided by principles such as social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities. The analysis of these definitions of social work from a global viewpoint reveals that the notion of social work at the global level has undergone multiple changes over time. The terminology employed within the social work field has undergone modifications, a phenomenon that is evident in the revised definitions. After careful consideration of the aforementioned concepts, it becomes evident that social workers must ascertain the underlying causes of oppression and vulnerability. The facilitation of the empowerment process necessitates the identification of power relations within the community. The distribution of power and its associated dynamics are intricately connected to the positioning of an individual or group within the broader social framework. The development process is significantly influenced by power dynamics and relationships, which manifest in various ways such as limited access

to resources, exclusion from decision-making processes, and experiences of humiliation based on caste or gender.

Gore (1985) noted that the aforementioned challenge remains unaddressed, leading to persistent uncertainty among social work educators and trained professionals in India regarding the feasibility of solely focusing on specific individuals, groups, and communities, given that the issues at hand primarily affect large segments of the population. The issues often recognized as challenges faced by socially marginalized and economically disadvantaged groups cannot be classified as mere adjustment difficulties. The moral-ethical and psychological paradigm of intervention is limited in its ability to address the social and cultural context of these problems (Srivatsava, 1999).

The principles and ethics of social work emphasize the significance of social justice and human dignity, thereby necessitating that social work education should foster the development of socially just practice (Esau & Keet, 2014). The conventional paradigm of Social Work might be likened to an elite framework that lacks the capacity to unveil the underlying structural origins of oppression. As delineated in the aforementioned criteria, social justice constitutes the fundamental underpinning of the social work profession. The identification of factors that contribute to societal injustice holds significant importance within the field of social work. As previously indicated, one's caste and gender identification play a significant role in determining their social standing and shaping their communication patterns. The exclusion of women, Dalits, and tribal populations from mainstream processes has perpetuated a cycle of injustice within the social system. Nevertheless, conventional social work overlooked the oppressive nature of these systems. According to Desai (2004), knowledge is formed within historical and cultural frameworks, as viewed from a socially critical perspective. Therefore, it is imperative to take into account the historical and cultural dimensions of the community during the curriculum development process in order to enhance innovation.

Hence, it is imperative for social work to comprehend the interconnections and overlapping nature of these difficulties. Without a comprehensive understanding of these issues, we will encounter difficulties in determining the appropriate ways to effectively tackle the developing societal challenges. Therefore, in light of these factors, it is imperative for social work professionals to modify their viewpoint on problem-solving by adopting a structural lens.

Structural Social Work: Contextualizing Social Work in India

Structural social work is a nascent paradigm within the field of social work practice, particularly within the specific context of India. In contrast to conventional social work practices, this method recognizes and addresses the underlying structural factors that contribute to marginalization and

vulnerability. The therapeutic and systemic approaches fail to incorporate broader social, political, and economic systems that recognize power dynamics and resulting disadvantages (Martin, 2003). The structural school of thought expresses a critical stance towards the presence of structurally oppressive components that are inherent in the clinical/individual perspective (Bodhi, 2011). In the Indian context, it is evident that traditional social work practice did not prioritize the examination and intervention of the wider social and economic framework that is influenced by caste and gender. In contrast, structural social work places attention on the broader structural arrangements that impact the functioning of individuals or communities. As previously indicated, the primary structure, which is determined by caste and gender, results in an inequitable allocation of rights and resources. In this context, structural social work recognizes the dominance of the primary structure. Based on the above information, it can be argued that the main structure is the underlying factor responsible for marginalization and oppression. Consequently, professionals in the field of social work are urged to actively confront and contest the dominant power dynamics that arise as a result of the primary structure. The concept of structural social work emerged as a means to shift away from the tendency to categorize individuals and their situations into separate entities. Instead, it emphasizes the significance of interpersonal interactions within the context of particular social, economic, and political conditions (Martin, 2003). The Indian culture exhibits a plethora of dichotomies, encompassing caste, class, gender, ethnicity, geography, and other factors, resulting in the exclusion of certain individuals from mainstream societal activities.

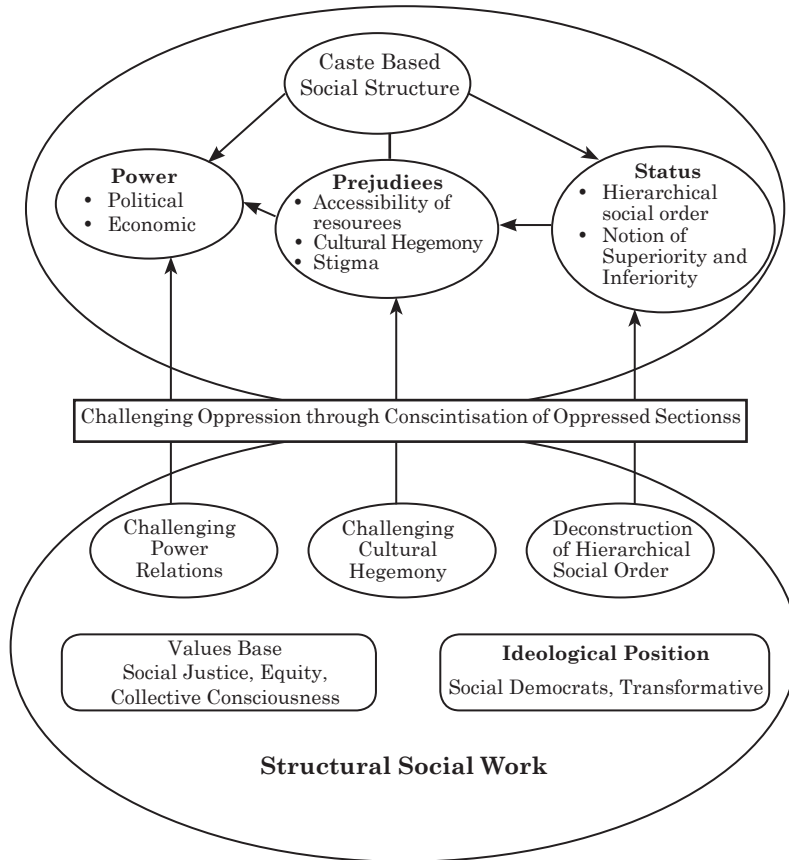
The longstanding social structure in Indian culture, characterized by caste and gender, has historically marginalized dalits and women, preventing their inclusion in mainstream societal processes. The freedom of expression within the public domain has been subject to limitations, particularly with regards to women. They have historically faced and continue to face significant barriers in terms of opportunities to voice their opinions in decision-making processes that have a direct impact on their lives. The concepts underlying these communities were never implemented. Throughout the duration of this process, individuals are subjected to an oppressive framework that imposes restrictions on their ability to engage and participate. Hence, it is imperative to grant these communities the necessary empowerment to transcend the confines of this oppressive framework. The conventional method rarely addresses the problem of oppressiveness. According to Bodhi (2011), it is imperative to address the traditionalist standpoint and establish a novel paradigm of liberatory practice. Structural social work approaches acknowledge the repressive nature of the current socio-economic framework and advocate for the freedom of individuals who are ensnared in this oppression, as well as the emancipation of the structure itself. This strategy can be seen as addressing the liberation of marginalized individuals.

Critiques are frequently directed towards structural social workers and/or educators regarding the methodological aspects of their implementation of structural social work. In contrast to the conventional approach of social work that focuses on raising individual consciousness, structural social workers prioritize the cultivation of community consciousness. The idea of “personal is political” is employed to emphasize that matters typically regarded as personal are in fact interconnected with broader systems of oppression. The suppression of oppressions and prejudice experienced by individuals will persist until they are articulated within a broader forum and are acknowledged by the dominant segment of society. Hence, it is imperative for individuals who encounter similar forms of oppression and have endured historical discrimination to unite in a collective effort to resist the dominant worldview.

In the process, structural social workers are required to identify the origins of power imbalances and control. In the Indian context, it is imperative for the structural social worker to possess a comprehensive understanding and recognition of the fundamental origins of social hierarchies, which are deeply embedded within our societal framework. These hierarchies are primarily established on the basis of caste and gender, afterwards intersecting with class dynamics. Identifying the precise origin of domination can often pose significant difficulties, as it arises from a multitude of factors. In the context of dalit women, they are subjected to many forms of oppression, experiencing triple discrimination due to their dalit identity within the wider society, their gender within their immediate family, and their status as dalit women within the broader category of women. In this scenario, it is imperative for a structural social worker to recognize and address all pertinent factors, and afterwards formulate ways to facilitate their liberation from this oppressive situation.

Framework for Structural Social Work:

Power plays an important role in caste structure. It is observed that caste based social status determines the power in all spheres viz. economic, political and cultural. The sources of power like education, politics, religion and modes of production are controlled by the people located at the top of social order. ‘Hierarchy’ and ‘status’ are also dimensions or forms of ‘power’ (Jhodka, 2012). They are also privileged being at the top of the ladder of the social order. Dalits on the other hand are powerless and less privileged sections of the society. Thus, structural social work practice in caste-based society is centered on power analysis and identification of the gap between privileged and non-privileged sections.



The above framework shows that structural social work is basically challenging the oppression by conscientizing the oppressed communities. The structural social worker must identify the power, prejudices and status in the caste system. These are the fundamental sources of oppression and marginalization. While challenging the power structure, system of prejudices and hierarchy of status, structural social workers must have appropriate and strong frameworks in the form of values and ideological positioning. Social justice, equity, collective consciousness, democracy, etc. are the values that social work practitioners from structural approach must uphold, whereas structural social workers must take ideological positions while addressing the issues in the society. Instance of being at the fence social work professionals must take a stand and be with victims of historical injustice.

Conclusion:

The concept of structural social work entails the liberation of individuals from various societal groups that have historically experienced subjugation and marginalization. This perspective presents a critique of the prevailing

social work ideology, which is rooted in a paternalistic framework, and proposes the importance of acknowledging and addressing systems of oppression. The major objective of structural social work practice in the Indian setting is to mitigate social inequalities resulting from caste and gender dynamics. The field of social work in India continues to face challenges in establishing a robust and effective identity due to its limited suitability within the Indian context, since it falls short in addressing the underlying issues that arise from the prevailing societal framework. To facilitate the indigenization of social work practice within an Indian context, it is imperative to incorporate structural themes into its teaching. The structural school of thought aims to reorient the epistemological basis of social work towards a more emancipatory and liberatory framework (Bodhi, 2011).

As per the recommendation of the second review committee, it is necessary to make modifications to the social work curriculum by incorporating a focus on structural concerns. The inclusion of caste and gender-based oppression and marginalization in the social work curriculum warrants significant attention, given its historical neglect. Social work, as a discipline, is characterized by its commitment to effecting societal change. One particular method within social work, known as structural social work, focuses specifically on effecting change in society by addressing and transforming prevailing systems of oppression. The imperative for social work in Indian society lies in the need to enable marginalized groups, specifically dalits and women, to assume leadership roles in their own development.

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