

Deconstructing Oppression in India: A Case for Anti-oppressive Social Work Practice

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ABSTRACT:

Most people understand oppression to be the systematic exploitation and discrimination of individuals because they belong to a marginalised group. The oppressive dynamics are ubiquitous and work at many levels, from the interpersonal to the more extensive repressive political and economic systems. A system of pervasive oppression is fostered in India, as in many other Asian nations, by social exclusion and marginalisation based on caste, religion, class, and gender. To reduce injustice on a micro and macro level and to reassess and avoid their own role in maintaining oppressive structures, social workers must be aware of the dynamics of oppression. Originating in a number of radical social work philosophies (feminist, anti-racist social work), the anti-oppressive framework presents a paradigm change in professional social work. Empowering social work practice, anti-oppressive practice seeks to liberate individuals from the vulnerabilities that present arrangements have placed on them and effect institutional and structural reforms. This research investigates, in the Indian setting, the anti-oppressive approach to social work practice. The article makes the case that by taking on oppression, the social work profession has to go beyond improving functioning and aim for social justice for everyone.

Keywords: social justice, marginalisation, social exclusion, India, oppression, anti-oppressive practice.

India is about to undergo a socioeconomic revolution along with extensive cultural and technical advancements. Though millions of

lives have been improved by education and job chances, millions more still go to bed hungry. diverse ethnic groups in this nation live in somewhat diverse ways. Many people's unfulfilled fundamental demands call for careful examination of the services provided by the political system. Millions of the poor and jobless people in the globe live in India. Although their frequency, severity, and size vary, social and economic issues do exist in all their manifestations. Numerous socioeconomic injustices afflict India, rendering many of its people unable to access resources. People's socioeconomic circumstances now show alarming disparities. The inability to get chances and resources leads to rights violations by restricting their involvement in society life. Regarding exercising their rights and leading dignified lives, many individuals encounter prejudice and persecution.

Notwithstanding its purpose for social change and long history of activism, social work has often come under fire for acting as a "safety valve," resolving conflicts and 'misfit' people to the social and political environment (Mimi Abramovitz, 1998). Stated differently, social work has in reality served to preserve the status quo in favour of those in positions of authority already. The social work profession is often criticised for its intertwined history of white supremacist and colonialism in the education and practice parts of the profession for nations like India and other former colonies (Almeida et al 2019). Under such conditions, social work intervention will not be able to serve the situations at hand until the root causes of oppression are removed. Social professionals must therefore adopt reflective practice and critical awareness. These days, social work has to use the theories and methods that break down the oppressive

institutions and structures in order to bring about structural and transformational change. Thus, opposing injustice is the goal of the social work profession rather than just improving a person's functioning (Dybicz, 2010).

Appreciating Oppression
Formally refusing to provide certain people or groups access to wealth and authority results in oppression. It is purposeful and justified to exclude certain groups of people. alternatives available to the oppressed

are limited in oppressive settings when the norms and laws of the dominant groups are accepted and become part of the daily life. The weaker or oppressed ones are the focus of discourses created by dominant groups, who reject their agency and present them as having little or no opportunity for change. Actually, as Lena Dominelli (2002) notes, the discriminatory conditions make individuals economically and socially handicapped.

Paulo Freire (1972) makes significant discoveries on the mechanisms of oppression in his study of education. For him, the oppressors and the afflicted are both devoid of humanity and live in a dual state of carrying out both functions. Processes common to many social groups including gender, caste, ethnicity, and religion make up the dynamics of oppression. They are present in every aspect of private and public human life. Both parties show a variety of actions that transcend the straightforward opposition between oppressor and victimised. The backdrop of the social divide from which an individual functions determines whether they are oppressors or oppressed. The way people see their identities—which are shown as organically fitting oppressive frameworks rather than as a social construction—reflects the effects of oppression. Through their use of disparaging and demeaning words against the impoverished and oppressed, individuals in positions of authority, as Freire notes, encourage the creation of such social realities of the downtrodden and their internalisation. The writings of Foucault emphasise the significant part that language plays in both perpetuating and changing

Power imbalances among groups are created by these choices, which give one group supremacy over another. While ignoring the characteristics and contributions of the "inferior" group, the dominance methodically establishes "superior" and "inferior" groupings (Dominelli, 2002). Some groups are excluded from socioeconomic circles and possibilities when their contributions are not valued enough. The

power relations (Foucault & Colin, 1980). Structured degrees of oppression are just as real as interpersonal ones. In India, a large number of the population—especially religious minorities, caste groupings, and backward groups economically. The indirect and pernicious character of this violence causes human values to erode and life spans to decrease, therefore aggravating unfair living circumstances. Johan Galtung (1969 pp. 171) notes, "It (Structural violence) is typically built into the very structure of society and cultural institutions." Silent and seemingly normal, this brutality avoids any notice. Furthermore unknown are the "causal relations" between systemic and personal violence. 'Structural violence kills slowly; political/personal violence kills instantaneously' (Galtung and Hovik, 1971, pp. 173). The understanding of oppression must go beyond simple discrimination of one group against another to include institutional and social structures. Institutional arrangements that are biased and prejudiced are the cause of structural violence or oppression. It reflects in the ordinary aspects of life and reproduces on many levels. Understanding oppression and the many power relations in our society depends critically on the application of Kimberly Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality paradigm. Intersectionality is the interaction of overlapping social identities, including gender, class, and race, that shape a person's or a group's life experiences, especially oppression and advantage. Intersectionality offers the social work field a critical thinking tool.

Oppression creates power imbalances in groups and communities. This

power is used to subjugate the weaker groups and communities. Foucault (1980) writes about power as a force that results from several factors and can be unlimited and recreated through interpersonal interactions that exist within certain social interactions. Power shifts terrains and can be used to achieve both positive and negative ends. Pierson (2002) writes about oppression as arising from extreme power imbalances. This imbalance exists between dominant and subjugated groups, with the former controlling the resources. They are the decision-makers whose acts and decisions create and perpetuate oppression. Okoli et al. (2019) suggest that the exploitation of the subjugated groups by the dominant groups has gone unchallenged and has been 'accepted by sensibilities across the board.'

Indian tyranny

Like many other Asian nations, India suffers from social and caste isolation. "The extent to which people are able to participate in social affairs and attain sufficient power to influence decisions that affect them" is how Okli R. Agwu (2019) defines social exclusion. Social exclusion, marginalisation and oppression are all related. Both alone and together they foster poverty, inequality, and socioeconomic disadvantage. According to Mullaly (2007), marginalisation may lead to serious material deprivation and, in the worst case scenario, group extinction. As it entails the unequal distribution of material resources, material deprivation is the outcome of marginalisation. People who are marginalised are left out of policies, programmes, and services (Young, 2000). In India, caste and religious identities, along with material poverty, lead to marginalisation. Economic, social, and cultural marginalisation and suffering have been systematic experiences of the Muslim population in India (Pandya, 2010). The Sachar Committee Report states that Muslims in India are in appallingly worse off than Dalits and may even be worse off than OBCs (Alam, 2008). One of the harshest and most enduring systems of hierarchy and

of persecution. Almost one-sixth of India's population, Dalits are subject to regular harassment, violence, and persecution. Though there are constitutional and legal structures to defend and preserve their rights, the data on violence against "lower castes" depict a pretty depressing reality of their actual experiences. Mobs in India have killed or lynched Dalits for doing things like riding horses, growing moustaches, having the same name as men from higher castes, or even for far less. The women in Dalit communities are most badly impacted as they have to deal with the combination of caste prejudice, gender bias, and financial hardship. The fallout from the September 2020 rape of a 19-year-old Dalit woman made clear the impunity and indifference to violence against women and underprivileged groups.

Thompson (2006) considers oppression at three levels: structural, cultural, and personal. In this paper, socioeconomic, sociopolitical, and sociocultural oppression are taken into account as prevailing at three levels in India. One way that socioeconomic inequality shows up is in the absence of chances and means of subsistence. For many people, a life with dignity is prohibited by poverty and unemployment, which are at their greatest levels right now¹. The Human Development Index of 2019 states that India is home to 28% of the world's impoverished². With relation to social programmes and provisions, they suffer the worst kind of exclusion and prejudice. Indian socio-political oppression is the second kind. The present form of Indian democracy is confined to elections. Even as every Indian is guaranteed equal rights under the Constitution, the political rights of religious minorities and caste groups are being eroded by the growing majoritarianism and human rights abuses of these groups without any response from the government. Systematic use of language is used to encourage the binary division of communities, which results in the 'othering' of these groups. It has increased injustice and fostered persecution that is dehumanising people. Social interactions inside this divide

are forming identities and perpetuating oppressive connections. Sociocultural practices are one more way that oppression is a part of Indian society. For some of the people, certain Indian cultural customs are still oppressive. Part of social institutions, these procedures are strictly adhered to. The notorious "honour killings" in certain regions of the nation serve as a case in point³. Comparably, the dowry system causes women to be oppressed and kills a lot of them⁴. For many individuals, particularly women, some cultural and religious customs are still oppressive. Simultaneously, as long as structural elements persist, oppression of various kinds and degrees affects sizable segments of the Indian community.

Anti-oppressive framework

Deriving from various radical social work approaches (anti-racist, feminist social work), the anti-oppressive framework offers a paradigm shift in professional social work. Anti-oppressive practice (AOP) is emancipatory social work practice that aims to bring about structural and institutional changes and free people from vulnerabilities that current arrangements have imposed on them. This practice aims at countering oppression at all levels beginning with deconstructing oppressive relations and providing alternatives. Social work professionals have come a long way from assisting people in adjusting and striking compromises with their oppressive life conditions to empowering them to exercise their agencies. The goals of egalitarianism and social justice are reachable only when tyranny is rejected on an individual and group basis. Knowing oppression exists and how it reproduces itself via interactions is a basic need for rejecting it and creating a fair social order (Essed, 1991). In 1972, Friere called this awareness of the reality of oppression "conscientization."

Lena Dominelli (2002) describes three

responses that oppressed people offer to their oppressors: acceptance, which refers to those who have internalised the dominant values and accepted their weaker positions; accommodation, in which weaker groups recognise their interests and try to get a compromise from the dominant groups; and rejection, which entails outright denunciation of the status quo and seek alternatives to the existing oppressive systems. Though it needs to be moulded in sociocultural, economic, and political settings, anti-oppressive practice is seen as "client-centered and empowering" (Dalrymple and Burke, 1995). Indian anti-oppressive practices need to look at the institutional and structural elements of oppression. If any improvement in the way social relationships are working is to be expected, societal institutions must include anti-oppressive processes. The social structure must be penetrated with the attitudes and ideals opposing injustice. The social work field understands the value of an individual's surroundings for their growth and well-being. Social work intervention is necessary to guarantee social inclusion, social justice, social cohesiveness, and better quality of life if a person's surroundings are tainted by oppressive interactions as they will only foster inequality and social exclusion (Teater, 2010). According to a 2014 statement by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), social workers step in to map the reasons of justice, liberty, and empowerment at the moment of societal imbalance. Social professionals must be aware of the subtleties of how injustice is felt and perpetuated. It is a process with many manifestations. For two main reasons, the dynamics of this process need to be understood: to avoid unintentionally oppressing the deprived while attempting to help them integrate into the mainstream life; and to be able to create a just social order by striving to eradicate

oppression in social interactions as well as in interpersonal relationships. Micro, mezzo, and macro social workers are all that India needs to start changing social interactions and fostering deeper connections. Working for public or nonprofit organisations, social workers in welfare states mostly rely on the state for financial support. Their development agendas call for cooperation with the state. Through building an anti-oppressive framework rather of carrying out preconceived developmental objectives, social workers may start effecting change from this liaisoning with the state. They have to get themselves together and express their requirement at the greatest level for this. Social workers may participate in the fair allocation of resources and guarantee the most vulnerable live dignified lives by creating agendas against oppressive institutional structures and putting them into practice using anti-oppressive principles. The knowledge of social workers turns into a key determinant of who receives and does not get assistance. The way they deal with their clientele is reflected in this professional authority. These interactions also reveal the ingrained discrimination that automatically views customers as less than.

The anti-oppressive paradigm demands that a social worker have a critical awareness while

working at the small scale to help people and families. Power dynamics must be understood by social workers even in their interactions with clients. They might unintentionally or actively repeat in their interaction with the client subtle or overt manifestations of oppression. Acts of power balance become relevant to end this ingrained subjection at the interpersonal level. Moderating the professional knowledge of social workers that elevates their status and gives them authority over the lives of their clients is part of this. Social workers also need

to recognise the client as an authority with the special experiences that come from their intersecting identities. Practitioners should not presume the passivity of vulnerable groups when identities turn into a cause of oppression as this assumption dehumanises these communities (Dominelli, 2002). The foundation of anti-oppressive practice is the notion of inclusion, independent of group affiliations. Extreme marginalisation and exclusion based on identity are now happening in India. Regularly infringed are the rights of downtrodden groups and religious minorities. Even if India was proclaimed a secular state, the growing tendency towards majoritarianism—which goes against the core of the Constitution—is not being questioned. Many members of caste groups and minority populations have been fatally lynched as one of the symptoms of this tendency towards Hindutva philosophy. Victims have been imprisoned and the rights violators have been garlanded. The state and the courts seem to have released themselves from their responsibilities of maintaining justice and the rule of law. Up to now, no professional social work organisation or person in India has made a single statement criticising the existing situation. The circumstances raise questions about the moral commitment of social workers in India to justice and equality. Though they sometimes make remarks against injustice in other regions of the globe, IFSW and other regional organisations have kept quiet about the predicament of minorities and other oppressed groups in India. The process of inclusion and liberation via negotiation at the highest level is necessary as policy reinforces oppression in social contacts. It is imperative to recognise the reality of oppressed people at this level and to make elected officials and those in positions of formal authority responsible. Those in India who are

compelled by a variety of circumstances to lead disgraceful lifestyles suffer prejudice and suffering. In this context, social workers would have to be involved at the highest level in anti-oppressive practice. In the course of their work, social workers see oppression from a unique perspective, and their knowledge of social injustice and oppression offers important insights. The accessibility of welfare programmes for the most disadvantaged groups of the population would be indicated by the rights-based approach to policy development. The unrestricted access to resources and welfare benefits would start a long-lasting process of empowerment. According to Wetzel (1997) social work practitioners have tried to establish human rights as the cornerstone of a global conversation on the function and goals of the field. This claim has to be confirmed by policy.

The Indian situation demands immediate attention to many levels of interventions. These treatments may continue concurrently at the levels of the community, group, and interpersonal relationships. Different types of oppression have rendered many communities helpless and unable to take action to improve their situation, hence community-level intervention is necessary. One feels more alienation and isolation, which call for quick social work intervention to stop the trend. Together, people come to understand their strength in the setting of bigger communities. Integrated around a cause, communities learn the value of the resources, alliances, and connections needed to organise and take action against injustice. AOP must make sure that, in the course of collective action, the requirements of component sub-groups are not disregarded, therefore preventing the establishment of new oppressive locations. According to Lena Dominelli (2002), all social workers should raise their awareness

as a means of opposing repressive social relations. This may be accomplished by including an educational component into AOP that will outline the critical analysis of the unfair social interactions and the pressing need to address them at the individual, group, and community levels. Certain despair has settled over weaker sections of India over their stable circumstances. The main goal of anti-oppressive practice will be to inspire these communities and groups to question the current situation. The history bears evidence to the reality that group efforts have been necessary to resist and prevail against tyranny. Arranging individuals to unite behind a cause and express solidarity against repressive policies will be part of anti-oppressive practice. Many social action strategies may be used to assist popularise the origin and contributing elements of the campaigns and establish mutual systems of care, therefore achieving the goal of gaining sympathy with the cause. While it is not necessary to disregard the intersectionality of oppressive connections or allow oppression at lesser levels, Dominelli (2002) does propose that divides and conflicts between and among individuals need to be momentarily demotivated. The anti-oppressive approach must guarantee that every member of the community exercises and demands their rights. Though excellent leadership and organisation are essential, it is important to recognise the contributions made by each individual. It is crucial to arrange individuals according to their identities as this will provide an axis around which support will be recorded. Dealing with the injustice arising from identities will be made easier by this. The narratives surrounding the disadvantaged and their circumstances need to change from their supposed indolence and incapacity to their real potential. The key factor propelling the anti-oppressive social work practice to success will be the organisation formed over the course of anti-oppressive practice around the principles of justice and equality. According to some social work literature, dominant groups should be made more inclusive while nevertheless being permitted to keep their

power (Okoli et al., 2017). But this book contends that all oppressive systems and processes need to be eliminated and replaced with fair and equality-based inclusion and arrangements. Unquestionably radical in approach, anti-oppressive practice is sometimes referred to as "emancipatory" and "empowerment" practice. Its foundation is critical understanding of obstacles to human growth and well-being. These obstacles are expressed politically, socially, culturally, and monetarily (Adams, Dominelli & Payne, 2009).

Helping economically disadvantaged individuals acquire their skills would be one of the main focuses of anti-oppressive practice. This would enable them to survive. Once stable earnings materialise, certain other problems become easier to handle. Education and skill development must be used to improve the capacities of disadvantaged groups while connecting them to various state and non-state welfare programmes. Extreme social issues in India include child labour, violence against women, communalism, poverty and unemployment. and casteism, drug addiction, criminality and misbehaviour, homelessness, the suffering of farmers, corruption. Because identities exist in communities, these issues exacerbate marginalisation. Mullaly (2007) advises recognising the relationship between social issues and more extensive social systems. According to Mullaly (2007), social workers need to acknowledge both the institutional elements that lead to marginalisation and oppression as well as the political character of the person in the process of becoming a useful part of society. Social workers must be reflective in order to empower their clients, who are always enslaved by institutional and structural processes. The goal of the Indian social work profession should be to facilitate the development of deeper connections and alter social interactions at all levels. The ways would rely on how the marginalisation causes are interpreted. Social workers know these sources and associated characteristics because they are involved at the grassroots with community and group members. This

knowledge is crucial for developing strategies to lessen these sources and oppressive elements. Because social workers are familiar with and knowledgeable about social exclusion concerns, they have negotiating power informally (Jordan and Jordan, 2000).

The difficult human rights scenario in India demands a struggle to create a fair social structure. "For Social Workers justice is satisfying rights and entitlements of individuals, groups and communities, based on the notion of equality, equity, access and inclusion in the face of resources and opportunities," says the International Federation of Social Workers, or IFSW. A clear framework of practice that would include a system of open consultation and partnerships with stakeholders and cooperation with interest groups is required in the Indian environment. It will become necessary to represent the weak and victims of instances involving human rights violations in elected bodies and tribunals. Several forms of social action may be used to raise awareness of the need of defending the weak. As stated by Clifford (1995), "AOP looks at the use and abuse of power not only with individual or organisational behaviour which may be overtly, covertly or indirectly racist, classist, sexist and so on but also with broader social structures". Overcoming the status quo would require promoting and maintaining change, say Harrison e Burke (1998). Encouragement of critical thinking and sensitization of people to societal diversity, pluralism, and uniqueness of persons, and via them, larger communities

Conclusion

Social work is unlikely to secure the goal of social justice without an Anti- Oppressive framework for analyzing its theory and practice. The profession of social work has frequently been criticized for imposing the ideologies of those in power on the already deprived

communities. The role of social work with the issues of disability, mental illness, and religious and sexual minority communities, though not limited to, has largely worked to adjust the individuals to the larger oppressive structure responsible for placing them at a disadvantage. Understanding the dynamics of privilege, power, oppression, and social location enables the social worker to acknowledge their inherent power and even authority over the clients.

Anti- Oppressive Practice is a continuous dynamic approach with knowledge and skills to recognize, analyze, and respond to oppression. It is pertinent to continually ask themselves if the social work intervention does contribute to rebalancing the power and oppression of communities, groups, or individuals.

Organisations from civil society that use the AOP policy and methodology at the agency level may revolutionise the way they provide services. This means involving the client and the communities in order to affect the agency's procedures and structure. Stated differently, while tackling the problems of oppression and systematic marginalisation, Civil Society Organisations must answer to the people they serve. Lastly, Anti-Oppressive Research is an important component of the Anti-Oppressive Framework even if it is beyond the purview of this study. Based on the social justice mandate, social work researchers must become anti-oppressive in order to oppose injustice in the production of knowledge and discourse (Strier, 2006). Such research activity aims to provide approaches that recognise and try to prevent the continuation

of the oppressive systems that are in place (Rogers, 2012). Not only a nebulous idea, AOP is like a prism through which to see the world. It must as a practice be a component of social work interventions with people, groups, and communities. The organisations offering welfare services to people and communities should include AOP into their ethos.

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