DIMENSIONS OF CRITICAL SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE IN INDIA

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Abstract

Critical social work opens a dialogue for social change by challenging the prevailing socio-economic conditions of the people and examining the underlying factors that contribute to the inequality and misery of people. Critical social work includes different theoretical and practice frameworks such as radical social work, anti-oppressive social work, and environmental social work. As a practice approach, critical social work applies to working with individuals, groups, and communities as well as in the clinical and developmental sectors. While all the approaches have their scope of practice in India, this article will focus on understanding and applying structural social work, feminist approaches to social work and Dalit social work in the Indian context. Considering the country's social context, it can be argued that Dalit social work falls within critical social work in India, where the writings and actions of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar contribute to critical social work in India and other parts of the world. The article critically analyses power structures in the country and the manifestation of oppression in different forms and discusses how the practice of critical social work can aid in personal liberation and emancipation in an Indian context.

Keywords: Critical, Social Work, Structural, Feminist, Dalit, India.

I.   Introduction

One of the fundamental questions the social work profession has been grappling with is if the existing social, economic, educational, and legal systems are capable of alleviating the misery of people. Critical social work, which attempts to answer this question, has emerged from the critical thoughts and human rights movements that took place in the second half of the twentieth century. The theoretical contributions in critical social theory from the Frankfurt School in the 1930s have been the impetus for the evolution of critical social work (Chan, 2018). Conventional social work has been helping people to adjust within the systems without asking questions about changing the systems that contribute to misery, and it has been criticized for victim blaming and status quo preserving. By contrast, critical social work maintains that existing social institutions cannot adequately meet human needs (Mullaly, 1997). Critical social work seeks to understand, explain, and transform various circumstances within which social workers and people with whom they work find themselves while connecting this to a structural analysis of those aspects of society that are oppressive, unjust, and exploitative (Webb, 2019). Social work practice in India can catalyze social change by understanding complex oppressive relationships and intervening to liberate people from such oppression.

Social work as a profession and as a body of knowledge has undergone progressive changes and adaptations throughout history. There have been several anti-establishment approaches in social work that developed in the second half of the twentieth century, which led to critical and radical perspectives in social work. Subsequently, critical social work emerged, synthesizing various intellectual movements that identified dimensions of economic and political domination in modern society, including feminism, race theory, postmodernism, and Marxist criticism (Webb, 2019). As in any pursuit of theoretical advancement, critical theory and critical social workers are tasked with continuing to break the discursive and ideological barriers to realize a better world (Granter, 2019). Movements for the rights of women, people of colour, indigenous communities, sexual minorities, and other social justice movements have challenged the inherent inequity existing in human lives. Critical social work follows the thoughts and practices developed from such advancements, which challenge and advocate change in the existing social systems. One of the central themes of critical theory in the Frankfurt School was emancipation, and critical social work places emancipation at the front and centre of social work practice (Pease &

Fook, 1999). It is this emancipatory approach that promotes personal liberation and social change that is required to be applied in the Indian social work context. Critical social work helps to understand a social problem in its entirety, and not as it appears obviously, for 'critical social work recognizes the significance of history, culture and context and the interconnectedness of domestic and international issues' (Reisch, 2019, p. 41). Given the oppression based on patriarchy, casteism, classism, domineering power structures in the society, discrimination towards people with disabilities and partisan governance, it is indeed a necessity to apply critical approaches in social work practice in India.

India's social and economic context demands interventions through critical social work for changes in the prevailing power structures by bringing in social reform and social equality. India has had several social reformers at different times in its history, and the progress the country has made is thanks to their efforts as well. One of the most important social problems in India continues to be poverty and its related issues, which governments and voluntary organizations are working towards addressing. Hence, there is a significant need to focus on community-based development interventions relying on clinically driven practices in social work. Critically reflecting on community organization in India, Andharia (2009) observes that most of the 'social work' largely operates within the need of the individual, groups or communities or has a problem focus, both of which have a temporal, instrumental dimension. However, there are several agencies that seek to redefine power relations that contribute to the experience of discrimination and marginalization. Their critical approaches in social work are viable and necessary to bring structural changes that address the root causes of social and economic inequalities and concomitant poverty.

Social work education in India began in 1936, and there are hundreds of schools of social work in the country providing master's and bachelor's degrees in social work as well as doctoral degrees. Social work is an elective course in high schools in certain states of the country. While it is not a regulated profession in India, social workers are employed in government and non-profit agencies. However, social work education in India has been adapted mostly from Western literature that follows Euro-centric approaches (Adikulam, 2014: 219; Mandal 1989: 307; Nagpaul 1993: 211). Based on a conventional approach, social work in India largely helps people to understand the prevailing social, economic, and legal structures and prepares people to adjust to them in seeking to satisfy their needs. Though there are several social activists, organizations involved in radical social change, and movements by deprived communities like Dalits and fishermen, professional social work has historically shunned dynamic, activist, and critical approaches. There is an imperative need to incorporate critical theories and critical approaches in social work education and practice, for such approaches can question the social systems and structures that create and perpetuate the poverty and misery of millions of people.

Social Workers Working with Structural Issues

Structural social work suggests that social problems are not caused by deficits in communication between individuals but arise because of issues within the social, economic, and institutional structures. It is not the individual's failure to adjust to the systems but the oppressive structures in the society that keep many people powerless and unable to access resources for a dignified life. Structural social work suggests that the focus for change is mainly on the structures of society and not solely on the individual (Vareed et al., 2022). According to Lundy (2011), a structural approach to social work can be viewed 'as a practice that acknowledges the role of social structures in producing and maintaining inequality and personal hardship and the importance of offering concrete help to those in need or difficulty' (pp. 87-88). Structural social work follows a Marxist perspective and seeks to dismantle colonialist, patriarchal and capitalist domination, and focuses on contributing to a welfare and egalitarian state (Abramovitz, 2008). Structural social work, with its questioning of the status quo, stands opposed to conventional social work and proposes a progressive approach to social work (Murray & Hick, 2013). Central to structural social work is an understanding of the multiple and intersecting forms of oppression (Mullaly, 2007) that occur at personal, cultural, and structural levels, with each level influencing oppression in the

others (Thompson, 1997).

Social structures are sets of enduring relationships among and between key institutions, including the family, state, capital, and labour. (Clement, 1984). The social structure is social in the sense that it is the product of relations between people and institutions. Social structures are as intimate/concrete as the family and abstract as the modes of production/economy. The structures could be as local as patriarchy in the home of a person and as national as the governing system of a country. Social workers consider the social relationships and institutions that may be contributing to the client's problems and actions as barriers to meeting their needs. In India, as in any society, humans are related to various structures in their life, and some of them are oppressive in nature. The people social workers work with in India are explicitly or tacitly oppressed by different structures, inter alia, patriarchy, caste, corrupt governance and domineering political ideologies, to which they are related on a regular basis.

Conventional social work operates within existing social institutions to assist individuals in adjusting and adapting to the status quo and fitting into the structures. In contrast, critical social work maintains that existing social institutions cannot adequately meet human needs and instead works towards fundamental structural transformation (Mullaly, 2009). The structural approach in social work seeks alternatives in the existing system and proposes changes in societal structures, which require a longer time than many of the clinical approaches followed in social work. Structural social work demystifies the notion of power based on social identities and seeks to minimize the effect of power in relationships. Such an understanding of the dynamics of power in social relationships and oppression experienced through such an imbalance of power helps to develop more respectful relationships with clients in social work practice. This is much valued in a society where demonstrations of power and paternalist approaches are accepted as a norm, even in social work practice.

Structural social work analyses the personal troubles of people with structural determinants of life following a blend of radical structuralism and radical humanism (Chen, 2018). Radical humanism works within the system that includes direct practice with service users and endeavours to radicalize and democratize the organization in which it is practised, whereas radical structuralism aims to change material conditions and oppressive structural patterns (George & Marlowe, 2005). In other words, this approach does not stop by addressing the immediate needs of people but simultaneously engages in consciousness-raising, empowerment, and collectivization to change the oppressive structures (Mullaly, 2009). Social work practice needs not only to meet the immediate needs of the people but also to examine factors that lead to the misery of people and work with them as well. For example, a social worker working with LGBTQ people not only provides support for their immediate needs like shelter but also builds collective groups of similar people to intervene for the rights of sexual minorities. Along with providing academic and resource support for Dalit students, social workers empower these students to understand the discrimination they face and work to address this discrimination. Likewise, along with providing legal support for women who undergo domestic abuse, the women shall be empowered to understand the unequal power in the caste hierarchy and be enabled to address it in everyday life.

An analysis of the social system reveals that material conditions contribute to the ordeal of people (e.g., indigenous people live without land) while the privileged and powerful maintain abundant resources (e.g., landlords from upper castes hold vast land areas). Structural social work proposes changes in such structures through government policies and the collective action of people. Structural social work in the Indian context requires special attention as many of the struggles faced in Indian society are the direct results of social, economic, legal, religious, class, and caste structures. Though they vary between states and within states and communities, the larger structural arches are the same. George and Marlowe (2005) argue that, despite the criticism of structural social work as an idealistic theory, field experiences from social work agencies in India demonstrate that structural social work can be practised and is also necessary for transformational change. India has a

history of social reformations by several community leaders. It has witnessed one of the largest nonviolent movements against colonization and several movements for the rights of women and for education for labourers. Social workers must draw inspiration from such radical changes and bring a critical perspective to social work practice to make structural changes.

Personal is Political: Feminist Approaches in Social Work Practice

The historical establishment of patriarchy in the country, supported by religious dogmas and stereotypical gender roles, persists with highly discriminating practices against women. Gender-based discrimination and violence continue in India (Government of India, 2021). Conventional social work follows an approach that helps the client to adjust to the systems and maintains the prevailing social structures. For example, a woman undergoing domestic abuse by her husband would be encouraged to adjust to the situation for the sake of her family and children. The woman would be reminded of her role as a mother to take care of her children and protect her family's reputation. Such an approach does not explore and critique the power and privilege derived from the patriarchal design of the family and society that scapegoats women to maintain patriarchal power. In other words, the blame for the misery generated out of the unequal power dimension of patriarchy is vested in the women. In the infamous Nirbhaya case, where a woman was brutally murdered after rape in New Delhi in 2012, the lawyers of the offenders blamed the victim for going out with her boyfriend at night (Asokan, 2015). Such victim blaming in public by official departments of the government and people in reputed positions reaffirms victim blaming based on prevailing gender roles in the country.

Feminist theories are compatible with critical social work practices that stimulate awareness and change, promote reflection, and open up interventions that can build egalitarian relationships (Wendt, 2016). Feminism provides a critical lens through which to analyze the realities of human life and assess the unequal power relations. It promotes the values of empowerment and social change in support of the oppressed people. Such an approach makes sense in the contemporary context of India, where social workers need to rise from the comfort of conformity to the prevailing structures to challenge the oppressive structures that keep women oppressed. Critical perspectives call attention to the power imbalance inherent in the client-worker relationship. A feminist approach in social work would focus on dismantling the power structures and support women in taking charge of their lives and becoming aware of the processes by which power structures are built. (Collins, 1986, p. 214).

India is widely diverse in the culture, food habits, dress styles, language, and power structures of each community. Even when social workers understand critical social work theory and practice approaches, applying these needs local adaptations. Sands and Nuccio (1992) argue that feminist thought emphasizes differences, recognizing the diverse constitution of client populations and unique needs. The use of deconstruction, as used in feminism, is helpful in uncovering the suppressed voices of marginalized populations and provides a means through which social workers can work with clients for social change. One context of such understanding is how mainstream feminism may have failed women from backward communities. It is evident in the Indian context how Dalit women have been left out in the discussions of mainstream feminism.

The intersectionality of oppression would need to explore the subjugation of women in different spheres of life. Violence against women in India is not only misogynistic in nature but also racist and casteist. The violence against women stems from a combination of subaltern identities which cannot be compartmentalized. That is why there is a need for Dalit feminism in India, which can empower women in areas in which they have been historically excluded (Soans, 2019). According to Shepard and Dziengel (2016), intersectional feminism can help practitioners to conceptualize the intersection of multiple identities and their impact on clients' lives while recognizing the need to challenge oppression for all. At the same time, such an approach has to consider the cultural diversity of the client group and the appropriateness of practice methods. There are arguments that social workers can engage

in the empowerment of clients by appreciating ethno-consciousness and applying critical consciousness (Lum, 2011, as cited in Shepard & Dziengel, 2016). In other words, social workers can work for personal liberation and social change within the specific cultural identity of the people with whom they work.

Women's movements are very strong in India, with women's associations formed under different political parties, women empowerment programs implemented by non-profit agencies and independent women's associations throughout the country. The number of activists and organizations following feminist ideologies and approaches is on the rise. Interestingly, there are women leaders coming up from historically oppressed communities. There is a growing trend in the popular media that critically addresses women's issues. For example, the 2021 Indian movie The Great Indian Kitchen discussed how a woman is enclosed in the kitchen after her marriage and not allowed to pursue her passions in life (Pandey, 2021). Another 2020 Bollywood movie, Thappad, which portrays a woman moving for separation from her husband for slapping her, generated wide discussion on women's rights in a country where slapping a wife by her husband is taken for granted in marital relations (Devina & Sridhar, 2020). The latest National Family Health Survey finds that more than 30 per cent of women in 14 states in the country justify men beating their wives (Sarkar, 2021). The challenge for social workers in India is to translate the critical and progressive approaches demonstrated in social movements and media to everyday practice with their clients. Analyzing the activities of NGOs, Anand (2022) finds that feminist perspectives in the work of NGOs have led to pro-poor policy formulation in favour of marginalized women and accountability by the government. The application of feminist models by social work agencies has helped to contextualize the caste politics in India in relation to the larger socio-cultural realities. Despite the efforts of government and non-governmental organizations, women continue to bear the brunt of patriarchal oppression. A change in the perspectives, approaches and intervention plans of social workers and agencies, directed towards critical approaches, is imperative to challenge patriarchal dogmas. Gender development needs to be understood in a broader and deeper context in which women gain personal and collective power and access to decision-making in the workplace, community, and home and are ensured decent work by infrastructure and social protections (Deepak, 2019). Adapting to feminist approaches in social work is pivotal in addressing visible oppression faced by women in the country.

Ambedkar as Icon of Critical Social Work in India

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar was born into a family of untouchables in central India in 1891. He was a victim of severe caste-based discrimination by which it was practically impossible for a child from an untouchable community to attend school, not to mention being attended to well by the teachers in the school. However, he became the only student from an untouchable community in the high school where he studied and went on to study at Columbia University and London School of Economics and received two PhDs and two DLits. Ambedkar was the chairman of the constitutional assembly that drafted the constitution of India. However, it was his incessant fight against casteism and inequality that made him an icon of the deprived communities in the country and a radical and critical social reformer.

The chaturvarnya caste system in Indian society has led to the horrendous practice of untouchability and its continuing deprivation of lower caste people in the country. Despite various legislations, movements, and projects to eradicate untouchability and its manifestations, discrimination against lower caste people exists in several forms, tacitly and explicitly. Ramaiah (2015) finds that over 25% of the Dalit population (that includes Scheduled Caste – the lower caste people and Scheduled Tribes – Indigenous communities) live in abject poverty with inadequate or no healthcare facilities. Caste is a reality among most people in the country, whereby a section of people enjoys the privileges of being born into an upper caste. In contrast, many communities face oppression in public life and access to opportunities for a dignified life. No wonder the chief justice of India commented that "castelessness is a privilege that only the upper caste can afford because their caste

privilege has already translated into social, political and economic capital" (Mandhani, 2021, para. 1). Statistical data from various surveys and everyday lived experiences of people lead to the logical conclusion that there is a broad correlation between one's economic state and one's position within the caste hierarchy (George, 2013a).

Ambedkar channelled his intellect and passion to erode the oppressive caste system deeply rooted in the Hindu religious system, for which he resorted to intellectual discourse and social reform. (Mukerji, 2020). Ambedkar found human equality as an overriding principle, and his writings defend it by arguing that human equality makes place for worth rather than birth, advocates struggle against dominance and advance a level playing to all against social prejudices (Rodrigues, 2017). One of the most famous protests of Ambedkar against caste was the public burning of the Manusmriti, the Hindu religious text that served as the constitution of Chaturvarnya, which was the basis of the caste system. He organized mass entry to the temples by Dalits, who were otherwise denied access. Ambedkar established Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha (Group for the Wellbeing of the Excluded) to promote socio-political awareness among the Dalits and raise public awareness of their grievances. He organized Dalits, created Dalit newspapers, initiated protests against discrimination in temple entry and access to water, and promoted access to education for Dalits. Ambedkar published a book in 1936 titled Annihilation of Caste, which compounded his fight against casteism and its evils. His clarion call was to 'Educate, Agitate and Organise', by which he encouraged people from Dalit communities to act for social change (George, 2013b). Ambedkar established the Independent Labour Party in 1936 that opposed the Brahminical and capitalist structure in the country. He founded Scheduled Castes Federation in 1942 to campaign for the rights of the Dalit community, which was later dismissed to form a political party by the Republican Party of India, which is still functioning in the country. He levelled Marxist criticism at the formation of Dalit labour movements by saying that Marxism did not consider the oppression faced by Dalits. Ambedkar developed a niche of ideology and activism befitting the Indian context.

There has been an uprising of Dalit movements in India for the last few decades among those who follow Ambedkar as an icon. The term Dalit is used to denote ex-untouchables of Indian society who have faced the worst kind of social exclusion. An ex-untouchable is deprived in all social, economic, and political realms in the Indian context (Kumar, 2005). Govinda (2008) writes about how an NGO working for the development of Dalit women in the state of Uttar Pradesh, a state with a strong base for a political party with Dalit identity, uses Ambedkar as an icon of their organization. Bodhi (2019) observes that there are efforts to insert liberatory and emancipatory elements into Indian social work education, which are now visible in some spaces and are being articulated in the public domain (p. 168). According to him, the two streams of social work that carry critical social work are Dalit Social Work and Tribal Social Work.

Both the understanding and the practice of critical social work in India need to give attention to Ambedkar in his analysis of society, religion, and the oppression of communities. While his voluminous writings contribute to intellectual discourses in critical social work, his efforts, including advocacy for inclusion through legal actions, public criticism, and activities against casteism, are models of intervention for structural and progressive change in the country. Ambedkar has suggested that equality cannot be achieved by focusing on one dimension of inequality in a piecemeal fashion; what is needed is to pursue a comprehensive reform that targets the multiple dimensions of inequality that feed into and reinforce each other (Kumar, Bapuji, & Mir, 2021). This approach is closely linked to the concept of intersectionality and helps to critically analyze the power dynamics and structural factors facing social work clients. Social workers draw inspiration, knowledge, and practice frameworks from Ambedkar's vision of equality, keen understanding of the social system that perpetuates inequality, and efforts to analyze society and actions to end inequality.

II.   Conclusion

In India, social work education and practice are transitioning with efforts for indigenizing and inculcating new ideas and approaches. Given the country's social,

economic, and political context and the nature of oppressive elements in the society, it is argued that social workers have to adopt critical approaches in the country to introduce changes in society and mitigate the sufferings of the people. Social work education, too, needs to come down from being elitist and self-serving to become a profession that is radical in nature and progressive in approach. Bodhi observes that social work educators who follow a structural perspective (rather than a functionalist perspective) define their engagement very much in consonance with the slogan of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, 'Educate, Agitate, Organise'. Social work knowledge imparted within this pedagogical framework is more critical, structural, and progressive (Bodhi, 2022, p. 139).

While discussing how structural social work and feminist approaches have imperative significance in Indian contexts, it becomes evident that other frameworks like anti-oppressive and environmental social work also have their place in social work practice in the country. All theories in critical social work carry certain common threads, such as dynamics of power, being critical of the prevailing social situations, not blaming the victim, and mutual respect for all stakeholders in the helping process. As with social workers in any social work approach, critical social workers need to understand and work within their local context. This is indeed very important in India, which is extremely diverse in all cultural aspects of life from state to state and within each state.

Dalit social work is indeed special to India as Dalits are among the most downtrodden people in the country. Dalit activism in the country draws its motivation from the life and work of Ambedkar, who has become an icon of not only social movements but also of non-profit agencies. Such repositioning of Ambedkar as an icon of critical social work in the country itself is a radical and rebellious move that recognizes the context of Dalits in the country. Along with Ambedkar, any social reformer who has created a longstanding legacy in different parts of the country, be it Narayanaguru in Kerala or Mahatma Phule in Maharashtra, is a source of inspiration for critical social work. Moreover, that list is only complete with mentioning the life and works of K. M. Gandhi, the father of the nation, who still inspires social workers from many diverse perspectives.

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