



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

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ABSTRACT: Oppression is largely understood as the systematic discrimination and exploitation of people based on their membership in a marginalized group. The oppressive dynamics are pervasive and function on various levels, from the interpersonal to the larger oppressive economic and political structures. India, like several other Asian countries, is afflicted with marginalization and social exclusion based on caste, religion, class and gender, fostering a system of widespread oppression. Social workers need to understand the dynamics of oppression to mitigate oppression at both micro and macro levels while simultaneously reevaluating and preventing their own complicity in perpetuating oppressive systems. 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 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. The present paper explores the Anti-Oppressive approach to Social Work Practice within the Indian context. The paper argues that the Social Work profession must look beyond enhancing functioning and pursue the goal of social justice for all by confronting oppression.

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



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India is at the cusp of socio-economic transformation accompanied by widespread cultural and technological changes. Millions of lives have been positively impacted through education and employment opportunities, yet millions of others still go to bed without food. There is a sharp contrast in how different groups of people live in this country. The unmet basic needs of a large section of the population demand close scrutiny in terms of what the governing system offers them. India is home to the world's millions of destitute and unemployed people. Social and economic problems differ in prevalence, intensity and magnitude but nevertheless exist in all forms. India is plagued with widespread social injustice making resources inaccessible to many of the country's population. This has led to gross inequalities in the socio-economic situations of people. The inaccessibility to resources and opportunities results in the infringement of rights by limiting their participation in societal life. Many people face discrimination and oppression in terms of enjoying their rights and living with dignity.

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Despite social work's mandate for social change and rich history of activism, the profession has often been criticized for performing a "safety valve" role whereby mediating and adjusting 'misfit' individuals and discontent communities to the social and political milieu (Mimi Abramovitz, 1998). In other words, social work has, in fact, worked towards maintaining the status quo in favour of those already in power. For countries such as India and other former colonies, the social work profession is continually criticized for its entangled history of white supremacy and colonialism in the profession's pedagogy and practice aspects (Almeida et al. 2019). Social work intervention under such circumstances will not be able to do justice to the cases in hand unless the causal factors of oppression are eliminated. It is, therefore, imperative for social workers to assume critical consciousness and reflexive practice. Today, social work requires applying the frameworks and approaches that aim at structural and transformational change by deconstructing the existing structures and systems of oppression. Therefore, the objective of the social work profession is not merely to enhance an individual's functioning but rather to confront oppression (Dybicz, 2010).

Understanding Oppression

Oppression is a consequence of formally not allowing certain groups or individuals access to power and resources. These decisions to exclude certain sections of populations are consciously taken and legitimized. These decisions create dominance of one group over another, creating power imbalances between groups. The dominance systematically creates 'superior' and 'inferior' groups, failing to recognize the traits and contributions of the 'inferior' group (Dominelli, 2002). Undervaluing the contribution of certain groups results in their exclusion from socio-economic spaces and opportunities. In oppressive environments, the rules and regulations of the dominant groups are legitimized and made a part of the normal routine, thus, limiting the options for the oppressed. Dominant groups create discourses around the weaker or oppressed ones, portraying them as people with little or no scope for change and denying their agency. In actuality, the discriminatory circumstances render people socially and economically disabled, writes Lena Dominelli (2002).

In his analysis of education, Paulo Freire (1972) draws out important insights into the dynamics of oppression. For him, both the oppressed and those who oppress are devoid of their humanity and exist in a duality of performing both roles. The dynamics of oppression entail processes shared across various social divisions like religion, caste, race, and gender. They exist in all dimensions of human lives, private and public. A range of behaviours is exhibited by both groups that go beyond the simple dichotomy of oppressor and oppressed. Whether a person is an oppressor or oppressed depends on the context of the social division they are functioning from. The consequences of oppression are reflected in how individuals perceive their identities which are depicted as naturally suiting oppressive frames and not as a social construction. Freire points out that those in power foster the fabrication of such social realities of the oppressed and its internalization through their use of derogatory and pejorative language towards the poor and oppressed (Freire, 1972). The powerful role played by language in reproducing and transforming power relations is highlighted in the works of Foucault (Foucault & Colin, 1980).

Oppression does not exist only at interpersonal levels but at structural levels too. Many of the population suffers structural violence in India, especially religious minorities, caste groups and

economically backward groups. This violence has an indirect and insidious nature that leads to the erosion of human values, and the shortening of life spans, pushing inequitable life conditions further. "It (Structural violence) is typically built into the very structure of society and cultural institutions," writes Johan Galtung (1969 pp.171). This violence is perpetrated silently and seems natural, escaping all the attention. The 'causal relations' between personal and structural violence also remain hidden. 'Political/personal violence kills instantly while structural violence kills slowly' (Galtung and Hoivik, 1971 pp.173). Oppression has to be understood in terms of social and institutional arrangements rather than just as discrimination of one group against another. Structural violence or oppression is a result of biased and discriminatory institutional arrangements. It reproduces at multiple levels and is reflected in the everydayness of life.

The application of Kimberly Crenshaw's (1991) framework of *intersectionality* is instrumental in understanding oppression and the various power dynamics within our society. Intersectionality refers to the interplay of overlapping social identities such as race, class, and gender that determine the individual or group's life experiences, particularly privilege and oppression. The concept of intersectionality lends to the social work profession as a tool for critical reflection.

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.'

Oppression in India

India, like several other Asian countries, is afflicted with marginalization and social exclusion based on caste, religion, class and gender. Okli R. Agwu (2019) explains the focus of social exclusion as "the extent to which people are able to participate in social affairs and attain sufficient power to influence decisions that affect them." Oppression, marginalization and social exclusion are all interlinked. Each individually and collectively breeds inequality, deprivation and socio-economic disadvantage. Mullaly (2007) suggests that marginalization has the potential to result in severe material deprivation and, in its most extreme form, can eliminate the group. Material deprivation is the result of marginalization as it involves the unfair distribution of material resources. Marginalization excludes people from services, programs and policies (Young, 2000). The marginalization experienced in India results from material deprivation and religious and caste identities. The Muslim community in India has experienced systematic marginalization and deprivation in the economic, social and cultural realms (Pandya, 2010). According to the Sachar Committee Report, the conditions of Muslims in India are abysmally disadvantaged, faring just above the Dalits and argued to be worse than the OBCs (Alam, 2008).

India's caste system is one of the most brutal and long-lasting systems of hierarchy and

oppression. Constituting nearly one-sixth of India's population, Dalits face frequent violence, harassment and oppression. The available statistics on violence against "lower castes" present a rather grim reality of their lived experiences despite the constitutional and legal frameworks to protect and safeguard their interests. In India, Dalits have been murdered or lynched by mobs for entering temples, riding a horse, growing a moustache, sharing a name with upper caste men or even for much less. Worst affected among Dalit communities are the women, facing the intersection of vulnerabilities that of gender bias, caste discrimination and economic deprivation. The aftermath of the rape of a 19-year-old Dalit woman in September 2020 exposed the impunity and the apathy towards violence against oppressed communities and women.

Thompson (2006) reflects on discrimination at three levels oppressive viz-a-viz personal, cultural, and structural. This work considers oppression in India as existing at three levels: Socio-economic, socio-political and sociocultural. Socioeconomic oppression is manifested in the form of a lack of access to opportunities and livelihoods. Poverty and unemployment, currently at their highest¹, proscribe a life with dignity for a large section of the population. Twenty-eight percent of the world's poor live in India, according to the Human Development Index of 2019². They experience the worst form of discrimination and exclusion regarding welfare services and provisions.

The second type of oppression in India is at the socio-political level. Indian democracy under the current dispensation is limited to elections. Though the Constitution of India provides for equal rights for all citizens, the increasing majoritarianism and human rights violations of religious minorities and caste groups with no action from the state are causing an erosion of the political rights of these groups. Language is deployed systematically to promote the binary division of communities leading to the 'othering' of these groups. It has escalated inequality and is breeding oppression leading to their dehumanization. Social interactions are happening in the context of this division, shaping identities and reproducing oppressive relationships.

Another level of oppression prevalent in India is manifested in the form of socio-cultural practices. Some traditional practices in India continue to be repressive for some of the population. These practices are rigidly followed as part of social institutions. The case in point is the infamous 'honour killings'³ in some parts of the country. Similarly, the dowry system is a source of oppression for women and is responsible for the death of many women⁴. Several cultural and religious practices continue to be repressive for many people, especially women. At the same time, large sections of the population face oppression of different forms and magnitudes in India as the structural factors continue to support it.

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

achievable only when oppression at interpersonal and collective levels is rejected. The fundamental requirement for rejecting oppression and establishing a just social order is to be aware of its existence and understand how it reproduces itself through interactions (Essed, 1991). Friere (1972) refers to knowledge about the existence of oppression as 'conscientization.'

Lena Dominelli (2002) talks about three reactions that oppressed people give to their oppressors: acceptance, i.e. those who have internalized the dominant values and accepted their weaker positions; accommodation, where weaker groups realize their interests and attempt to achieve a compromise from the dominant groups; rejection involves outright denunciation of status quo and seek alternatives to existing oppressive systems.

Anti-oppressive practice is considered 'client-centred and empowering' (Dalrymple and Burke, 1995), but it has to be shaped in sociocultural, economic and political contexts. Anti-oppressive practice in India must examine the structural and institutional factors producing oppression. Societal institutions have to encompass anti-oppressive mechanisms if any change in the functioning of social interactions is envisaged. The values and attitudes against oppression have to seep into the social order.

The social work profession recognizes the importance of a person's environment for their well-being and development. If a person's environment is marred with oppressive interactions, it will only breed inequality and social exclusion, thus mandating social work intervention to ensure social inclusion, social justice, social cohesion and improved quality of life (Teater, 2010). International Federation of Social workers (IFSW) in 2014 stated that social worker intervenes at the point of societal disequilibrium to chart the causes of justice, liberation and empowerment.

For social workers, it is important to understand the nuances of how oppression is experienced and reproduced. It is a process that occurs in different forms and ways. The dynamics of this process have to be understood for two main reasons: to be able to establish a just social order by working towards eliminating oppression in inter-personal relationships as well as in social interactions; to prevent themselves from unconsciously oppressing the deprived while trying to help them integrate into the mainstream life.

India needs social workers at all three levels, i.e. micro, mezzo and macro, to begin a change in social interactions and help strike more meaningful relationships. In welfare states, Social workers working with state or non-profit organizations depend on the state for financial aid to a good extent. They seek collaboration with the state on their development agendas. This liaisoning with the state offers a platform from which social workers can begin bringing about changes by constructing an anti-oppressive framework instead of implementing pre-conceived developmental agendas. For this, they have to organize themselves and make their need felt at the highest level. From framing agendas against oppressive institutional arrangements to implementing those using anti-oppressive principles, social workers can get involved in the equitable distribution of resources and ensure lives with dignity for the most vulnerable.

The expertise of social workers becomes a decisive factor in deciding who gets help and who does not. This professional authority reflects the nature of the interaction between them and their clients. These relationships also point to the entrenched oppression that instinctively treats clients as inferior.

The anti-oppressive framework mandates a critical consciousness by a social worker while

working at the micro level providing services to individuals and families. Social workers must be aware of the power dynamics even within their relationship with the client. They may consciously or unconsciously reproduce implicit or explicit expressions of oppression in their relationship with the client. To eliminate this embedded subjugation at the interpersonal level, acts of balancing the power become pertinent. This entails moderating the professional expertise of social workers that privileges their position and allows them to control their clients' lives. Social workers must also acknowledge the client as an expert with his/her unique experiences derived from their intersectional identities.

In the cases where identities become a source of oppression, practitioners should not assume the passivity of vulnerable groups as this assumption disempowers these groups (Dominelli, 2002). Anti-oppressive practice relies on the idea of inclusiveness irrespective of the identities of the groups. India is currently witnessing identity-based exclusion and extreme marginalization. The rights of religious minorities and depressed groups are regularly violated. While India was declared a secular state, the increased tilt towards majoritarianism, violating the fundamentals of the Constitution, is going unchallenged. The manifestations of this inclination toward Hindutva ideology are the fatal lynching of many members of minority communities and caste groups. The violators of rights have been garlanded while victims have been incarcerated. The state and courts, which are responsible for ensuring the rule of law and upholding rights and justice, seem to have absolved themselves of their duties. So far, there has not been a single statement by any professional social work organization or individual in India opposing the current scenario. The situation has cast doubt on the ethical commitment of social workers toward equality and justice in India. IFSW and other regional organizations issue time-to-time statements against oppression in different parts of the world but have been silent on the situation of minorities and other depressed groups in India.

Oppression in social interactions is reinforced at the policy level, necessitating the process of inclusion and emancipation through negotiation at the highest level. The realities of oppressed people at this level need to be acknowledged, and elected representatives and those who hold formal power need to be held accountable. People in India who are forced to live undignified lives because of multiple factors experience oppression in the form of deprivation and discrimination. Situated in this background, anti-oppressive practice would necessitate the involvement of social workers at the highest level. Social workers, in their jobs, have a unique vantage point of witnessing oppression, and their understanding of social injustice and oppression provides critical sights.

The rights-based approach to policy formulation would signify the accessibility of welfare provisions for the vulnerable sections of the population. This unhindered access to resources and welfare provisions would begin a sustainable empowering process. Wetzel (1997) states that social work practitioners have sought to make human rights the basis for a universal discourse about the role and purpose of the profession. This assertion needs to be replicated at the policy level. Indian scenario calls for urgent attention to interventions at multiple levels. These interventions can go on in parallel at the interpersonal, group and community levels. Community-level intervention is required as oppression of multiple forms has left several communities powerless and incapable of acting towards changing their circumstances. There is an increased sense of

alienation and exclusion, which needs urgent social work intervention to reverse the process. Individuals realize their power within the context of larger communities when they act together. Communities, when integrated around a cause, discover the power of relationships, solidarities and resources required to mobilize and act to counter oppression. AOP has to ensure that the needs of constituent sub-groups are not overlooked during collective action, and hence, no new sites of oppression are created.

Lena Dominelli (2002) suggests consciousness-raising by social workers at all levels as a tool to contest oppressive social interactions. This is possible to achieve by incorporating an education component in AOP that will critically analyze the unjust social relations and define the urgent need to address them at all three levels, i.e. individual, group, and community levels. Certain hopelessness has set over vulnerable groups in India about their stable conditions. Anti-oppressive practice will focus on motivating these groups and communities to challenge the status quo. History is a witness to the fact that fights against oppression have been fought and won through collective actions. Anti-oppressive practice will entail organizing people to rally behind a cause to register support against oppressive arrangements. The focus of the campaigns for obtaining solidarity with the cause can be achieved through an array of social action methods which will help popularize with the origin and contributing factors while creating mutual systems of care. Dominelli (2002) suggests that divisions and disagreements between and among people have to be demotivated temporarily, but this is not to suggest that the intersectionality of oppressive relationships has to be ignored or oppression at smaller levels has to be tolerated. The anti-oppressive practice has to ensure the involvement of all community members in demanding and enjoying their rights. While strong organization and leadership are necessary, all participants' contributions must be highlighted. Organizing people around their identities is important, which will help create an axis around which support will be registered. This will help in dealing with the oppression that emanates from identities. The discourses revolving around the oppressed and their conditions need to be shifted from their perceived indolence and incapacities to their actual abilities.

The organization that is built during the course of anti-oppressive practice around the ideals of justice and equality will be the main force to catapult the anti-oppressive social work practice to success. Some social work literature suggests that dominant groups should be allowed to retain their power but should be made more inclusive (Okoli et al., 2017). This work, however, suggests that all mechanisms and structures of oppression should be dismantled and replaced by just and equality-based arrangements and mechanisms of inclusion. Anti-oppressive practice, also known as 'emancipatory' and 'empowerment' practice, is undoubtedly radical in approach. It is based on critical awareness of human development and well-being barriers. These barriers are financially, culturally, socially and politically constituted (Adams, Dominelli & Payne, 2009).

One of the central areas of Anti-oppressive practice would be to help economically marginalized people in skill development, which would help them eke out their livelihoods. Once sustainable incomes ensue, dealing with certain other issues becomes less difficult. The capabilities of vulnerable populations must be enhanced through education and skill development while linking them to different state and non-state welfare provisions. India faces extreme social problems ranging from poverty and unemployment to child labour, violence against women, communalism

and casteism, substance abuse, crime and delinquency, homelessness, farmers' distress, and corruption. These problems lead to further marginalization, which exists in communities because of identities. Mullaly (2007) suggests recognizing that social problems are connected with larger societal structures. Social workers should recognize the individual as political in the process of becoming a valuable member of society and the structural factors that contribute to oppression and marginalization, writes Mullaly (2007). In order to empower their clients, social workers need to be reflexive and work on raising the consciousness of their clients, constantly subjugated by structural and institutional processes.

The social work profession in India needs to focus on changing social interactions at all levels and help strike more meaningful relationships. The strategies would depend on the interpretation of the sources of marginalization. Since social workers are connected at the grassroots with community and group members, they know these sources and their related aspects, which plays a huge role in strategizing the mitigation of these sources and factors of oppression. Social workers have the advantage of knowing and dealing with issues of social exclusion, and it provides them with leverage while engaging in informal negotiations (Jordan and Jordan, 2000).

India's challenging human rights situation calls for a campaign to establish a just social order. The International Federation of Social workers, IFSW, states, '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 .'Indian scenario calls for developing a definitive framework of practice that would entail a system of open consultation and partnerships with stakeholders and collaboration with interest groups. Representing the vulnerable and victims of human rights violation cases in courts and elected institutions will be needed. Different methods of social action can help mobilize support for the cause of protecting the vulnerable.

"AOP looks at the use and abuse of power not only with individual or organizational behaviour which may be overtly, covertly or indirectly racist, classist, sexist and so on but also with broader social structures" (Clifford, 1995). Challenging a status quo would require stimulating and sustaining change, state Burke and Harrison (1998). Encouraging critical thinking and sensitizing individuals and groups, and through them larger communities, to recognize and value social differences, pluralism and distinctiveness of people.

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.

Civil society organizations following the AOP policy and approach at the agency level can transform their service delivery. This entails a participatory approach seeking involvement from the client and communities to influence the processes and mechanism of the agency. In other words, there is a need for Civil Society Organizations to be accountable to the communities they serve while addressing the issues of oppression and systemic marginalization.

Finally, Anti-Oppressive Research, though beyond the scope of the present paper, is a key aspect of the Anti-Oppressive Framework. Social work researchers guided by the mandate of social justice need to develop an anti-oppressive consciousness to challenge oppression in creating knowledge and discourse (Strier, 2006). Such research practice seeks to develop methodologies that acknowledge and attempt to avoid the reproduction of existing oppressive mechanisms (Rogers, 2012).

AOP is not merely a vague concept but is akin to a lens through which to look at the world. As a practice, it needs to be a part of social work intervention with individuals, groups & communities. AOP is to be embedded in the philosophy of the organizations providing welfare services to individuals and communities.

Notes:

1 <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/indicators/indias-unemployment-rate-rises-further-employment-rate-lowest-since-june/articleshow/79428634.cms>

2 <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/governance/india-home-to-28-of-world-s-poor-human-development-index-2019-68336>

3 <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2018/dec/29/2018-a-look-at-the-trend-of-honour-killings-in-india-1916828.html>.

4 <https://www.shethepeople.tv/top-stories/opinion/dowry-deaths-reality-in-india-but-until-when/>

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