

Caste as Structure: Identity and Oppression in Indian Social Work Practice

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ABSTRACT

This chapter critically engages with the foundational assumptions of social work practice in India by foregrounding caste as a structural determinant of oppression and inequality. While mainstream social work often emphasize individual-level change and psychosocial support, such approaches often risk obscuring the deep-rooted structural realities that shape marginalized lives particularly those of Dalit and Adivasi communities. Drawing from the principles of structural social work and rooted in the lived experiences of caste-based discrimination and exclusion, this chapter discusses how caste operates not merely as a cultural or social identity, but as a system of organized disadvantage embedded in institutions, policies and everyday interactions. Through a review of existing academic literature and critical theoretical insights, the chapter argues for a reorientation of Indian social work that acknowledges and confronts caste-based hierarchies. It calls for a shift from charity-based or welfare models to a rights-based, anti-oppressive framework that centers social justice.

Key Words- Structural Social Work; Caste; Marginalisation; Inequality and Justice

1.INTRODUCTION

Social work discipline in India has historically emerged and shaped by colonial legacies, welfare state models and philanthropic traditions (Dominelli, 2010; Pathak, 2012; Tamburro, 2013; Dash, 2018; Roy, 2020). Despite the commitment to equity and justice, the social work profession often remains silent or insufficiently engaged with caste, which is the most enduring and oppressive social structure in Indian society (Bhalerao, 2016; Jare & Kale, 2017; Maske, 2023; Vareed, Plante & Sebastian, 2023).

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This chapter is an attempt to understand that silence by positioning caste not merely as an identity but as a deeply embedded system of structural exclusion that often deny access to dignity, opportunity and rights. The focus of this chapter is to understand how caste operates as a social structure with its own historically specific and contextually embedded mechanisms of social control, exclusion and stratification. The chapter, based on existing scholarly literature, argues that caste must be central, not peripheral, to the theoretical, pedagogical and practical frameworks of social work profession in India. By doing so, the chapter seeks to reframe dominant approaches in the field that tend to emphasize individual behavior change, community development and service delivery without sufficiently engaging with the structural forces that perpetuate inequality.

There is a pressing need to examine the caste question within social work because many of the profession's current approaches, particularly in academic training and field practice, adopt a caste-neutral or caste-blind stance (Bhalerao, 2016). This tendency not only limits the social work profession's ability to challenge the existing systemic injustice but also inadvertently reinforces the status quo. Marginalized communities particularly Dalits (Scheduled Castes), Adivasis (Scheduled Tribes), and Other Backward Classes continue to face intergenerational cycles of discrimination and deprivation that cannot be addressed without a structural lens. As caste remains institutionalized in everything from education and health to labor and access to justice, it is imperative that social work profession confront this reality directly. The rationale for framing caste as structure is rooted in both theoretical and experiential insights. Drawing on critical social theories, Ambedkarite thoughts and the lived experiences of oppressed communities, this chapter proposes a shift from individualistic, charity-based, and technocratic models of social work to an anti-oppressive, rights-based approach that recognizes caste as a foundational axis of inequality in India.

The chapter is organized into eight interconnected sections. Following this introduction, Section 2 introduces the structural social work, examining its emergence as a critique of mainstream social work and exploring its applicability in the Indian context. Section 3 provides a sociological and historical overview of caste, emphasizing its operation as a system of structured inequality rather than merely a social identity. Section 4 deepens this analysis by engaging with conceptual frameworks that help theorize caste as structure, drawing on global and local sources of critical thought. Section 5 critiques the current state of social work education and field practice in India, highlighting the marginalization of caste in its curriculum. Section 6 outlines a strategies and vision for transformative social work by suggesting reforms in curriculum, pedagogy and professional

practices. The final section concludes the chapter by emphasizing that any meaningful engagement with social justice in India must begin with an honest and sustained confrontation with caste. By placing caste at the heart of structural analysis and social work praxis, this chapter contributes to an emerging body of scholarship and practice that insists on making Indian social work more accountable, more contextual and more just.

2. UNDERSTANDING STRUCTURAL SOCIAL WORK

The emergence of structural social work represents a critical turn in the field's understanding of oppression, inequality and the role of the social worker. Originating in Canada during the 1970s and 1980s, structural social work was developed as a response to the limitations of mainstream, reformist approaches that failed to address the root causes of social problems (Mullaly, 1993). According to Murray & Hick (2013) structural social work is influenced by marxist thought, critical theory, feminist frameworks, and anti-racist scholarship. It locates the source of individual and collective suffering not in personal pathology or deviance, but in the structural arrangements of power and privilege that govern any society. Lundy (2011) mentioned that at its core, structural social work seeks to challenge and transform the societal institutions and ideologies that perpetuate inequality. It emphasizes a dual focus by providing immediate support to individuals in distress while simultaneously engaging in collective action aimed at systemic change. This approach insists that social work practice must be politically aware and ethically committed to dismantling oppression in all its forms based on class, race, gender, ability and caste identities. Furthermore, King (2008) discusses the fundamental principles of structural social work. According to him oppression is not incidental but often systemic and deeply embedded within social structures. Structural social work, therefore, prioritizes empowerment, active participation, and advocacy, aiming to challenge and transform oppressive systems. It also integrates personal and political dimensions of practice, encouraging social workers to connect individual experiences with broader social injustices. Importantly, structural social work rejects the value-neutral or apolitical stances, recognizing that social work inherently involves ethical and political commitments.

Structural social work stands in sharp contrast to conventional social work models (Murray & Hick, 2013), it often prioritize individualized, therapeutic interventions rooted in psychological or behavioral explanations. Lundy (2004) opined that traditional social work tends to focus on adapting individuals to their environments or “fixing” maladaptive behaviors, often without interrogating the social, economic, or political forces that create distress in the first place. While such approaches can offer temporary relief

or coping strategies, they risk reinforcing systemic injustices by obscuring the role of structural inequality in shaping personal and community-level hardship. In postcolonial contexts like India, the relevance of structural social work is both urgent and profound (George & Marlowe, 2005). The country is often marked by deeply entrenched histories of colonization, social stratification, economic exploitation and cultural domination. As Bhat and Maske (2017) also pointed out that caste operates as a pervasive and institutionally sanctioned form of structural violence, regulating access to land, labor, education and dignity in Indian society. They argued that the mainstream social work profession has often adopted Western models that insufficiently account for these local realities. As a result, there is a disjuncture between the lived experiences of marginalized communities and the frameworks used to understand and intervene in their lives.

Structural social work offers a critical corrective by advocating for a context-sensitive, justice-oriented model of practice that can meaningfully engage with the social, historical, and political specificities of caste-based oppression (Mullaly, 1993; Vareed, Plante & Sebastian, 2023). Its emphasis on collective empowerment, systemic advocacy and solidarity makes it particularly well-suited to addressing the structural injustices faced by Dalits, Adivasis, and other historically oppressed groups in India (George & Marlowe, 2005; Jare & Kale, 2017). By adopting a structural approach, social work profession in India can move beyond a technocratic or depoliticized model of intervention and instead become a site of resistance, transformation and a hope for positive change. Authors argue that this shift is not only necessary for making the profession more accountable and effective but it is essential for making it ethical.

3. CASTE IN THE INDIAN SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Caste remains one of the most enduring and deeply entrenched systems of social stratification in the Indian subcontinent (Thorat, 2009; Deshpande, 2011; Jodhka, 2017). While often framed as a cultural or religious phenomenon, caste is, at its core, a structural system of graded inequality that regulates access to power, privilege and resources (Thorat & Madheswaran, 2018). Kumar (2014) argued that caste organizes society into a rigid hierarchy, wherein individuals are assigned social status at birth, and this status determines their occupational roles, social interactions and life chances. The caste system has evolved over millennia, yet its foundational logic of purity, pollution and hereditary status, continues to shape Indian social life.

3.1 Understanding of Caste as a System of Stratification

The caste system classifies Hindu society into four broad *varnas*. These are Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (traders)

and Shudras (laborers), and those who are outside this framework, are known as Dalits (formerly referred to as “untouchables”). While the *varna* model is often used in ideological justifications, the everyday lived reality of caste is shaped by the *jati* system where thousands of endogamous groups with locally specific rules and hierarchies (Sharma, 1984; Thorat, 2008). Sociologically, caste functions as both a cultural ideology and an economic arrangement (Jodhka, 2017). Scholars like B.R. Ambedkar, M.N. Srinivas, and André Béteille have shown how caste determines access to capital, land, and livelihood, while also regulating social behavior through norms of purity, commensality, and intermarriage. Ambedkar, in particular, critiqued caste as a system of “graded inequality” that denied basic human dignity to the oppressed castes and he argued for its annihilation as a precondition for democracy and social justice in India (Hiwrale, 2020).

3.2 Everyday Manifestations of Caste-Based Exclusion

Despite constitutional guarantees of equality and affirmative action policies, Thorat, (2008) argued that caste-based exclusion remains pervasive in contemporary India. Caste is often recognized through protective legislation such as the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989. However, the gap between legal provisions and social reality is vast (Chatterjee, 2021; Khora, 2024). Discrimination against Dalits and Adivasis continues in areas of education, employment, housing, access to public services and even the criminal justice system (Thorat, 2009). Caste is also embedded in rituals, language, media representations and institutional norms. It shapes the imagination of honor, shame, and morality, and often invisibilized in dominant discourses (Jodhka, 2017). Kumar (2014) commented that caste manifests in practices such as residential segregation, caste-based slurs, restrictions on religious places and exclusion from decision-making processes. The persistence of manual scavenging, despite its legal abolition, is a stark reminder of how caste continues to structure the most dehumanizing forms of labor. Caste based hierarchies are reproduced in corporate boardrooms (Jodhka, 2008), university spaces (Sukumar, 2022) and digital media platforms (Kanjilal, 2024), often under the guise of merit, tradition or cultural fit.

4. CASTE AS STRUCTURE: THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING

Understanding caste merely as a cultural identity or social label inadequately captures its enduring role in shaping the contours of inequality in India. Rather, authors through this chapter argue that caste must be understood as a structure which is historically produced and institutionally sustained system of organized disadvantage. This structural

lens moves beyond symbolic or interpersonal understandings of caste to reveal its embeddedness in laws, policies, institutions and the everyday logic of Indian society.

4.1 Caste as a Structure of Organized Disadvantage

Beteille (1991) maintained that caste operates as a mechanism that organizes access to life chances through a hierarchical distribution of resources, dignity and recognition. It determines who owns land, who performs manual labor, who occupies positions of power and who remains vulnerable to systemic violence. This stratification is neither incidental nor natural but it is socially constructed and historically maintained through a range of institutions like religion and education to the family, labor markets and state apparatus (Gupta, 2000). Unlike spontaneous or episodic forms of discrimination, the caste system institutionalizes disadvantage in ways that reproduce inequality across generations (Thorat, 2008). Structural violence is enacted through practices such as exclusion from educational institutions, lack of political representation, underpayment and precarious employment, and persistent residential and occupational segregation (Bhat & Maske, 2017). These forms of exclusion are often normalized and rendered invisible, particularly when caste is treated as a matter of cultural identity rather than as a mechanism of power and control.

4.2 Bourdieu, Dr. Ambedkar and Critical Race Theory

A robust conceptual framework for understanding caste as structure requires interdisciplinary tools. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital particularly social capital and symbolic capital is instructive in this regard. Bourdieu (1994) posited that individuals and groups possess varying degrees of capital (economic, social, cultural, symbolic), which determine their position within a social field. In the Indian context, dominant castes possess high volumes of social and symbolic capital manifested in networks, language, institutional familiarity and perceived respectability (Jeffrey, 2001). However, Rathod (2022) maintained that marginalized social groups, by contrast, are systematically excluded from these capitals, rendering them to invisible or illegitimate in dominant spaces, even when they possess merit or credentials. Ambedkarite thought, however, remains the most powerful lens for theorizing caste as a system of structural violence. Hiwrale (2020) argued that Ambedkar understood caste not simply as a social anomaly but as an entrenched political and economic structure of domination. For him, caste was "not merely a division of labor, it is a division of laborers," and that its annihilation required not just reform but a radical transformation of Indian society. Chandrachud (2024), former chief justice of India, argued that Ambedkar's call for justice was not confined to legal

equality but encompassed the redistribution of power and dignity. Critical Race Theory, though developed in the U.S. to address anti-Black racism (Constance-Huggins, 2012), offers resonant insights for caste analysis. The theory highlights how structural discrimination is often embedded within seemingly neutral institutions and policies. Concepts such as “interest convergence,” “whiteness as property,” and “intersectionality” can be productively adapted to the Indian context. For example, in examining how caste privilege is maintained through laws, merit-based discourses and institutional inertia (Goodnight, 2017). Just as Critical Race Theory challenges color-blind ideologies in the West, caste-critical approaches must interrogate caste-blind narratives within Indian public and academic discourses.

4.3 Caste: Identity or Structure

Caste is often invoked as a marker of identity, it is used for self-definition, community-building and also electoral mobilization. However, it is essential to distinguish between caste as identity and caste as structure. Caste identity may be mobilized in affirmative or empowering ways, particularly in the assertion of Dalit and Adivasi voices and rights. However, caste as structure refers to the durable systems of inequality that transcend individual or group identities and persist regardless of personal choices or cultural practices. This distinction is crucial for social work practice. Treating caste solely as identity risks reducing systemic injustice to interpersonal prejudice or cultural diversity management. It leads to interventions that prioritize symbolic inclusion, token representation and individual empowerment, without addressing the institutional arrangements that perpetuate exclusion. Conversely, recognizing caste as structure allows social workers to ask deeper questions, such as: Who holds power in this institution? Whose knowledge counts? How are resources distributed? What structural changes are needed to make justice possible? Hence, theorizing caste as structure involves recognizing its function as an organized, institutionalized system of domination that intersects with other forms of oppression. It demands a critical, interdisciplinary approach that centers the lived realities of caste-based exclusion while also envisioning pathways to dismantle the architecture of inequality. For social work in India to be truly transformative, it must adopt this structural lens—not only in theory but in its pedagogy and practice.

5. SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION IN INDIA: A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT

Social work education in India has long been modeled on Western paradigms, with a strong emphasis on individual rehabilitation, casework,

and therapeutic models (Alphonse, George & Moffatt, 2008; Dash, Kumar, Singh & Shukla, 2020). While these approaches have their utility, the transplantation of Euro-American frameworks into the Indian context has often led to an epistemic mismatch between the tools of professional practice and the lived realities of caste-based oppression. This section critically examines the limitations of prevailing pedagogical and practical models in Indian social work, particularly their inability—or unwillingness—to confront caste as a foundational axis of structural inequality.

5.1 Current Pedagogical Approaches in Social Work Curricula

Social work education in India typically follows a framework focused on micro-level interventions such as counseling, community organization, and rehabilitation (Roy, 2017; Islam, 2024). We teach/learn courses on human behavior, research methodology and fieldwork practices which often mirror global trends, while macro-structural analyses remain marginal or optional. The dominant pedagogical philosophy prioritizes neutrality, professional detachment and value-free interventions. These notions, while ostensibly ethical, tend to depoliticize social realities and obscure the deeply embedded nature of structural issues. Fieldwork placements often emphasize development work with “underprivileged communities,” yet without adequate theoretical grounding in caste dynamics, students risk reproducing patronizing, savior-like attitudes. Moreover, the social location of both faculty and students, who are predominantly from dominant caste backgrounds shape what is taught, how it is taught and which forms of knowledge are considered legitimate.

5.2 Absence of Caste in Professional Training

Bhalerao (2016) maintained that caste is often treated as either a peripheral topic or a static cultural marker rather than a dynamic system of inequality in social work discipline. Caste appears under the broad umbrella of “Indian Social Structure” or in modules addressing diversity, but it is seldom foregrounded as a critical determinant of social injustice. Maske (2023) also pointed out this and stated that the contributions of anti-caste thinkers like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Jyotirao Phule, Periyar, or even contemporary Dalit feminists are either omitted or confined to elective courses. This curricular erasure not only silences marginalized voices but also perpetuates a form of caste-blindness that limits the profession’s transformative potential. In professional training, this gap becomes even more pronounced. Social work trainees are rarely equipped to navigate or challenge caste-based exclusions in the institutions they work with—be it schools, hospitals, NGOs or government bodies. In fact, caste-based discrimination within social work institutions themselves—through

practices of exclusion, stereotyping, and tokenism—often mirrors broader societal patterns. This indicates that the issue is not merely curricular but deeply systemic.

5.3 Critique of Caste-Blind Interventions and Their Limitations

Caste-blindness is the assumption that caste no longer matters or that it should not be explicitly addressed. This caste-blindness often remains a dominant posture within social work interventions. Practitioners often emphasize neutrality, universalism, or economic class over caste, under the belief that targeted caste-conscious engagement might be divisive or politically sensitive (Vareed, 2023). While such intentions may appear egalitarian, they fundamentally misunderstand the nature of caste as a structural determinant of disadvantage. Caste-blind interventions often tend to produce shallow or ineffective outcomes. For instance, livelihood programs that do not address caste-based occupational stratification fail to challenge the generational confinement of Dalit communities to stigmatized labor. Education initiatives that ignore caste hierarchies in classrooms or school management risk reproducing systemic exclusion. Legal aid or counseling that refuses to name caste-based violence perpetuates the invisibility of structural harm. Moreover, as Jogdand (2024) argued that caste-blindness reinforces the dominant caste gaze in both practice and scholarship. It privileges the experiences and assumptions of those who do not face caste-based oppression, thus making upper-caste positionality the default. In doing so, it neutralizes the radical, justice-oriented potential of social work and reduces it to a service delivery mechanism devoid of political consciousness.

To move beyond these limitations, authors in this chapter argue that social work education and practice in India must undertake a radical rethinking. This must involve not merely including caste as a topic but centering it as a critical lens through which all social phenomena are understood. Anti-caste praxis must be integrated into fieldwork, theory and ethics—training future professionals to recognize their own social locations, engage in reflexive practice and work in solidarity with movements for caste justice.

6. STRATEGIES FOR INTEGRATING CASTE-CONSCIOUSNESS INTO SOCIAL WORK

This section of the chapter discusses strategies for integrating caste consciousness into the social work profession. It argues that to meaningfully address caste-based inequality, caste consciousness must be embedded across pedagogical, institutional and practical dimensions. At the curricular level, this involves incorporating anti-caste theory, Dalit

feminist thought, and Adivasi epistemologies into core social work courses rather than relegating them to electives. Field-based learning should engage students directly with caste-affected communities and social movements, while also critically engaging with thinkers such as Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Jyotiba Phule, Periyar and contemporary anti-caste scholars and activists. In terms of fieldwork and supervision, placements should not only focus on development outcomes but also encourage students to document and critically reflect on caste dynamics in institutional and community settings. Recruiting and supporting Dalit, Bahujan, and Adivasi field supervisors and faculty is essential to ensure that students are exposed to diverse social standpoints. Institutionally, there is a need to increase representation of marginalized caste groups within faculty, research scholars, students and governance structures of social work institutions. Furthermore, institutions must establish anti-caste grievance redressal mechanisms, peer-support networks and caste sensitivity training as part of their formal protocols. Lastly, the professional ethics of social work should be expanded to include explicit commitments to caste justice. Practitioners must be equipped to document caste-based discrimination, advocate for inclusive policy reforms, and challenge systemic exclusion within the spheres they operate in—whether in health, education, legal aid, or housing.

Structural change cannot be achieved by individual actors alone. It requires collective organizing, solidarity, and sustained institutional engagement. Social work must ally itself with broader anti-caste movements, labor unions, women's groups, and indigenous rights organizations that are already engaged in transformative work. Solidarity here means not speaking for, but standing with; not leading, but amplifying. Solidarity also involves recognizing that caste injustice is not only the concern of Dalit, Bahujan, or Adivasi communities—it is a national democratic concern. Dominant caste practitioners and institutions must shoulder the responsibility of unlearning privilege and dismantling the systems that sustain it. Finally, institutions of social work education and practice must be held accountable. They must move beyond tokenism, beyond annual seminars on Ambedkar Jayanti, and toward embedding anti-caste justice as a core operational ethic. This includes transparent recruitment policies, curriculum audits, community partnerships, and institutional reflexivity.

6.1 Reimagining Social Work: Praxis, Policy, and Pedagogy

The journey toward an emancipatory social work in India requires a fundamental reimagining of the profession. This concluding section of the chapter outlines transformative pathways that span pedagogy, policy and praxis, with the aim of grounding social work firmly in the lived realities of caste-based inequality and structural injustice. It envisions a profession not

merely responsive to oppression but actively committed to dismantling it, rooted in local contexts and accountable to the marginalized communities it seeks to serve.

To move in this direction, we argue that social work education must evolve beyond its existing frameworks, which often marginalize caste and instead become a space for emancipatory learning and critical inquiry. This transformation calls for curricular decolonization, wherein syllabus are revised to treat caste as a core axis of social stratification alongside class, gender and other identities. Anti-caste scholarship, histories of resistance and indigenous epistemologies must be embedded as foundational elements of the curriculum. Equally important is the cultivation of critical reflexivity and positionality, enabling both students and faculty members to interrogate their own caste locations, privileges and internalized biases. Such reflexive pedagogies foster deeper ethical engagement and a sustained commitment to social justice. Furthermore, we suggest that the profession must embrace community-centered learning that moves beyond the confines of classroom theory. This involves immersive, field-based education that respects and engages with the knowledge, agency and leadership of Dalit, Adivasi and Bahujan communities. Fieldwork should be co-created with communities and movements, ensuring that the process is both ethically sound and socially accountable. Finally, there is an urgent need to diversify faculty and leadership by actively recruiting individuals from marginalized caste backgrounds. This step is essential not only to broaden perspectives and dismantle institutional gatekeeping but also to offer students a more inclusive and representative educational environment. This reimagined social work profession will reclaim its radical roots as a force for liberation, social justice and equity in India. It will be a profession that does not shy away from uncomfortable truths but embraces them as necessary steps toward genuine transformation.

7. CONCLUSION

This chapter has critically examined caste not merely as an identity marker but as a deeply entrenched structural system that shapes inequality and exclusion within Indian society and social work practice. Through an exploration of caste's historical, sociological and institutional dimensions, alongside reflections from practitioners and marginalized communities, we have seen how caste permeates educational curricula, professional practice, and everyday interactions often rendered invisible or minimized in mainstream social work. Central to the argument is the imperative to dismantle caste as a prerequisite for meaningful social transformation. This requires a radical reorientation of social work theory and practice towards an anti-oppressive, rights-based framework that acknowledges

caste as a fundamental axis of injustice. The chapter concludes with a call to action: for scholars to deepen research that interrogates caste structurally and intersectionally; for faculty members to embed anti-caste consciousness in pedagogy and institutional culture; and for practitioners to commit to solidarity, reflexivity and justice-oriented practice. Only through such collective and sustained effort can social work in India reclaim its emancipatory potential and contribute to the dismantling of caste hierarchies, thus fostering a more equitable and just society and our discipline.

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