

Contemporary Movements and Efforts by the Civil Society for Dalit and Tribal Empowerment from a Social Work Perspective

Dr.Rambabu Botcha¹, Ms.Ridashisha Kharbani², Dr.Vishal Mishra³

ABSTRACT

The trajectory of Dalit and tribal empowerment in India has evolved from historical resistances against exploitation to contemporary civil society-led movements advocating for rights, dignity, and social justice. In post-independence India, despite constitutional safeguards and targeted developmental initiatives, Dalit and tribal communities have continued to face structural inequalities, displacement, land alienation, and cultural erosion. Grassroots and organized movements such as the Bhim Army, National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR), and various tribal assertion movements reflect a renewed collective consciousness and resistance against socio-economic deprivation and systemic discrimination. This chapter critically explores contemporary movements led by civil society actors that seek to dismantle caste and tribal hierarchies and promote substantive empowerment. It examines the strategies adopted ranging from rights-based advocacy, legal interventions, identity assertion, to socio-political mobilization and highlights the increasing political engagement among marginalized groups. The chapter also proposes a praxis framework for Dalit and Tribe Centred Social Work, emphasizing empowerment-oriented, rights-based, and culturally responsive interventions. Social workers are positioned not merely as facilitators but as co-travelers with communities in their struggle for justice, advocating for inclusive development, capacity building, and systemic change. By integrating theoretical perspectives with practical approaches, this chapter aims to strengthen the role of social work in advancing the aspirations of Dalit and tribal communities towards an equitable and dignified future.

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1. Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, Rajiv Gandhi National Institute of Youth Development, Sriperumbudur, Tamil Nadu. Email: rambabu@rgniyd.gov.in
 2. PhD Scholar, Department of Social Work, Rajiv Gandhi National Institute of Youth Development, Sriperumbudur, Tamil Nadu. Email: ridashishakharbani12@gmail.com
 3. Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, Rajiv Gandhi National Institute of Youth Development, Sriperumbudur, Tamil Nadu. Email: v.mishra309@gmail.com

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1. INTRODUCTION

Dalits are individuals who belong to the Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) categories in India. They continue to face widespread discrimination across social, economic, cultural, religious and political spheres. As per the 2011 Census of India, Scheduled Castes constitute 16.6% of the country's total population, amounting to over 17 crore people, while Scheduled Tribes make up 8.6%, totalling over 8 crore individuals. Together, SCs and STs represent approximately 25.2% of India's population, exceeding 25 crore people. Among Indian states, Tamil Nadu ranks third in terms of Scheduled Caste population and holds the second-highest literacy rate (73.26%) among Scheduled Castes nationwide. And Madhya Pradesh holds the distinction of having the largest Scheduled Tribe (ST) population, with over 1.6 crore individuals, constituting approximately 21% of the state's total population (Census of India, 2011)

Traditionally, Dalits have been relegated to occupations considered menial and degrading, such as carcass disposal, hide skinning, leatherwork, sweeping and manual scavenging. These jobs are often hereditary, imposed by the rigid caste system and leave little room for mobility. Their exclusion from mainstream society is not only social but has been historically justified through religious doctrines. Access to religious spaces and the right to worship have been privileges reserved for upper castes, with complex religious rituals reinforcing social hierarchies. Consequently, Dalits were systematically denied participation in religion, education and land ownership, effectively marginalizing them within the social order.

Despite the implementation of affirmative action policies that have improved access to education and government employment for Dalits, significant barriers persist. The control of dominant castes over key social, economic and political spaces continues to restrict true freedom and inclusion. The deeply entrenched caste system remains the root cause of the ongoing socio-economic and cultural exclusion faced by Dalit communities in India (Kamaraj, 2019).

The tribal communities in India are among the most marginalized and vulnerable groups. A significant portion of them live in persistent poverty and face severe food insecurity. Compared to other social groups, their representation on the Human Development Index is notably low, while their ranking on the Human Poverty Index remains disproportionately high. Research consistently indicates that tribal populations lag behind in key areas of development, including social, economic, educational and

political spheres. Despite being relatively small in number, tribal groups display immense diversity in terms of language, cultural identity, physical traits and community size. While geographically widespread, they largely remain disconnected from the mainstream population. India hosts the largest tribal population globally, with Scheduled Tribes (STs) present in over 20 states and 2 union territories. According to the **2011 Census**, there are 834 recognized tribal communities, constituting 8.6% of the national population, approximately 103 million individuals. Notably, the tribal population experienced a higher decadal growth rate of 23.66% between 2001 and 2011, compared to the overall national growth rate of 17.69%. Around 89.97% of STs reside in rural areas, while 10.3% are found in urban settings. The sex ratio among tribal communities is relatively balanced, with 990 females per 1,000 males, compared to the national average of 940 females per 1,000 males.

Data indicates that over half of the country's tribal population is concentrated in Central Indian states such as Madhya Pradesh (14.69%), Maharashtra (10.08%), Odisha (9.2%), Rajasthan (8.86%), Gujarat (8.55%), Jharkhand (8.29%), Chhattisgarh (7.5%) and Andhra Pradesh (5.7%). In the northeastern region, significant ST populations are found in Assam (3.72%), Meghalaya (2.45%), Nagaland (1.64%), Tripura (1.12%), Mizoram (0.99%), Arunachal Pradesh (0.91%), Manipur (0.87%) and Sikkim (0.20%), all of which report a tribal population above the national average of 8.61%. Notably, the states of Punjab and Haryana, along with the union territories of Delhi, Puducherry and Chandigarh, have no officially recognized ST populations.

Furthermore, roughly 67.17% of India's total tribal population is concentrated in just seven states: Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Jharkhand, and Chhattisgarh. Mizoram stands out with the highest proportion of STs relative to its total population at 94.43%, while Uttar Pradesh has the lowest at 0.57%. Among the union territories, Lakshadweep has the highest share of STs at 94.8%, whereas Daman and Diu have the lowest at 6.32% (**Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2013**).

The literacy rate among STs is 58.96%, which is significantly lower than the national average of 72.99%, reflecting a gap of 14.03 percentage points (**Census of India, 2011**). To address such disparities, the Indian Constitution, under **Article 46**, emphasizes the responsibility of the state to promote the educational and economic interests of marginalized groups, including STs, and protect them from social injustice and exploitation. To improve educational access and quality, the government has established tribal ashram schools and **Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRSs)** in tribal-dominated regions.

Objectives and Scope of the Chapter

The primary objective of this chapter is to critically examine the contemporary movements and efforts led by civil society in advancing the empowerment of Dalit and tribal communities in India. Despite the presence of constitutional safeguards and targeted developmental policies, these communities continue to face systemic exclusion, discrimination, displacement and socio-economic marginalization. This chapter seeks to trace the evolution of resistance from historical struggles to modern rights-based movements and understand how civil society functions as a transformative force in challenging caste-based and tribal hierarchies.

The scope of this chapter encompasses an in-depth analysis of key civil society-led movements such as the Bhim Army, National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR), various Adivasi mobilizations and indigenous people's organizations that advocate for rights related to land, identity, culture and dignity. It investigates the diverse strategies employed, including legal interventions, digital activism, community mobilization and global advocacy efforts.

Additionally, the chapter proposes a **Praxis Framework for Dalit and Tribal Social Work**, offering a model that integrates empowerment-oriented, rights-based and culturally responsive practices for social work professionals and educators. It emphasizes the role of social workers not as saviors but as collaborators in the struggles for justice and equality. By bringing together theoretical perspectives and ground-level practices, this chapter aims to contribute to the discourse on inclusive development, social justice and systemic change. It also calls for a reimagining of social work pedagogy to align more closely with movement-based learning, ensuring that future practitioners are better equipped to accompany marginalized communities in their journey toward dignity, equity and self-determination.

2. CIVIL SOCIETY AND EMPOWERMENT

The concept of civil society has been approached through multiple theoretical frameworks, yet there remains no universal consensus on its precise definition. As noted by Urry (1981) and McIlwaine (1998), civil society is generally understood as occupying the space between the state and the household. The usage of the term is not confined to academic discourse alone but has also permeated everyday language. For instance, Dictionary.com's 21st Century Lexicon defines civil society as: (a) the aggregate of non-governmental organizations and institutions that represent the interests and will of citizens, or (b) individuals and organizations within society that operate independently of government control. Additionally, the term is sometimes used in a broader sense to describe the essential elements of a

democratic society, such as freedom of speech and an independent judiciary. However, the meaning and scope of civil society have evolved over time and remain subject to debate and reinterpretation. In the following section, will explore the historical development and theoretical evolution of the concept of civil society.

To facilitate this understanding, Oommen (2004) outlines the evolution of civil society through three distinct phases or “incarnations,” providing a valuable framework for comprehending how the concept has transformed over time. The subsequent discussion will first present Oommen’s articulation of these three incarnations, followed by perspectives from various other scholars who have contributed to the discourse on civil society.

Civil society organizations in India cannot be directly equated with the concept of *Bürgerliche Gesellschaft* or bourgeois society, as described by Hegel. Unlike their Western counterparts, these organizations did not emerge from experiences rooted in an autonomous market economy, juridical frameworks, property relations, individualism or the discourse of Abstract rights. Instead, their origins are deeply embedded in two interconnected processes: the resistance to colonial rule and a growing self-awareness that questioned social practices seen as regressive in light of modern education and liberal ideologies. From the outset, civil society in India has been a diverse and pluralistic space, comprising at least seven distinct types of organizations that pursued different, though often complementary, goals (Beher, 2004; Jayal, 2007).

First, the 19th-century social and religious reform movements, such as the Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj, sought to modernize and reform Hinduism by challenging caste hierarchies, ritualism, idolatry and by promoting women’s education and widow remarriage. Second, in the early 20th century, Gandhian organizations like the *Harijan Sevak Sangh* worked towards the ‘social uplift’ of marginalized castes and the poor. Third, self-help organizations linked to the labor movement, particularly in industrial centers like Bombay and Ahmedabad, such as *Swadeshi Mitra Mandal* and *Friends of Labourers Society*, emerged to support workers’ rights.

Fourth, anti-caste movements, such as the *Self-Respect Movement* in Tamil Nadu, directly confronted caste-based oppression and aimed to secure dignity and equality for historically marginalized communities. Fifth, English-educated professionals formed associations like the *Bombay Presidency Association* to lobby the colonial government for expanded educational and employment opportunities for the emerging middle class. Sixth, the Indian National Congress, which led the freedom struggle, fostered a range of affiliated groups including women’s and youth organizations, integrating them into the broader civil society framework. Seventh, certain

social and cultural groups, such as the *Hindu Mahasabha* and *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)*, focused on the goal of establishing a Hindu nation, representing what can be termed as “uncivil” elements within civil society.

Following independence, as leaders of the freedom movement assumed control of the newly formed state, civil society organizations largely withdrew from active engagement with the government. The legitimacy enjoyed by the post-independence leadership led many such organizations to refrain from politicizing citizens or fostering civic engagement that encouraged dialogue between the state and its people. This passive relationship began to shift significantly by the early 1970s. The gradual decline of the Congress party signaled a crisis in representative and accountable governance, leading to widespread public dissatisfaction. Capitalizing on this unrest, socialist leader Jayaprakash (J.P.) Narayan mobilized one of the largest political movements against the authoritarian tendencies of the central government under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, marking a turning point in the role of civil society in India’s democratic landscape (Chandhoke, N. 2012).

The Government of India (GOI) has implemented several developmental measures aimed at improving the socio-economic conditions of vulnerable tribal communities. Key initiatives for the holistic development of tribals include the adoption of the Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP), establishment of Integrated Tribal Development Agencies (ITDAs), formation of Cooperative Societies and Large Sized Multi-Purpose Societies (LAMPS), Small Farmers’ Development Projects, the Modified Area Development Approach (MADA), the Dispersed Tribal Development Programme (DTDP), and micro-projects designed for the development of Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs). In addition to these schemes, constitutional provisions empower the government to designate tribal-dominated regions under the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Constitution. These schedules are intended to provide special administrative arrangements and autonomy through the creation of Autonomous District Councils based on the concentration of tribal populations. Their primary objective is to safeguard, protect, and promote the rights and interests of tribal communities in India. (Ambagudia, J. 2018).

Contemporary Movements for Dalit Empowerment

Bhakti Movement

The 15th-century Bhakti Movement treated all sections of society equally, promoting two traditions Saguna (worship of Vishnu or Shiva) and Nirguna (formless God). While Saguna upheld the caste order, it advocated caste equality. Nirguna saints like Ravidas and Kabir inspired Dalits,

especially in urban areas, promising social equality and salvation. Fuller notes the movement reinterpreted devotionalism as egalitarianism, laying a foundation for Dalit protest against orthodox Hinduism.

Neo-Vedantik Movements

Initiated by Hindu reformers, these movements aimed to remove untouchability while keeping Dalits within the caste framework. Dayanand Saraswati of Arya Samaj believed caste was a political, not religious, construct, with social mobility based on merit. Movements like Satyashodhak Samaj (Maharashtra), Self-Respect Movement (Tamil Nadu), Adi Dharma (Bengal), and Adi-Hindu (Uttar Pradesh) emerged. Adi-Hindu leaders viewed Hinduism as imposed by Aryans, claiming indigenous roots without directly attacking caste. Dalits began identifying as Adi-Andhras, Adi-Karnatakas, Adi-Dravidas, and so on, with conversion as a means to escape untouchability.

Sanskritisation Movement

M.N. Srinivas defined Sanskritisation as the adoption of upper-caste customs by lower castes. Dalit leaders like Swami Thykkad, Muldas Vaishya, and others adopted Brahmanic practices (vegetarianism, sacred thread, rituals) to elevate their status. This was seen as an assertion of equality. Many were drawn to Arya Samaj, Brahmo Samaj, and Mahanubhav sects. Organized Dalit movements emerged in the 1920s across regions: Adi-Dharm (Punjab), Ambedkar's Mahar movement (Maharashtra), Namashudra (Bengal), Adi-Dravida (Tamil Nadu), and others. Ambedkar had earlier explained this imitation in his *Castes in India* (1916), arguing caste formation stemmed from emulation of Brahmins by lower castes.

Gandhi's Contribution to Dalit Movement

Gandhi, influenced by his South Africa experience, regarded untouchability as inhuman and emphasized its removal. He viewed uplifting Harijans as essential to national reconstruction. In 1932, while in jail, he founded the Harijan Sevak Sangh to work for Dalit upliftment, separate from the Congress.

Ambedkar's Contribution to Dalit Movement

Ambedkar launched Bahiskrit Bharat (1927) and Janta (1930), and formed Samaj Samta Sang to promote caste equality. He supported inter-caste dining and marriage, and led the 1927 Mahad Satyagraha to access Chavadar Tank, winning the case in 1937. He also led a temple entry movement in Nasik (1930–34). As a member of the Governor General's Executive Council (1942–46), he founded the Scheduled Castes Federation

and advocated for education, employment, and reservation for Dalits using government resources (Nanda, M. 2020).

Bhim Army: A Contemporary Dalit Rights Movement

The Bhim Army, founded in 2015 by Chandrashekhar Azad, Vinay Ratan Singh, and Satish Kumar in Uttar Pradesh, is a Dalit rights organization rooted in Ambedkarite ideology. It emerged to combat caste-based discrimination and uphold the constitutional rights of Dalits, Adivasis, OBCs, and Muslims. Known for its assertive and direct-action approach, the organization gained prominence by intervening in cases of caste violence and defending Dalit dignity, particularly in the Saharanpur region. Bhim Army runs over 350 free schools for Dalit and Muslim children, emphasizing education as a tool of empowerment. It aims to unite marginalized communities under the Bahujan identity and actively challenges caste hierarchy, communal politics, and the ideology of Manuvada. In 2020, Bhim Army transitioned into electoral politics to expand its influence, with Chandrashekhar Azad emerging as a key youth leader. The group strongly opposed the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and played a leading role in anti-CAA protests. Committed to social justice, equality, and constitutional values, the Bhim Army continues the legacy of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar by combining grassroots activism with political engagement, advocating for the rights and dignity of historically oppressed communities in India (Bhim Army Bharat Ekta Mission. 2025).

National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR)

The National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR), established in 1998, is a coalition of Dalit rights activists and human rights defenders working to eliminate caste-based discrimination in India. Based in New Delhi, NCDHR operates across various states through its four main campaigns Dalit Arthik Adhikar Andolan (DAAA), All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch (AIDMAM), National Federation of Dalit Land Rights Movements (NFDLRM), and National Dalit Movement for Justice (NDMJ). Each strand focuses respectively on economic justice, women's rights, land rights, and legal justice for Dalit communities. NCDHR seeks to expose institutional failures in implementing the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act and holds the Indian state accountable for caste-based human rights violations. Its activism ranges from advocacy and litigation to policy monitoring and budget analysis, notably through DAAA's work on the Dalit Adivasi Budget Analysis and gender-responsive budgeting for Dalit women. NCDHR also established the National Dalit Watch following discriminatory responses during natural disasters. Internationally recognized for its work, NCDHR received the Rafto Prize in 2007 and continues to collaborate with global bodies like the UN and

International Dalit Solidarity Network, making it a cornerstone of the contemporary Dalit rights movement in India. (Dhankhar, G. 2022).

Ambedkar Students' Association (ASA)

The Ambedkar Students' Association (ASA) was founded in 1993 at the University of Hyderabad (UoH) as a response to caste-based discrimination and marginalization faced by Dalit students on campus. Rooted in the legacy of Telangana's socio-political struggles and inspired by national anti-caste movements, ASA emerged from the need for a dedicated platform to address the exclusion of Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) students from mainstream student politics and university administration. Before ASA's formation, student groups like the Progressive Students Forum (PSF) failed to adequately represent Dalit concerns. Dalit students were often reduced to foot soldiers in these groups, prompting the need for their own independent voice. ASA was influenced by incidents of caste violence such as the Karamchedu and Tsundururu massacres and aimed to challenge caste hegemony within the university. Dalit students faced discrimination from admission to academics, often labeled as "quota students" and stereotyped as undeserving. Social exclusion was common many faced humiliation in mess halls and classrooms, reinforcing caste hierarchies. ASA's formation marked a radical assertion of dignity, rights, and Ambedkarite values, and it became a pivotal force in challenging institutional casteism and empowering marginalized students within the university space (Sannaki, M. 2021).

Dalit-Bahujan Student Movements:

Dalit-Bahujan student movements have emerged as powerful spaces of resistance within Indian universities, especially after the 1990s. Inspired by the legacies of Ambedkar, Phule, Shahu, and Birsa, these movements challenge Brahminical dominance and caste-based exclusion in higher education. Organizations like the United Dalit Student Forum (UDSF) and Birsa Ambedkar Phule Students' Association (BAPSA) created a political and ideological shift, enabling Dalit-Bahujan students to assert their rights and identities. Following Rohith Vemula's institutional murder, there was a surge in collective assertion, forcing even leftist groups to acknowledge Ambedkarite ideals. These student groups now advocate for social justice, equality, and annihilation of caste. Leaders envision themselves as future representatives of the broader Dalit-Bahujan movement and stress the need for unity, ideological clarity, and sustained participation. Despite facing political suppression and discrimination, Dalit-Bahujan student organizations continue to grow as a transformative force against caste hegemony in academic and public spaces (Mahananda, A. 2023).

4. CONTEMPORARY MOVEMENTS FOR TRIBAL EMPOWERMENT

The history of tribal protest movements in India is deeply intertwined with the forests; their traditional habitat marked by deforestation, depletion of natural resources, and forced displacement. While multiple factors have contributed to tribal unrest, two primary drivers can be identified: (i) the onset of large-scale deforestation during the colonial period, and (ii) post-independence developmental policies implemented by successive Indian governments.

Among the most significant of these struggles was the resistance to the Narmada River Valley Project. Conceived in the 1950s, this inter-state development plan proposed the construction of 30 major, 135 medium, and approximately 3,000 minor dams across the Narmada and its tributaries. The most contentious component of the project was the Sardar Sarovar Dam, which threatened to displace thousands of tribal families. The project raised critical concerns about displacement, environmental degradation, and the lack of public participation in decision-making (Sangvi, 2002).

Several grassroots organizations emerged to challenge the project, including the Narmada Dharmagrastha Samiti (NDS), Khedut Mazdoor Chetna Sangathan (KMCS), Narmada Asargrasta Sangharsha Samiti (NASS), and Lok Adhikar Sangh (LAS). These groups mobilized tribal communities to assert their rights to land, information, livelihood, and self-determination. Their activism succeeded in halting construction at various phases and brought national and international attention to the issue. The resistance movements also achieved key victories in Madhya Pradesh, where displaced communities successfully demanded their rights.

Niyamgiri Movement (Odisha)

One notable instance of tribal resistance based on ecological and cultural principles is the Niyamgiri movement. The agitation, led by the Dongria Kondh tribe of Odisha, was against Vedanta Resources' proposed bauxite mining project in the revered Niyamgiri Hills. The movement blended legal procedures under the Forest Rights Act (2006) with ancient religious beliefs, according to which the hills are revered as Niyam Raja, the mountain god. Tribal groups now have the authority to determine the future of the project after the Supreme Court of India ordered the holding of Gram Sabha hearings in 2013. Vedanta's project was canceled as a result of a majority vote against mining in all twelve communities. Since then, the Niyamgiri movement has grown to become a worldwide representation of tribal communities' rights and indigenous environmental justice (Padel & Das, 2010).

Pathalgadi Movement of Jharkhand

This campaign, which has gained traction since 2017, involves tribal groups constructing stone slabs (pathalgadi) marked with constitutional articles ensuring tribal autonomy. It reflects a decentralised declaration of tribal self-government under the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution and the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) of 1996. Though contentious, it demonstrates increased tribal awareness of legal rights and autonomy (Areeparampil, 2018).

Bodoland Movement (Assam)

In order to maintain their linguistic, cultural, and territorial identity, the Bodo tribe in Assam has been claiming autonomy through the Bodoland movement, which is a persistent political and ethnic statement. The Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) was established under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution as a result of the movement, which witnessed both militant and democratic stages starting in the 1980s. The Bodo Peace Accord, which established the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) with expanded legislative and administrative authority, was signed in January 2020 as the culmination of the movement. The movement is noteworthy for its emphasis on ethnic self-determination as well as for showing how long-standing tribal issues may be resolved through negotiated political settlements. It draws attention to how tribal movements have changed subnational administration within Indian federal system.

Sarna Dharma Recognition Movement

Tribal groups in Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh are spearheading an ongoing cultural-religious campaign called the Sarna Dharma recognition movement, which calls for the official inclusion of the Sarna faith in the national census. Sarna adherents contend that their beliefs are different from those of other major religions, such as Hinduism, because they customarily venerate the natural world, sacred groves and ancestor spirits. The fear of cultural absorption and the elimination of Adivasi identity is the driving force behind the call for a distinct religious code. The legal and political basis for tribal rights is weakened by the lack of recognition, according to tribal leaders and activists, who also argue that the constitutional guarantee of cultural preservation is compromised. It affirms that religious freedom encompasses the freedom to define one's belief system outside of the prevailing religious categories and is part of a larger movement for cultural self-determination.

Educational Empowerment and Adivasi Youth Collectives

With increased access to formal education, Adivasi youth are increasingly forming student groups and youth collectives to address the systemic issues they experience in academic and social settings. These include prejudice in educational institutions, low representation in higher education and the loss of cultural identity. These collectives, which are typically technologically equipped and founded in intersectional viewpoints, are redefining tribal engagement by combining indigenous identity with larger efforts for social justice, decolonized curricula, and democratic participation. Their advocacy symbolizes a new era of tribal political consciousness, emphasizing autonomy in knowledge systems, public discourse and institutional reform (Xaxa, 2021).

5. TRAJECTORY OF DALIT AND TRIBAL MOVEMENTS IN POST-INDEPENDENCE INDIA

The Dalit movement initially focused on securing dignity and justice through human rights assertion. Dalits sought temple entry to assert their equal rights denied by untouchability. The Mahad Temple Entry Satyagraha, Nasik Kalaram Mandir Satyagraha and Parwati Temple Entry in Poona were examples of these struggles. Dalit identity was also asserted outside Brahmanism by rediscovering Dalit history and egalitarian culture. This was reflected in adi movements ‘adi-Dharam’ in Punjab, ‘adi-Dravida’, ‘adi-Andhra’, and ‘adi-Kannada’ in South India claiming Dalits as original inhabitants of India. In Uttar Pradesh, groups like Mehtars and Chamars claimed Buddhist identity, questioning caste discrimination. In the South, Iyoti Thass initiated Buddhist conversions among untouchables in the 1870s. Later, the Dalit movement embraced modern secular ideas of justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity. Ambedkar critiqued Brahmanism and Chaturvanya using the language of rights. His reconstruction of Buddhism emphasized social justice and reason, with the Sangha reflecting democratic values. Through the Independent Labour Party, he addressed Dalits, marginalized peasantry, and unorganized workers. This legacy was revived in the 1970s by Dalit Panthers, inspired by Black Panthers in America. They radicalized Dalit politics and culture, broadened the term “Dalit” to include untouchables, landless laborers, urban working class, and women.

Tribal movements in India have historically been a significant part of resistance against oppression, displacement, and marginalization. These movements are deeply rooted in the socio-economic and cultural realities of the tribal communities, who have faced continuous threats to their land, resources, and identity both during colonial rule and post-independence.

While tribal groups across India share some common concerns, the specific triggers and trajectories of their movements often differ based on regional contexts, cultural practices, and the nature of external interventions. The primary causes of tribal uprisings were deeply connected to issues of land alienation, curbs on traditional livelihoods, economic exploitation, and the intrusion of external forces such as colonial administrators, moneylenders, traders, and missionaries. The imposition of colonial forest laws restricted access to forests, which were crucial for tribal sustenance through shifting cultivation, hunting, and gathering. The influx of non-tribal settlers and the exploitative zamindari system further aggravated the discontent among tribal populations (Raj, 2023).

Several significant tribal movements occurred during colonial times, setting the foundation for tribal consciousness and resistance in post-independence India. For instance, the Santhal Rebellion (1855-56) was a massive uprising against the oppressive zamindari system and British authorities. Led by Sidhu and Kanhu, the Santhals declared their area autonomous before the rebellion was brutally suppressed. Similarly, the Munda Ulgulan (1899-1900), under the leadership of Birsa Munda, was a pivotal movement aiming to resist the feudal zamindari system and colonial exploitation, while also striving for a revival of the tribal socio-religious order. Other significant uprisings included the Kol Mutiny (1831) in Chota Nagpur against land dispossession and exploitation by moneylenders and outsiders, the Bhil Revolts (1817-1819) in the Western Ghats over famine and misrule, and the Khasi Uprising (1829-1833) in the northeastern hills resisting British attempts to build roads through their territories (Raj, 2023). These movements were not merely economic or political in nature but also had cultural and religious dimensions. The advent of Christian missionaries, viewed by many tribes as an extension of colonial control, further fueled resistance. The British undermined traditional tribal leadership and governance structures, replacing them with formal administrative systems that disregarded tribal customs and land rights.

Post-independence, while India adopted constitutional provisions to safeguard tribal interests, including the Fifth and Sixth Schedules, the challenges persisted. Land alienation continued due to industrialization, mining, and large infrastructure projects like dams, often leading to displacement without adequate rehabilitation. These challenges gave rise to new forms of tribal mobilization, including demands for autonomy, protection of land rights, forest rights, and political representation.

Tribal movements in independent India have also been linked to the demand for separate states or autonomous councils. For example, the formation of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Uttarakhand was significantly

driven by tribal movements seeking greater control over their land and resources. Additionally, forest-based movements like the Forest Satyagraha in the 1930s and later the struggles related to the implementation of the Forest Rights Act, 2006, reflect the ongoing resistance of tribal communities against state policies perceived as exploitative or exclusionary. Tribal movements in India, both historical and contemporary, reflect a continuous struggle for dignity, autonomy, and survival. While the forms and strategies of these movements have evolved over time, the underlying issues of dispossession, cultural erosion, and marginalization remain persistent. These movements are not just resistances but are assertions of tribal identity, self-governance, and a vision for equitable and sustainable development (Raj, P. 2023).

6. OUTCOMES OF MOVEMENTS: MILESTONES AND CONTINUING CHALLENGES

The government has introduced constitutional provisions, legislation, and policy frameworks to address such discrimination. Between 1980 and 1996, Dalit rights gained traction through the support of grassroots organizations such as Movement Education Trust and Volunteer Agencies in Service to India's Oppressed and Neglected (VISION). Dalit concerns gained visibility in mainstream politics and academic discourse. Scholars were compelled to critically reassess Indian traditions, culture, and ideologies, including modernity and Marxism. The movement debunked several myths upheld by Brahmanical ideology and exerted considerable pressure on the ruling classes. Dalits are also entitled to certain safeguards under the Indian Constitution. Ambedkar highlighted the importance of education as a viable tool for enacting social change and promoting a life of dignity. He executed by establishing schools in Bombay (modern-day Mumbai) and then an institutional campus in Aurangabad (Nagsenvan). These were the leading centers of education throughout his lifetime.

The UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) chastised India in 1996 for not guaranteeing the protection of Dalit human rights, which heightened awareness of Dalit rights around the world. In response, international NGOs like Human Rights Watch published studies like *Broken People* (1997) that brought attention to the horrors that Dalits had to endure. The International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) was established in 2000 with the goal of educating people about caste oppression on a national and worldwide scale. Caste-based discrimination was further elevated in the global discourse by the Goonesekere Report, which reframed it as a transgression based on "work and descent" rather than religious conviction. This contributed to the international conversation about caste-based discrimination as a human rights issue.

Despite reservation policies improving Dalit access to education and public employment, social inclusion remains largely unfulfilled. Dalits continue to face systemic exclusion from various sectors of social life, both in status and economic opportunities. While they have raised awareness about their oppression, caste discrimination continues as a normalized reality in everyday life.

7. STRATEGIES ADOPTED BY CIVIL SOCIETY MOVEMENTS

The Dalit movement in the 1930s saw a shift from temple-entry satyagrahas to right to education, employment and political representation as necessary prerequisites for securing justice. In Ambedkar emphasized the need of education as a potential means of bringing about social transformation and a dignified existence. In order to accomplish this, he founded a People's Education Society, which established schools in Bombay (present-day Mumbai) and, subsequently, an institutional campus in Aurangabad (Nagsenvan). During his lifetime, these establishments were the top educational hubs. They drew enthusiastic pupils and the greatest teachers. The educated youth who were to work for the government were trained as a result of these efforts. 'Asmitadarsha', a literary movement, was subsequently to emerge from the campus of the People's Education (PE) Society in Marathwada. Of course, because of the careless and ineffective governance, PE society's heyday has long since faded (Khan 2007). Despite later splits, the movement produced powerful literature depicting pain and resistance. It inspired similar movements in Gujarat, Karnataka, and recently in Tamil Nadu (Gorringer, 2005).

Rights-based Advocacy and Legal Empowerment

Civil society movements often adopt rights-based advocacy to empower marginalized communities by making them aware of their legal and constitutional rights. This approach emphasizes the use of laws, policies, and human rights frameworks to demand justice and accountability from the state and other power holders. Legal empowerment includes educating communities about their rights, facilitating access to legal aid, and challenging unjust laws and practices through petitions, public interest litigations and policy interventions. Such strategies have been crucial in advancing the rights of tribal communities, women, children and other vulnerable groups.

Use of Media, Art, Digital Activism and Protest

Modern civil society movements increasingly leverage traditional and digital media, art forms and creative expressions to amplify their causes. Protest songs, street theatre, visual art and documentaries are used to

narrate the lived experiences of marginalized groups and mobilize public support. Additionally, social media platforms have become powerful tools for digital activism, enabling campaigns to go viral, influence public discourse and pressure policymakers. Peaceful protests, rallies and online petitions complement these efforts, making the movement more visible and impactful.

Community Organization, Capacity Building and Alliance Formation

Grassroots mobilization is central to the success of civil society movements. By organizing communities, movements foster local leadership and collective action. Capacity building involves training community members in advocacy, negotiation, legal literacy and organizational skills, empowering them to engage with governance structures effectively. Furthermore, building alliances with other civil society organizations, academic institutions, media and sympathetic political actors creates a broader coalition that enhances the movement's influence and sustainability. This collaborative approach strengthens solidarity across various social justice causes.

International Advocacy (UN Forums), and Public Campaigns

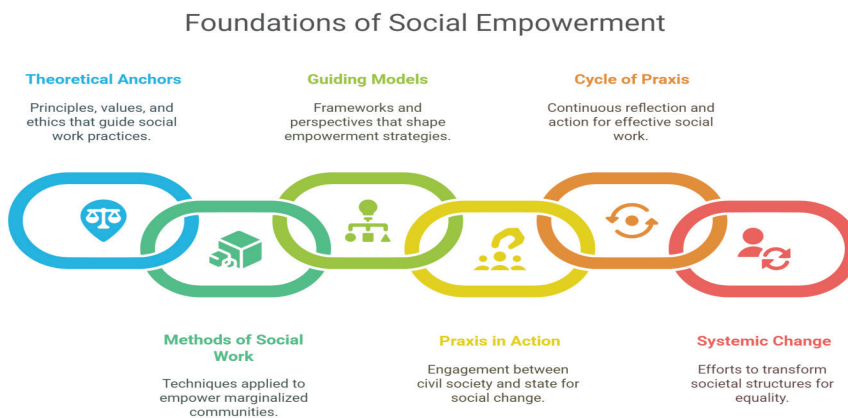
Strategic litigation is often used to bring systemic issues before courts, leading to landmark judgments that drive policy changes and protect rights. Civil society also engages in international advocacy by participating in UN forums, submitting shadow reports and highlighting human rights violations on global platforms to apply international pressure on governments. Public campaigns, including awareness drives, signature campaigns and nationwide movements, help in mobilizing widespread support and placing issues like environmental justice, gender equality and tribal rights at the forefront of national and international agendas.

8. PRAXIS FRAMEWORK FOR DALIT AND TRIBAL SOCIAL WORK

Dalit and Tribal Social Work refers to a specialized, emancipatory practice framework grounded in the principles of human rights, social justice and culturally sensitive interventions aimed at addressing the historical injustices and systemic exclusion faced by Dalit and tribal communities in India. These groups oppressed by caste hierarchies and colonial dispossession face barriers to dignity, development and participation in mainstream society. The aim of Dalit and Tribal Social Work is not just welfare or service delivery but social transformation rooted in empowerment and liberation.

This aligns with the **global definition of social work** (IFSW, 2014), which sees social work as *a practice-based profession and academic discipline that promotes social change, development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people*. The profession is underpinned by theories from social sciences and indigenous knowledge systems and engages with people and structures to enhance well-being. (Truell, R. 2014).

Core Components of the Praxis Framework



Theoretical Anchors: Principles, Values, and Code of Ethics

At the heart of this framework are the six **core values** of social work, as outlined by NASW: **Service**: Reaching out to marginalized communities with compassion. **Social Justice**: Challenging caste and ethnic injustices and advocating for structural change. **Dignity and Worth of the Person**: Recognizing the intrinsic worth of every Dalit and tribal individual. **Importance of Human Relationships**: Strengthening community bonds and collective action. **Integrity**: Ensuring trust, accountability and ethical practice in all interventions. **Competence**: Culturally informed, evidence-based and context-specific interventions.

These values are expressed through **ethical principles** like challenging social injustice, respecting diversity and practicing with competence and integrity. This becomes particularly important in addressing issues of caste-based violence, land alienation, displacement and educational exclusion (National Association of Social Workers, 2021).

Methods of Social Work Applied to Dalit and Tribal Empowerment

The praxis framework draws comprehensively from all six core methods of social work, integrating them in a cohesive and meaningful manner to address the challenges faced by Dalit and tribal communities. **Social**

Case Work involves providing individualized interventions to support those affected by atrocities, mental health issues, or substance abuse, which are prevalent in marginalized tribal belts and Dalit ghettos. **Social Group Work** focuses on forming self-help groups (SHGs), youth clubs and community collectives to foster solidarity, leadership and mutual support, which are essential for empowering these communities and amplifying their voices. **Community Organization** plays a critical role in mobilizing people to assert their rights such as forest rights, land rights and the right to education while incorporating indigenous knowledge systems and collective wisdom for sustainable development. **Social Action** is demonstrated through advocacy, public interest litigations (PILs), protests and awareness campaigns aimed at combating systemic injustice; movements like Dalit Panthers, the Pathalgadi movement and various forest rights struggles are prime examples of this method in action. **Social Work Research** serves as the backbone of evidence-based advocacy, enabling practitioners to map socio-economic realities and develop context-specific interventions that influence policies and practices in favor of marginalized groups. Finally, **Social Welfare Administration** ensures the efficient management and implementation of welfare schemes such as the Forest Rights Act (FRA), Scheduled Caste Sub-Plan (SCSP), Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP), and Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTG) development initiatives, thereby promoting accountability, transparency, and inclusivity in governance (Thomas, G. 2019).

Guiding Models and Perspectives

This framework is grounded in several interrelated models that guide its application. The **Rights-Based Approach** emphasizes that development is not an act of charity but a fundamental matter of justice, aligning social work practice with the Constitutional mandates of Fundamental Rights, such as Articles 15 (prohibition of discrimination), 17 (abolition of untouchability), 19 (freedom of expression) and 21 (right to life with dignity) alongside the Directive Principles of State Policy outlined in Articles 38, 39 and 46. A **Culturally Sensitive Practice** ensures deep respect for Adivasi and Dalit ways of life, including their oral traditions, knowledge systems and belief structures, while consciously avoiding the imposition of mainstream, top-down models of development. The **Empowerment-Oriented Practice** seeks to nurture individual and collective agency, foster critical awareness and strengthen the community's capacity to advocate for its rights and interests. Applying a **Justice and Equality Lens**, this framework addresses the deep-rooted structural causes of marginalization such as caste discrimination, patriarchy, forced displacement and the historical criminalization of tribal communities. Finally, the principle

of **Inclusive Development** aims to secure equitable access to quality education, healthcare, sustainable livelihoods and meaningful participation in governance and decision-making processes, ensuring that no one is left behind.

Praxis in Action: Civil Society and State Engagement

Dalit and tribal social work praxis must function at the critical intersection of civil society movements, government welfare initiatives and the lived aspirations of marginalized communities. A core element involves leveraging government schemes to drive inclusive development. This includes tapping into targeted initiatives such as the Scheduled Caste Sub Plan (SCSP) and Tribal Sub Plan (TSP), along with key legislations like the Forest Rights Act (FRA), Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) and employment guarantees through Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). Education and livelihood programs like Ekalavya Model Residential Schools, Vanbandhu Kalyan Yojana, Stand-Up India, National Safai Karamcharis Finance & Development Corporation (NSKFDC) and TRIFED further support community advancement. Equally important is active engagement with civil society movements, which includes participating in Dalit-led struggles such as the Ambedkarite movements, Bahujan social justice campaigns and initiatives to end manual scavenging, alongside Adivasi resistance movements like the Niyamgiri agitation, POSCO protests, the Pathalgadi movement, and other land and resource rights campaigns. Additionally, youth-driven efforts are playing an increasing role in promoting tribal education, entrepreneurship and the revival of indigenous culture. A vital component of this praxis is fostering Constitutional literacy, empowering communities with knowledge of their legal rights and entitlements through tools like legal literacy camps, training community-based paralegals, and utilizing mechanisms such as the Right to Information (RTI) to hold institutions accountable and claim justice.

The Cycle of Praxis: Reflection and Action

The praxis framework should be grounded in Paulo Freire’s dialectical approach of “action-reflection-action,” which emphasizes continuous learning and transformation. Social workers must begin by listening to and learning from community narratives, understanding their lived experiences, histories and aspirations. This is followed by critical reflection on the structural barriers such as caste oppression, land alienation or systemic discrimination that hinder community empowerment. Equipped with this understanding, practitioners can then strategically plan interventions using participatory tools that prioritize community voices

and collective decision-making. The next step involves acting collectively; whether through community mobilization, advocacy or delivering essential services that address immediate and long-term needs. Importantly, the process does not end with action; it requires continuous evaluation and adaptation, ensuring that interventions evolve in response to community feedback and changing contexts. This cyclical model guarantees that the social work practice remains dynamic, participatory and deeply rooted in both community agency and the pursuit of systemic transformation.

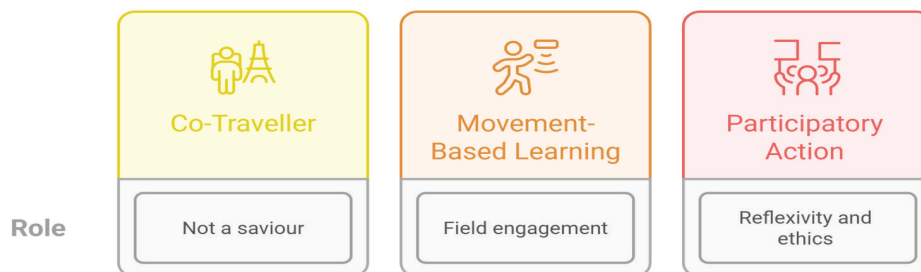
Towards Systemic Change

The ultimate aim of Dalit and tribal social work is to drive systemic change by transforming exclusion into participation, dependency into autonomy and marginalization into leadership. Social workers must collaborate with grassroots movements, academic institutions and policy frameworks to amplify the voices of marginalized communities and dismantle oppressive structures. A key focus is fostering leadership from within these communities by nurturing and empowering a cadre of Dalit and Adivasi social workers who can serve their own people with pride and strength. The Praxis Framework for Dalit and Tribal Social Work embodies a holistic, rights-based, participatory and contextually grounded approach tailored to the Indian context. While rooted in global social work values, it remains deeply aligned with the lived realities of Dalit and tribal communities in India. This framework calls for a renewed commitment to creating an inclusive and equitable society by confronting structural violence, enhancing community agency and ensuring spaces for dignity, justice and sustainable empowerment.

9. ROLE OF SOCIAL WORK IN EMPOWERING DALIT AND TRIBAL COMMUNITIES

The professional field of social work holds a pivotal responsibility in advancing the rights, dignity and self-determination of Dalit and tribal communities in India. These communities have historically faced entrenched marginalization rooted in caste hierarchies, colonial displacement and socio-economic exclusion. Despite constitutional safeguards and progressive policies, Dalits and tribals continue to confront systemic barriers such as caste-based discrimination, land alienation, poverty, inadequate access to education and healthcare and political underrepresentation. From a professional standpoint, social work must adopt a transformative approach that goes beyond service delivery and aims for structural change. This requires a shift in posture, methods and values centering solidarity, empowerment and justice. Several interrelated aspects define this evolving role of professional social work:

Social Work Values



1. Social Worker as a Co-Traveller, Not a Saviour

A critical paradigm shift in contemporary social work with Dalit and tribal communities is the reimagining of the social worker's role not as a rescuer or authority figure, but as a **co-traveller** who walks alongside the community. This framework challenges the hierarchical and paternalistic model of intervention and encourages a shared journey of transformation. It involves:

- **Listening more than prescribing:** True empowerment begins with understanding the lived experiences and perspectives of the community rather than imposing external solutions.
- **Valuing indigenous knowledge systems:** Tribal and Dalit communities possess rich cultural knowledge, survival strategies and moral worldviews that are often overlooked or undermined. Social workers must recognize and learn from these assets.
- **Learning from movement history:** Engagement with the legacy of social movements such as the Ambedkarite, Bhakti and tribal rights movements helps ground practice in historically rooted struggles for justice.
- **Sharing space, leadership, and decisions:** Professional practice must promote collaborative processes where leadership and ownership remain with the community.

This co-traveller stance fosters humility, mutual respect, and trust—qualities essential for long-term, sustainable empowerment.

2. Movement-Based Learning and Field Engagement

Professional social work education and practice must be deeply connected with **movement-based learning**, wherein students and practitioners actively engage with ongoing struggles and campaigns. This approach enriches both knowledge and action through real-time, grassroots exposure. It enables:

- **Understanding ground realities:** By working within movements or in collaboration with community-led initiatives, social workers gain nuanced insight into the socio-political dynamics affecting marginalized groups.
- **Building empathy and political awareness:** Direct interaction with injustice fosters deeper emotional connection and critical consciousness beyond theoretical or institutional knowledge.
- **Translating academic concepts into real-world action:** Field engagement allows practitioners to apply methods of social work like community organization, advocacy and policy practice within authentic contexts of resistance and change.

This experiential pedagogy aligns well with the core values of the profession: service, social justice, dignity, and the importance of human relationships.

3. Participatory Action, Reflexivity, and Ethics

The empowerment of Dalit and tribal communities cannot be achieved through top-down interventions. It requires **participatory approaches**, where community members are active agents in the change process. Professional social work practice must therefore be grounded in:

- **Participatory action:** Designing and implementing programs **with** the community rather than **for** them. This involves joint needs assessments, shared decision-making and collective evaluation.
- **Reflexivity:** Social workers must continuously reflect on their own social locations, biases and institutional affiliations. Questions such as “*Whose side am I on?*” and “*How does my identity influence this relationship?*” are central to ethical practice.
- **Ethical engagement with power and institutions:** In working with the state, NGOs, or other structures, social workers must maintain critical awareness of their role. Navigating dilemmas such as choosing between neutrality and justice in caste conflicts or balancing community traditions with human rights requires a principled stance.
- **Respect for self-determination:** Upholding the right of communities to define their own paths, priorities, and identities is fundamental. Consent, transparency, and cultural sensitivity are non-negotiable.

In this context, the **Code of Ethics** becomes not just a professional guideline but a moral compass, ensuring that social work does not replicate the very power imbalances it seeks to dismantle. The role of professional social work in empowering Dalit and tribal communities is inherently political, ethical and participatory. It calls for practitioners to act not as

saviours, but as **co-creators of justice** deeply embedded in the community's journey toward dignity, rights, and self-reliance. By grounding practice in historical movements, embracing field-based engagement, practicing participatory methods and upholding ethical responsibility, social workers can meaningfully contribute to systemic transformation.

The profession must continuously evolve learning from the struggles of the marginalized, challenging oppressive structures and reaffirming its commitment to equity and human dignity. Only then can social work fulfill its true promise as a force for collective empowerment and social change in the lives of Dalits and tribals across India.

10. CONCLUSION

This chapter critically examines the socio-political realities of Dalit and tribal communities in India and traces the contributions of contemporary and historical movements from the Bhakti tradition to Ambedkarite and Gandhian philosophies to their empowerment. These movements underscore the enduring role of **civil society** in shaping a more just, egalitarian India. The chapter further introduced a practice framework grounded in rights-based, participatory and ethically engaged social work, where the practitioner is envisioned as a **co-traveller** in the journey toward justice. As we move toward the vision of *Viksit Bharat 2047*, empowering Dalit and tribal communities is not just a moral or professional responsibility it is essential to nation-building. Social workers must actively work to dismantle systemic exclusion and ensure these communities are not merely recipients but active participants in the democratic process. This calls for a **reimagining of social work education and practice** infusing it with movement-based learning, critical consciousness, and ethical solidarity. Ultimately, professional social work must stand in **solidarity** with marginalized voices, practice **critical reflexivity** and embrace **transformative praxis** that bridges theory with action. In doing so, it can lead the charge in mainstreaming Dalits and tribals into the fabric of a just and inclusive India.

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