

# Positioning Structural Social Work in Indian Context

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# Positioning structural social work in Indian context

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## Abstract

Postmodern ideologies and human rights movements in the last quarter of the 20th century contributed to the development of a critical, radical approach in social work practice and education in North America. This ‘structural social work’ approach argues that social problems are largely the result of oppressive social structures, not individual deficiencies. Social workers are ethically obligated to change oppressive structures rather than simply helping clients to adjust to them. Structural social work, a transformative approach, can benefit Indian society. This article discusses introducing ‘structural social work’ into an Indian social work context and proposes a framework for its practice.

## Keywords

India, power, practice, privilege, structural, social work

## Introduction

In this article, we will look at *structural social work* as a theoretical framework and practice that emerged late in the 20th century to address the underlying social issues of marginalization and inequality as a result of systemic power imbalance. The underlying premise is that social work and social workers are uniquely placed to bring about social equality by recognizing the intersectionality of structural oppressions and utilizing the practices of radical humanism and radical structuralism. This article will provide a general overview of structural social work, its theoretical premise

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and practice application, and then look at where and how it may be applied in an Indian context to bring about transformative social change.

The roots of social work can be found in the work of ‘friendly visitors’ and ‘settlement houses’ of England, emerging from the societal upheaval that resulted from industrialization. Over the decades, social work developed and evolved in many countries as a structured profession, underpinned by codes of ethics and standards of practice. The international definition of social work (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2020) states that social work promotes social change and development, social cohesion and the empowerment and liberation of people. Social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. Critics of social work, both inside and outside of the profession, have stated that social workers’ commitment to social justice in practice is limited and therefore it is a tool used to maintain the status quo (Lotz, 1997; McDonald, 2006). It assumes that deep change is only required of the individual and not of the system or environment. Moreau (1979) argues that traditional social work, based on a medical model, is largely non-political and encourages people to adapt to their environment, to embrace the status quo. Social work has been primarily dominated by theories and ideology which hung around objective decision-making focused on the dyad of worker and client (Weinberg, 2008). For example, should an individual or family fail to thrive or address their problem, it is usually presented that the fault lies with the individual or the family – rarely is there an expectation that the environment (socioeconomic and/or political) needs to change.

Critical theory provides criticism and alternatives to traditional, mainstream theories in social sciences and social work practice. Kellner (1990) states that critical theory is motivated by an interest of those who are oppressed, is informed by a critique of domination, and is driven by the goal of liberation. Conventional social work operates within existing social institutions to assist individuals to adjust and adapt to the status quo. In contrast, critical social works maintains that existing social institutions cannot adequately meet human needs and instead work towards fundamental structural transformation (Mullaly, 1997). Structural social work, based on critical theory, follows a Marxist perspective and seeks to dismantle colonialist, patriarchal and capitalist domination, and focuses on contributing to a welfare and egalitarian state (Abramovitz, 1998). It focuses on how societal structures contribute to oppression of people and how social work should work on bringing changes in the unequal social structures to alleviate social problems.

## Understanding structural social work

Structural social work, a progressive approach and practice method, was developed during the 1970s. Coming under the umbrella of critical theory, this critical (progressive) approach in social work questions current systems and structures, identifies barriers and oppressive policy and advocates for change. It posits that social problems are not caused by deficits in communication between individuals and systems (as some theories suggest) or by an individual’s lack of personal fit and adaptability to the context, but by differential access to power and conflict between systems (Fook, 2015; Moreau, 1979).

The term ‘structural social work’ was first used by Middleman and Goldberg in their 1974 publication *Social service delivery: The structural approach to social work practice* (Mullaly and Dupre, 2019). In 1979, Maurice Moreau, a Canadian social worker, published an article, *A structural approach to social work practice*, expanding the idea of structural social work drawing specific attention to shifting service users’ consciousness/understanding of their situation and its relationship to the broader/structural context. Progressive social workers also employ a radical structural approach – developing their understanding of social, economic and political structures that create groups of marginalized peoples and maintain oppression (Mullaly, 2007). Structural

theory adds an important corrective by recognizing the gaps of context, power and unequal access to resources, and provides broader frames of reference for social work practice. In addition to working with people, it calls for fundamental changes in social structures which require a longer timeline for change than many of the clinical approaches followed in traditional/mainstream social work. 'Social structure' in this article refers to the social (e.g. gender roles), economic (e.g. capitalism), political (e.g. conservative or left ideologies), and cultural (e.g. caste system) systems (along with others) that influence and define our lives. Systems, which include such things as programmes, resources and their access, may have intentional and unintentional exploitative elements in them, discriminating and oppressing various groups of people. These structures and systems are socially constructed and passed down through generations (Gergen, 1999); however, because they are socially constructed, they are not impervious to change by the same society (Wood and Tully, 2006). This forms one of the bases of structural social work practice: progressive social workers believe the oppressive structures in society need to be changed; and as they are socially constructed 'they can be deconstructed and reconstructed' (Wood and Tully, 2006: 17). Structural social work proposes a framework for social work practice to work with social structures, while taking care of the needs of the clients.

Modernist and postmodernist thoughts have contributed to the formulation and understanding of structural social work. Modernist theories, meta-narratives about history, progress, and human beings, for example, moved society away from ignorance or a superstitious understanding of the world to a scientific, rational one; these theories were used to overthrow the previous dominant structures and were seen to liberate people as a result. As the world moved forward, many of the 'truths' (meta-narratives) put forward and used as rationale by those in power began to be critiqued by philosophers – Nietzsche and Foucault, for example. Postmodern theories began to evolve and gain strength, with postmodern philosophers and theorists suggesting that different realities exist at any time, instead of believing in a single reality derived from a single rationality, and those realities are continuously defined and redefined by different actors in different contexts (Harvey, 1990; Ife, 1997; Irving, 1999). The experiences of those living these differing realities challenge the policies and practices that emerge from meta-narratives about economics, social, and human development. These are experienced differently by different people at different times in different places. For example, poverty will be experienced differently by a young, Black, single mother than a middle-aged, White, single father. As well, because they differentiate from those who fit the meta-narrative they often experience discrimination and oppression, albeit differently, as well. A critical, structural social work approach and practice would invariably demand contextual and client-specific intervention, even while working on similar problems and in a similar environment.

Postmodernism is always reflexive (May and Perry, 2017). A social worker is subjective, while attempting to be objective, as she cannot completely step outside of her beliefs and interests (Wood and Tully, 2006). This asks for self-reflective practice by social workers, where they have to be mindful of how their subjectivity influences and affects their practice: identifying their social location and analysing how their social location affects their relations with the people they serve.

Deconstruction is a postmodern tool for seeking out and exposing hidden power relationships in cultural and local discourses (Wood and Tully, 2006). Deconstruction can expose the power dynamics between people and intervene by reconstructing the imbalances in power.

A structural social work practice employs two prongs – 'radical humanism' and 'radical structuralism' (Mullaly, 2007); this two-pronged approach has been referred to as a progressive approach as it looks to address the root of people's difficulties, not only the effects. One of the central themes of structural social work is power. Structural social work critically analyses how dominant structures in society influence access to opportunities, resources and power. Current societal structures

grant easier access to some sections of the community, while others experience individual and collective oppression and inaccessibility (Hick et al., 2010).

A radical humanist approach looks to help people increase their personal power through understanding how to: (1) exercise their rights; (2) maximize their access to resources; (3) understand that their problem may have systemic or structural causes that not only affect them but many others – their problem or cause is not a personal flaw. These are implemented by social workers sharing information about how processes and policies work, sharing information about what people are entitled to and how they can receive the service or good; sharing information about how to appeal negative decisions. The social worker works to ensure that service users have their basic needs met and then work to help them understand connections between their personal troubles and broader political situations, identifying networks of individuals working towards change in the area in which they are experiencing difficulty (Mullaly, 2007).

### **Power, privileges and oppression**

There exist multiple forms of oppression in every society. The oppressive elements of the society are associated with power and privileges. Structural social work understands the paradigm of social work practice through power, oppression and privileges. For Freire (1970), oppression was a human being's perverse tendency to deprive others of freedom and happiness. Oppression exists in overt forms, as experienced by people in their day-to-day life, as well as through subjective and internalized forms. Internalized oppression happens when one person or group of people feel that they are considered less valued by others in society and they start to affirm the negative stereotypes within themselves. Such oppression can manifest in different ways, like discrimination against other people based on ethnic background or desiring to be like the more highly valued group. Internalized oppression can be experienced by people in oppression, especially by members of ethnic or racial minority groups (Marsiglia and Kulis, 2009). Consider this example from an Indian context: a person from a Dalit community may internalize oppression due to the social inequality and non-acceptance directed towards them by other communities, thereby experiencing self-hatred, as well as hatred towards others. It could also create a situation where they consciously or unconsciously begin to conform themselves to the oppressive structures in the society they live in. Mullaly (2007) opines that internalized oppression leads people to accept their exploited situation and continue to feel undeserving. This form of internalized oppression may not be visible nor easily recognizable to others. Ironically, those with power can steer the language and discourse and can therefore influence the way life is experienced and interpreted (Parton, 2009). New centres of power, like media in general and social media in particular, have arisen in societies; they significantly influence discourses and often define life.

Power dynamics at a societal level have limited and marginalized persons based on ascribed criteria such as ethnicity, caste, gender, sexual orientation, sexual identity, disability and the colour of one's skin (Wood and Tully, 2006). While these power dynamics undergo subtle and explicit changes throughout time, many of them have been established for generations. For example, patriarchal forms of oppression manifest in different forms like dowry, domestic violence, and the feminization of poverty (Johnson and Johnson, 2001), ideas that have passed through generations as tradition. A person is often oppressed not by just one social structure, but by multiple structures. For example, a woman born into a lower caste bears all the inequalities suffered by women. Her misery is deepened if she is handicapped or lives in a remote community. She finds herself amid an intersectionality of oppressions through her identities of caste, gender, place of birth or residence, and ability. This intersectionality of oppression prevents her from accessing resources in comparison to those who are privileged (Yan 2016). Structural social workers understand the

intersectionality of oppression, help to identify oppressive structures and help to develop the strengths and networks of the people they work with.

Every community confers roles, positions, power (or powerlessness) and privilege (or lack of) around these elements which heavily influence an individual's identity and how the person is seen in the world. The power and privileges ascribed to individuals in the society affect their relationships within the society. For example, a person from upper caste is usually treated with more respect in society while a person from lower caste is discriminated against in visibly elite social settings. An officer in a government office holds power that could be exerted over another individual who seeks the service from that office. While the education and position of a social worker provide them legitimate authority for work, the social location of the worker compounds their power. Such sources of power and privilege include physical appearance (a well-dressed person is accepted with more respect), notions of ability (a person with a well-built body receives more respect than a disabled person), gender (men receive more respect than women), age (aged people are less likely accepted than younger people), caste (people from upper caste accepted and respected more than people from lower caste), colour (a lighter skinned person receives preferential treatment over a darker skinned person), education (higher levels of education bring more respect) and the power of language (someone who speaks fluent English is admired). Religion, family status, education and position of parents, place of birth, connection to political parties and leaders, wealth of the person and family and leadership in community are also factors that may contribute to the amount of power given to an individual.

## **Social work in India**

Social work, as a profession, began in India in 1936 with the establishment of the Sir Dada Narobji School of Social Sciences, the present Tata Institute of Social Sciences, in Mumbai. There are now hundreds of schools of social work in India offering bachelor's and master's level programmes in social work, as well as doctoral programmes. Social work is an elective at high schools (Grades 11 and 12) in some states. Professionally trained social workers work with various departments in government, different development programmes of state and central governments and in non-profit organizations. Social workers work as frontline staff, project officers, managers and researchers in health, community organizations, women's development, livelihood promotion, environmental conservation, education of children and several other fields.

Despite decades of active practice and education, social work is still not accepted as a (licensed) profession in India and is not regulated by any central agencies or governing bodies (Stanley et al., 2018). The social work agency setting suffers from a paucity of resources to support clients they work with (Palattiyil and Sidhva, 2012: 76). The social work job profile is often not clearly specified, and the social worker may be expected to perform other tasks that are not strictly within their professional repertoire (Stanley and Mettilda, 2015). Social workers' pay scales are low and one's employment tenure often depends on the whims of the employer. The lack of resources often limits the work and the social worker's autonomy in decision-making: the management of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) tend to make most of the decisions concerning policies and programmes, as well as the administration of agencies. It must be emphasized that while this is not the situation in all agencies, this tends to be the predominant scenario in practice. Despite these working conditions, social workers perform their roles and functions admirably and take pride in the contribution that they make in improving the lives of the people and communities that they serve.

The need for deconstructing social work education and practice in the Indian context needs to be understood in reference to the historical evolution of the social work profession globally and in

the specific context of the country. Cox and Pawar (2013) argue that (professional) social work accompanied the social welfare system from the home country in order to meet the requirements of colonial powers and was implemented in India by experts from these countries. In the second half of the last century, the United Nations (UN) took initiatives to implement Western model social services in developing countries (Midgley, 1981). This should be understood in conjunction with large-scale Western donor agencies, who not only pumped in huge monetary donations but also social work practice methods, approaches and philosophy during the same timeframe. The social work curriculum in India also followed the methods and techniques offered by colonizers and international agencies and has been heavily dependent on textbooks from Western countries, mostly American, to teach in social work programmes (Mandal, 1989: 304; Nagpaul, 1993: 209). The various specializations in social work education programmes – medical and psychiatric social work, family and child development, correctional administration and labour welfare – were introduced by the visiting faculties from US universities (Mandal, 1989).

Social work education and practice in the country has been criticized for the adoption of Western concepts and practice models, and their failure to devise indigenous strategies for social work (Adikulam, 2014: 219; Mandal, 1989: 307; Nagpaul, 1993: 211). Many social workers feel social work education in India needs indigenization, strengthening the understanding of local issues and devising local strategies for addressing them. Introduction of structural social work to the Indian social work curriculum would also require adaptation to the cultural context, while still following a theoretical framework based on critical social work. Poverty, and related issues, still dominates the areas served by social workers in the country, and there are various structural factors like casteism, governance, gender and education that perpetuate poverty (Haq, 2019; Modi, 2015). Caste is one of the fundamental oppressive social structures in India; social workers need to develop action plans and interventions to address discrimination based on caste to ensure human rights and social justice in the community.

Structural social work in the Indian context requires special attention as many of the struggles Indian society goes through are the direct result of social, economic, legal, religious, class and caste structures. The historical caste system still continues to discriminate against people based on the caste they are born into. The economic and political changes since the 1990s, and right-wing policies of subsequent governments in the country, have contributed to social structures that challenge the livelihood, freedom of speech, provisions of social justice and minority rights of citizens. There is also an increasing socioeconomic disparity influenced by global economic trends (Alphonse et al., 2008). Large sections of people have been marginalized due to the effects of globalization: mass suicides by farmers in different parts of India in the decades since the 1990s confirm this reality. Though they vary between states, within states and across communities, the larger political, economic, communal and patriarchal structures remain the same around the country. Structural social work proposes a progressive and radical social work practice method that would challenge these structural inequities and oppression at micro, meso and macro levels.

## **Practice framework for structural social work in India**

As mentioned previously, structural social work emerged as a critique to conventional and dominant social work practice frameworks and did not prescribe a set of practices (Murray and Hick, 2013). However, several authors have suggested various practice frameworks for structural social work (Carniol, 1992; George and Marlowe, 2005; Hick et al., 2010; Lundy, 2011; Moreau, 1979; Murray and Hick, 2013). Moreau (1979) suggests five practice elements: (1) Defence: maximizing access to rights and resources; (2) Collectivism: development of collective consciousness; (3) Materialization: Grounding problems in access to resources; (4) Increasing client power in

worker–client relationships; and (5) Enhancing client power through personal change. In 1992, Ben Carniol, building on the work of his friend Maurice Moreau, influentially suggested that in practice, structural social work would consist of the defence of the client; sharing power/demystifying professional techniques; unmasking structures of oppression; personal change; consciousness-raising; and political activism and solidarity (Carniol, 1992). In the paragraphs that follow, we will build on these practice frameworks for an Indian context, providing possible skill sets in each of them, identifying new practice frameworks required for structural social work in India.

## *Defence*

Defence implies maximizing access to rights and resources to clients. This is achieved through giving information to clients about their rights and entitlements. Structural workers advocate vigorously with clients, with other workers and with other organizations to push back the barriers to access, so that clients receive at least their legal requirements for a decent living (Carniol, 1992). It also involves coaching clients on how to defend themselves against a structure or an organization, and subsequently introducing to clients a process of questioning about the rules of institutions and systems, with the intent of leading to the deconstruction of prevailing structures. In the Indian context, this support given to clients to defend their rights and entitlements involves challenging societal stereotypes including patriarchy, casteism and sexism. For example, if working to provide familial rights to a lesbian client, a social worker is structurally challenged with the mandate of the organization; stereotypical attitudes of society; discriminatory practices of the legal system towards lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer or questioning (LGBTQ) people; and prejudiced honour concepts of family.

Having enough resources available for clients while seeking to provide maximum access to rights and resources to the client is another challenge. While availability of adequate resources to support a client or a community is often taken for granted in a developed country, they are not guaranteed in a developing country like India. For example, finding safe and comfortable shelter for temporary accommodation for a person with non-heterosexual orientation or a wife fleeing from domestic violence may not be easy for a social worker in India, as such facilities are not sufficiently available in many parts of the country. Hence, an important social work role is advocating for sufficient resources within the community – through government and non-government machinery – to support the people they work with. This role demands wide advocacy through mass action, machineries, legislation, policy development and resource mobilization through collaborative efforts.

## *Sharing power/demystifying professional techniques*

In structural social work, social workers seek to share their power and promote client–worker relationships based on mutual dialogue thereby replacing the traditional, paternalistic version of professional practice that assumes workers ‘manage’ their clients (Carniol, 1992). Structural social work has a significant focus on issues around power, and one among them is equalizing power relations between social workers and service users (Dalrymple and Burke, 2006). Unmasking power relations between the client, the worker and the social agency is to ensure that clients do not undeservingly scapegoat themselves when they encounter contradictions and challenges working with agencies and their policies (Moreau, 1990).

In India, the traditional, professional version of social work is ostensibly coupled with features of agency power, reinforcing the power of the social worker. Carniol proposes that a more democratic, humanistic and critical approach helps demystify the techniques and jargon of the



profession. This calls for democratic, equitable, liberal, progressive (including feminist, critical and Dalit) approaches in social work rather than paternalistic, erudite and ascending notions of worker–client relationships. Sharing power is an empowering process in itself – such as giving choices to clients (e.g. preference for the client’s schedule rather than the schedule of the worker), sharing assessments with them (rather than keeping them as scientific knowledge digestible by only the worker and the team), respecting their privacy (requesting permission before sharing information with others), explaining services and procedures of the agency (rather than keeping the service user guessing) and affirming the dignity of the service user (where the worker empathizes with the client with a conscious understanding of their own social location). For example, working with farmers in a rural community, the social worker would find a convenient time that works for the farmers (usually in the evenings after farmers finish their work) rather than meeting only during the office hours of the worker, which would lead to the loss of a day’s labour for the farmers. A social worker working with mental health patients would take time to explain a patient’s assessment, diagnosis and treatment procedure with them and their guardians in a simple language that could be understood. Working in a counselling centre, a social worker, using a structural framework, would ensure client seating arrangements that would be equal to those of the worker in comfort and placement. Examples such as these help workers to share power with clients, demonstrating respect and empathy.

### *Social workers understanding their social location*

Working from a structural perspective, it is important that social workers understand their own social location: the social construction of their ‘place’ or position in society based on their gender, caste, race/ethnicity, religion, class, sexual orientation, geographic location and history of their family. A structural perspective involves recognizing and deconstructing power relationships in systems – and social workers are part of systems. They need to be aware of how their social location will impact the working relationships they will be able to develop with clients. In addition, every community confers roles, positions, power (or powerlessness) and privilege (or lack of) around these elements which heavily influence an individual’s identity and how the person is seen in the world (Al-Krenawi et al., 2016). For example, a person from an upper caste is usually treated with more respect in society, while a person from a lower caste is discriminated against in visibly elite social settings. While the education and position of a social worker provides them legitimate authority for work, their social location impacts the level of power they are perceived to hold. Other elements that may contribute to a power differential include place of birth; religion practised; level and type of education achieved; languages spoken; parents’ position in the community; political affiliations; and level of wealth displayed. Embracing a structural, reflective practice allows the social worker to understand their social location from a client’s perspective and then work to diminish the power differential between them, so that power does not impede the helping process.

### *Unmasking structures of oppression*

The conventional approach in social work primarily helps the clients to adjust/adapt to the system(s) they are struggling with; thereby implicitly blaming the victim for their failure to understand and adjust/adapt to the situation. Such an approach dismisses the strengths of the person and mitigates the role systemic structures contribute to the suffering of people. For example, working with a woman experiencing domestic violence, social workers using a conventional approach might discuss the reasons for violence, ways to strengthen the relationship and the situation of the

children, if appropriate. There would be scarce discussion of the systemic, oppressive elements surrounding the client and how she is impacted by them. A structural social work approach would draw the Indian woman's attention to how patriarchy operates within Indian society, how family structures often oppress the rights and freedom of women and how Indian society tolerates violence from men while totally dismissing violent behaviour from women. Paulo Freire (1970) proposes that the oppressed should be enabled to name the oppressive elements in their cultural contexts and in their life situations. Naming the oppressive elements helps them recognize the social structure and thereby challenge it, in addition to being relieved of self-blame about the realities of their lives.

### *Collectivism*

Structural social workers, conscious of the limits of individualistic action to create systemic change, encourage collective action by people facing similar social oppressions (Carniol, 1992; Lundy, 2011). In structural social work, collective social action is understood as a method to obtain structural change and social justice – equality/equity for all. Social action is taught as a secondary method in social work, but is not applied as a secondary method, or even as a method worth attempting (Lee et al., 1996: 230). Progressive social changes in India have been achieved by various mass movements initiated by trade unions and civil associations at different levels. However, such movements and collective actions are initiated by citizens or volunteers, not social workers. Social workers need to realize the potential of collective action, help their clients develop their critical consciousness, and connect them to areas of action for structural change. For example, when working with people with disabilities, a worker may provide information about organizations working to strengthen the rights of people with disabilities; clients can then make an informed choice about becoming part of the collective action. Partnering with others with similar problems can provide support, a different worldview or understanding, lessens self-pity, and increases social power through collective action.

## **Deconstructing social work practice and education in Indian context**

Structural social work suggests that the focus for change is mainly on the structures of society and not solely on the individual. It is more realistic than many other theories in that it is not only concerned with one group of oppressed people, but with all groups who are survivors of the existing social order (Mullaly and Dupre, 2019). Chan (2018), however, opines that it does not adequately address colonization; structural social work does not take into consideration the wisdom of Aboriginal communities. Nor does it take into consideration the uniqueness of their lives in the focus of a critique on capitalism and neoliberalism. Given the nature of the work, structural social work can be particularly difficult to implement (George et al., 2007). Application of structural social work looks to create fundamental changes in the society which requires a longer time than many of the clinical approaches followed in social work.

There are civil society organizations, including professionally trained social workers as well as activists/workers without social work training, working to bring structural change; social workers joining with others in a structural context of collectivisation to bring about changes in society. In India, there are large movements actively working for the rights of Dalit communities, protection of the environment, universal education and the rights of sexual minorities, for example. Human rights groups are working in different parts of the country, responding to different needs of the people and the communities. International development organizations have a strong presence in

the country; connecting with larger networks of human rights and social work practices assist with mutual learning and providing solutions for local problems.

Structural social work is indeed a needed concept in Indian social work, considering the oppression that occurs as a result of structural factors; many of the struggles Indian society experiences are the direct result of social, economic, legal, religious, class and caste structures, though they may vary between and across states and communities. A progressive approach will alert the social worker to recognize that clients suffer psychological harm as a result of institutional structures which keep many people powerless. Structural social work perspectives are clearly allied with social movements such as LGBTQ rights, Dalit movements and movements for rights of Indigenous communities, which critique traditional social work practice (Rossiter, 1997). After carefully analysing the works of NGOs in rural India, George and Marlowe (2005) note that the evil effects of untouchability in India can be addressed through a structural social work framework. A common concern of structural social work practice is achieving the twofold goal of alleviating the negative effects of an exploitative and alienating social order on people, while working simultaneously to transform society.

Proposing and incorporating structural social work concepts in social work in India may prove challenging as there is not a centralized accreditation agency or a code of ethics. The social work programme curriculums are approved at the university level: discussions and academic discourses on structural social work can help the ideas percolate down to the curriculum. The developing networks of social work associations (National Association of Professional Social Workers [NAPSWI], the India Network of Professional Social Workers' Associations [INPSWA] and regional associations of social workers are working to promote social work's identity in the country.

Despite not being a licensed profession, social work is treated as a professional course, accepted as such by students as well as employers. A social work education is treated as the basis for applying for jobs understood as social work. Many NGOs appoint trained social workers for positions that require specialized knowledge and experience; however, the payment and employment guarantee of social workers in non-government sectors are not at par with organized sectors like the government.

There have been calls to re-examine the Indian social work curriculum to create learning and teaching pedagogies that would make students self-reflective and to have them question their own patriarchal and moralistic attitudes towards marginalized communities (Nadkarni and Rego, 2016: 183). They also opine that embracing feminist and subaltern perspectives would provide radical shifts in social education and practice. Professional social work in India has historically shied away from social action movements to address structural and systemic oppression in the country. It is understood that social, economic and environmental justice requires a transformation of power through participatory democracy and the democratization of society's structures; this can be achieved by creating alternative movements and transforming current structures in the society (Ross, 2011: 259). Adopting a structural perspective in social work brings a local perspective to social work in education and practice; it would enhance acceptance and respect for the social work profession in the country, as such social work helps people to address oppression rather than helping them to adjust to oppressive social elements. Indian social work education needs to integrate subaltern perspectives, learn ways in which to transform oppressive social structures, and develop practice frameworks with indigenous and structural perspectives. Refocusing the social work curriculum towards critical and progressive approaches, drawing on postmodern theories, will enable the profession to understand Indian realities in an indigenous way, as well as devise contextual social work practice that will address Indian social, economic and political structures perpetuating oppression and inequity.

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