

# Historical Analysis of Dalit and Tribal Social Work with Reference to Schools of Social Work in the Global Context

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## Introduction

**Dalit and tribes:** The two most marginalized and vulnerable communities of our country and social work “the work carried out by trained personnel with the aim of alleviating the conditions of those people in a community suffering from social deprivation”. But surprisingly, as a country it took us more than half a century after the initiation of social work as a discipline, to have a much needed specialized academic focus dedicated solely to dalit and tribal social work.

Before getting into that, it becomes relevant to discuss these two categories of dalit and tribe. The word ‘Dalit’, among many other words, is used to refer to a community in our country who has been systematically denied the basic human rights and dignity since the advent of caste Hindu society. They are the communities who do not even fall under the purview of the Hindu caste hierarchy. They are considered lower than the lowest caste in the hierarchy. They have been historically referred to as ‘untouchables’; a word that is very representative of the kind of treatment that was dolled out to them by the ‘upper castes’.

The majority of their population do not just face abject poverty and related issues like lack of education, poor health conditions, but they also have to face severe social stigma. Ours has been a society that has constantly obstructed the upward mobility of these communities in a socio-economic sense. Thus, to look at their problems from Eurocentric lenses leads to a narrow focus on only the economic deprivation and poverty. Eurocentric models do not accommodate a social structure as convoluted as the caste system; it remains indigenous to primarily India and its sub-continent.

Consequently, there emerges a strong need to reform social work that would take in to account this Indian reality instead of falling prey to alien models of social work that has been imported from societies distinctly different from ours.

## Description

Tribes are a much more debated and much less defined category. Till this day, the categorization of who qualifies as a tribe and who does not, remains murky. Even the word ‘tribe’ has attracted its fair

share of contention in the academia. Many studies indicate that the first academic attempt to conceptualize the category tribe was made by the Asiatic society of Bengal in 1874. Under the British rule the concept of tribe has been different in different phases. For example, in the 1891 census the term ‘forest tribe’ was used under the broad category of agricultural and pastoral castes. In the 1901 census they were described as ‘groups that practiced Animism’, in the 1921 census ‘hill and forest tribes’ category was used, and in 1931 census the term ‘primitive tribe’ was used.

According to Xaxa, in the post-independence period a lot of studies have been dedicated to facilitating the adoption of several measures to distinguish tribe from caste. But again, the attempt to use the category tribe as one homogenous label becomes very problematic.

The rough idea of the popularly accepted meaning of the word is provided by D.N. Majumder. He defines Indian tribes as social group characterised by territorial affiliation, endogamy, non-specialised function, tribal leadership and unity of language or dialect, maintenance of social distance with other tribes or castes and consciousness of homogeneity of ethnic or territorial integration. His definition highlights distinct social, ethnic and territorial identity of Indian tribes. According to him, tribes in India are confined to a particular topographical location and have limited contact with people of mainland. But these ideas can be easily challenged if we delve into further discussion.

The advent of a formal social work education in India started with the Sir Dorabji Tata graduate school of social work which was set up in Bombay in 1936 with the assistance of Clifford Manshardt. And in the year 1956 the department of tribal welfare was established at the Tata graduate school of social work. The home ministry, GOI, started a department which offered short term programmes and specialized studies to impart knowledge regarding the importance of tribal welfare. The programme had field training in forestry, agriculture, animal husbandry, cooperatives and handicrafts as well as social and cultural programmes. However, support was withdrawn in 1966 when the training had to be discontinued for various reasons.

It would be incorrect to say that tribes and issues related to them never made it to the formal curriculum in India before 2005. Over the years ‘tribes’ have been a target group in social work teachings,

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especially within the curriculum M.V. Moorthy had proved while he delivered his talks to All India Radio, Bombay on 10<sup>th</sup> February 1961. But the approach towards the study of tribal communities has constantly been very paternalistic. This approach is not unique to India, across the globe tribal communities has been always looked at as communities that require saving from their own 'primitiveness'; something that social workers from the 'mainstream' society is equipped to do. This condescending nature of social work has proven to have heavily cost the tribal communities. However, the period beginning from 2005 is significant as 'tribal social work' as a distinct concept emerged in India.

It was when the Indian academia had realized that their approach to social work has been majorly Eurocentric and has lost touch with the Indian reality, did a restructuring of the syllabus happen in the Tata institute of social sciences. Post the 2005 restructuring, major focus was directed towards the issue of social justice, equity and governance with respect to dalit and tribal communities. And then finally in the period of 2012-14 another restructuring took place in TISS which helped dalit and tribal social work to emerge as an independent social work program among eight other independent social work programmes. The programme continues till day and is called 'M.A. social work in dalit and tribal studies and action'. It falls under the school of social justice and governance. It is increasingly dealing with the issues of knowledge production which takes in to account the 'perspectives from within'.

Even internationally it is becoming increasingly important for social workers to understand the aboriginal communities and try to cater to their needs through a more bottom-up perspective instead of the condescending top bottom-approach which they have managed to employ historically.

For example, the Canadian association of schools of social work which is the accreditation body for schools of social work in Canada has in recent years acted to ensure that the curriculum of the schools reflects the diversity of Canadian society and addresses the concerns of aboriginal people.

In the United States of America as well, there is raising consciousness among the social workers regarding the colonizing effect the social workers had on the indigenous people of the country. They realize that social workers must overcome the negative history of the profession with first nations peoples, in particular, social work involvement in extensive child removals and coercive sterilization of indigenous women. United states and the state governments are the authorities under which the social workers are expected to operate in America, and thus inadvertently they also fall prey to their general colonizing and disempowering values. But it is increasingly being realized that there needs to be a change in the approach, thus, social workers must challenge social injustice, including what is perpetuated by their employers.

Even the Australian association of social work has acknowledged the role that social workers and the social work and welfare professions played in the implementation of government policies, such as assimilation policies, which led to the stolen generations.

The stolen generations were the indigenous children who were forcibly removed from their parents between the 1910-1970's under the policy of 'assimilation' by the federal government. Assimilation was based on the assumption of black inferiority and white superiority, which proposed that Indigenous people should be allowed to "die out" through a process of natural elimination, or, where possible, should be assimilated into the white community.

In 2004 the AASW published an acknowledgement statement to Aboriginal and Torres strait islander peoples which acknowledges the role of non-Indigenous social workers in contributing to the stolen generations (AASW, 2004). Post this acknowledgement the AASW has tried to put in place rules and regulations to make social work more inclusive and diverse in its skills set.

And now the AASW Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (ASWEAS) require that all AASW accredited tertiary social work programs in Australia include practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities as a core curriculum component for all qualifying courses since the 2010's.

Thus, we see that even in the international context there is a wave in social work academia to renovate the knowledge system and make it relevant to the needs of their own nations. This is marked by a departure from the strictly eurocentric methods of social work.

## Conclusion

In conclusion we can state that, in the contemporary times active efforts are being made to free the social work profession from any paternalistic and condescending ways which result in turning a blind eye to the specific needs of the communities. It further results in steam rolling of all who are in need of help into a homogenous group of people whose sole characteristic is their deprivation. The social work academia in India and abroad are trying to recognize the differential needs of all communities and are trying to equip themselves in ways that would facilitate efficient delivery of social work services while keeping in mind the context and history of the communities.

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