



Social Work Practices in India: Between Tradition, Modernity, and Social Crisis

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ABSTRACT

Social work in India operates within a complex and often contradictory landscape shaped by deep-rooted traditions, rapid socio-economic transformation, and recurring social crises. This paper critically examines social work practices in India by situating them at the intersection of tradition, modernity, and structural inequality. It argues that while traditional community networks and cultural values continue to influence social support systems, modern institutional frameworks—driven by state policies, neoliberal reforms, and professionalized NGOs—frequently fail to address the lived realities of marginalized populations. Drawing on secondary literature, policy analysis, and selected field-based observations, the study explores how social work interventions engage with issues such as caste hierarchy, poverty, educational exclusion, and mental health distress. The paper highlights a persistent gap between policy intent and practice, where standardized models of intervention often overlook local contexts, power relations, and cultural knowledge. It further contends that social work in India risks becoming managerial and technocratic unless it consciously reorients itself toward social justice, community participation, and ethical accountability. By advocating for a context-sensitive and critically informed practice framework, this paper positions social work not merely as a service-delivery mechanism but as a transformative social force. The study contributes to ongoing debates on the future direction of social work in India and underscores the need to reconcile



indigenous practices with contemporary professional approaches in addressing enduring social crises.

1. Introduction

Social work in India occupies a complex and often contested space shaped by historical legacies, cultural traditions, and rapidly transforming socio-economic conditions. Rooted in indigenous systems of care such as family networks, community solidarity, and collective responsibility, practices of social support long predate the formal professionalization of social work. However, the emergence of modern social work in India—particularly during the colonial and post-independence periods—introduced institutional frameworks, policy-driven interventions, and standardized models that frequently operate in tension with local social realities. This tension has intensified in recent decades amid growing social crises marked by inequality, displacement, mental health distress, and the erosion of community support systems.

Despite its stated commitment to social justice and human wellbeing, social work practice in India often remains constrained by bureaucratic structures, donor-driven priorities, and technocratic modes of intervention. Welfare policies and development programs tend to emphasize measurable outcomes, targets, and efficiency, while overlooking the structural roots of social problems such as caste hierarchies, class inequality, gendered oppression, and regional marginalization. As a result, social work risks being reduced to a mechanism of service delivery rather than functioning as a critical practice capable of challenging injustice and enabling social transformation.

The contemporary Indian context further complicates social work practice. Rapid urbanization, neoliberal economic reforms, and the expansion of non-governmental organizations have reshaped the field, producing new opportunities as well as ethical and professional dilemmas. While modern institutions and professional training have expanded the reach of social work, they have also contributed to the depoliticization of practice, distancing social workers from community knowledge and lived experience. Traditional systems of care, though not free from exclusion or inequality, continue to play a significant role in everyday survival strategies, particularly among marginalized populations. The coexistence of these traditional and modern forms of social support generates contradictions that remain insufficiently examined in existing literature.

This paper argues that understanding social work in India requires situating practice within this intersection of tradition, modernity, and social crisis. It seeks to critically examine how social work



interventions engage with structural inequality, policy frameworks, and community realities, and to identify the gaps between intent and impact. By adopting a critical and context-sensitive perspective, the study positions social work not merely as an institutional profession but as a socially embedded practice with transformative potential. In doing so, the paper aims to contribute to ongoing debates on reorienting social work in India toward ethical accountability, social justice, and meaningful community engagement.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in a critical understanding of social work as a practice embedded within social structures, power relations, and cultural contexts. Rather than viewing social work as a neutral or purely technical profession, the paper conceptualizes it as a socially situated intervention shaped by historical forces, institutional arrangements, and ideological orientations. Such a perspective is essential in the Indian context, where social inequalities are deeply institutionalized and reproduced through caste, class, gender, and regional hierarchies.

The framework draws primarily on Structural Social Work, which locates personal and community-level problems within broader socio-economic and political structures. From this standpoint, issues such as poverty, educational exclusion, and mental health distress are understood not as individual failures but as outcomes of systemic inequality and social marginalization. Structural social work challenges the tendency of welfare systems to individualize social problems and emphasizes the need for transformative action aimed at altering oppressive social arrangements.

In addition, insights from Critical Theory inform the analysis by interrogating the role of power, ideology, and institutional control in shaping social work practice. Critical theory enables an examination of how state policies, bureaucratic procedures, and donor-driven frameworks can depoliticize social work, turning it into an instrument of regulation rather than emancipation. This approach is particularly relevant in analyzing the increasing managerialism and standardization within Indian social welfare programs, where efficiency often takes precedence over equity and contextual relevance.

The paper also adopts a Social Justice and Human Rights–based Approach to frame social work as an ethical practice committed to dignity, participation, and equity. This perspective emphasizes the rights of marginalized groups and foregrounds accountability to communities rather than institutions. In the Indian context, where access to basic rights is uneven and often mediated by social identity, a rights-based



framework provides a normative foundation for evaluating the effectiveness and ethical orientation of social work interventions.

Conceptually, tradition is understood as locally embedded systems of care, kinship, and community practices that have historically mediated social support, albeit within unequal social orders. Modernity refers to institutionalized, professional, and policy-driven forms of social work influenced by state agendas and global development discourses. Social crisis denotes the cumulative impact of structural inequality, economic precarity, social fragmentation, and psychological distress experienced by marginalized populations. By integrating these conceptual lenses, the framework enables a nuanced analysis of how social work in India operates within—and is constrained by—the interplay of tradition, modernity, and crisis.

3. Historical Evolution of Social Work in India

The evolution of social work in India is closely intertwined with the country's social structure, political history, and changing development priorities. Long before the emergence of formal social work as a profession, Indian society relied on indigenous systems of care rooted in family, kinship, community, and religious institutions. Mutual aid within extended families, caste-based occupational support, village councils, and faith-based charity constituted the primary mechanisms through which social needs were addressed. While these systems provided localized forms of care and social security, they were also embedded within hierarchical social orders that normalized exclusion, particularly along lines of caste and gender.

The institutionalization of social work began during the colonial period, when Western models of welfare and philanthropy were introduced alongside emerging ideas of social reform. Colonial interventions, though limited in scope, laid the groundwork for organized social service through charitable trusts, missionary activities, and early training programs. At the same time, Indian social reform movements challenged practices such as untouchability, child marriage, and gender discrimination, linking social welfare with moral and political transformation. This period marked the initial shift from informal community care to organized social intervention.

Following independence, social work gained formal recognition as a professional discipline aligned with the nation-building agenda. The establishment of training institutions, expansion of social welfare departments, and implementation of state-led development programs positioned social work as an instrument of social change and inclusion. During this phase, social work practice was closely tied to



state policy, focusing on poverty alleviation, rural development, education, and health. However, the centralized and top-down nature of many programs often limited community participation and failed to adequately address structural inequalities.

The late twentieth century witnessed a significant transformation with the rise of non-governmental organizations and the introduction of neoliberal economic reforms. Social work increasingly shifted toward project-based, donor-funded initiatives emphasizing efficiency, quantifiable outcomes, and short-term interventions. While this expansion broadened the reach of social services, it also contributed to the professionalization and bureaucratization of practice. The growing influence of managerial frameworks redefined social work roles, often distancing practitioners from grassroots engagement and critical advocacy.

In the contemporary period, social work in India operates within a fragmented landscape shaped by state welfare schemes, NGO-led interventions, and residual traditional support systems. This historical trajectory reveals an ongoing tension between care and control, empowerment and regulation, and community knowledge and institutional authority. Understanding this evolution is essential for critically assessing present-day social work practices and for envisioning more context-sensitive and transformative approaches in the future.

4. Methodology and Sources

This paper adopts a qualitative, critical, and exploratory research design to examine social work practices in India within their socio-historical and structural contexts. Given the nature of the research problem—focused on power relations, institutional practices, and lived social realities—a qualitative approach is most appropriate for capturing complexity, contradiction, and contextual nuance rather than seeking statistical generalization.

The study primarily relies on secondary sources, including academic literature on social work, sociology, and development studies; government policy documents; reports published by national and international organizations; and archival materials related to the evolution of social welfare in India. Peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and policy reviews form the core theoretical and analytical foundation of the paper, enabling a critical engagement with existing scholarship.

In addition to secondary data, the paper incorporates select field-based observations and illustrative cases drawn from documented practice contexts such as education, community development, and mental health



interventions. These illustrations are not treated as formal case studies but are used analytically to bridge theory and practice and to highlight recurring patterns and contradictions within social work implementation. This approach allows for grounded reflection without overstating empirical claims.

Data analysis follows a thematic and interpretive approach, guided by the conceptual framework outlined earlier. Themes such as structural inequality, policy–practice gaps, professionalization, and community engagement are identified across sources and examined in relation to each other. The analysis remains reflexive, recognizing the researcher’s positionality and the normative assumptions embedded within social work discourse.

Ethical considerations are addressed through careful use of secondary data and anonymization of any practice-based references. The study avoids identifying individuals or communities and remains attentive to issues of representation, power, and voice. By combining critical theoretical analysis with context-sensitive interpretation, this methodological approach supports a rigorous and ethically responsible examination of social work practices in India.

5. Social Work in Practice: Key Domains

Social work practice in India manifests across multiple domains where structural inequality, institutional intervention, and lived social realities intersect. This section examines three critical areas—caste and social exclusion, education and community development, and mental health and poverty—to illustrate how social work operates on the ground and to reveal the limitations and possibilities of existing practice models.

5.1 Caste, Class, and Social Exclusion

Caste remains a foundational axis of social inequality in India, shaping access to resources, dignity, and institutional support. Social work interventions addressing marginalization among Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and other socially excluded groups often operate within state welfare schemes or NGO-led programs. While these interventions aim to promote inclusion through education, livelihood support, and legal awareness, they frequently adopt a remedial approach that treats exclusion as a technical problem rather than a structural injustice. As a result, social work practice risks addressing symptoms—such as poverty or lack of access—without confronting the entrenched power relations that sustain caste-based oppression.



5.2 Education and Community Development

In the field of education, social work plays a significant role in addressing school dropout, child labor, and community disengagement. School social work and community-based educational interventions seek to bridge the gap between institutions and marginalized families. However, these efforts often rely on standardized models that prioritize enrollment and attendance over meaningful participation and learning. Community development initiatives similarly emphasize capacity building and self-reliance, yet they may overlook local knowledge systems and social dynamics. This disconnect limits the transformative potential of social work, reducing it to a mediating function rather than an empowering practice.

5.3 Mental Health, Poverty, and Care

Mental health has emerged as a critical area of social work intervention, particularly among populations affected by poverty, displacement, and social exclusion. Social workers are increasingly engaged in counseling, outreach, and referral services within community and institutional settings. However, mental distress is often framed in clinical or individual terms, neglecting its social determinants such as unemployment, stigma, and social isolation. Limited resources, cultural stigma, and uneven service availability further constrain effective intervention. A socially grounded approach that integrates mental health with broader social support systems remains largely underdeveloped.

Taken together, these domains reveal a pattern in which social work practice oscillates between meaningful engagement and institutional limitation. While practitioners often demonstrate commitment and ethical concern, the prevailing frameworks within which they operate restrict their ability to address root causes. Examining these domains underscores the need for a reorientation of social work practice toward structural analysis, community participation, and social justice-oriented action.

6. *Policy–Practice Gap in Indian Social Work*

One of the most persistent challenges in Indian social work is the widening gap between policy formulation and practice on the ground. Social welfare policies are often framed with progressive intentions, emphasizing inclusion, empowerment, and rights-based delivery. However, when translated into practice, these policies frequently lose their transformative potential due to bureaucratic constraints, inadequate resources, and limited sensitivity to local social contexts.



A central feature of this gap is the top-down nature of policy implementation. Welfare schemes are typically designed at the national or state level with standardized objectives, indicators, and timelines. Such uniform frameworks leave little room for contextual adaptation, ignoring regional variations, cultural specificities, and community knowledge. Social workers positioned at the implementation level are often reduced to functionaries tasked with meeting targets rather than facilitators of social change. This institutional arrangement undermines professional autonomy and weakens the capacity for critical engagement with structural issues.

Bureaucratization further compounds the policy–practice divide. Extensive documentation, compliance requirements, and monitoring mechanisms prioritize procedural correctness over substantive outcomes. Social work practice becomes increasingly oriented toward reporting and verification, diverting time and energy away from direct engagement with communities. In this process, ethical concerns related to dignity, participation, and trust are frequently sidelined in favor of administrative efficiency.

Another dimension of the policy–practice gap lies in the mismatch between policy assumptions and lived realities. Many welfare programs are based on abstract models of beneficiaries that fail to account for intersecting forms of disadvantage related to caste, gender, disability, and migration. Consequently, those most in need often remain excluded or encounter barriers in accessing services. Social workers, constrained by rigid guidelines, are seldom empowered to adapt interventions in response to these complexities.

The cumulative effect of these factors is a form of social work practice that is reactive rather than transformative. Bridging the policy–practice gap requires more than incremental reform; it demands a rethinking of how social work is positioned within the welfare state. Enhancing practitioner autonomy, incorporating community participation in policy design, and embedding structural analysis into program frameworks are essential steps toward aligning policy intent with meaningful social impact.

7. Critical Challenges and Ethical Concerns

Contemporary social work practice in India is confronted with a range of critical challenges that raise fundamental ethical questions about the nature, purpose, and direction of the profession. These challenges are not merely operational but structural, reflecting broader transformations in governance, development discourse, and professional identity. Addressing them requires a critical examination of how social work is practiced, regulated, and evaluated.



One major concern is the depoliticization of social work. Increasingly, social work interventions are framed as technical solutions to social problems, detached from their political and structural roots. Issues such as poverty, caste discrimination, and gender-based violence are often treated as isolated or individual concerns rather than manifestations of systemic inequality. This shift limits the scope of social work to managing social distress instead of challenging the conditions that produce it, thereby diluting its commitment to social justice.

The growing NGOization and donor dependency of social work further complicates ethical practice. Funding priorities frequently shape program objectives, timelines, and evaluation criteria, privileging short-term, measurable outcomes over long-term community transformation. Social workers operating within these frameworks face ethical dilemmas as they navigate tensions between institutional demands and community needs. The pressure to conform to donor expectations can marginalize local voices and undermine participatory approaches.

Another significant challenge lies in the ethical tension between care and control. Welfare interventions often involve mechanisms of surveillance, eligibility verification, and behavioral regulation, placing social workers in dual roles as caregivers and enforcers. This dynamic raises concerns about consent, autonomy, and dignity, particularly when working with vulnerable populations. Without critical reflection, social work risks reinforcing paternalistic practices that contradict its ethical commitments.

Finally, the profession faces an ongoing identity crisis. The emphasis on managerial efficiency and administrative compliance has narrowed the scope of professional judgment and critical engagement. Social workers are increasingly positioned as implementers rather than reflective practitioners or advocates. This erosion of professional autonomy weakens ethical accountability and limits the potential for transformative practice.

Collectively, these challenges underscore the need for ethical reflexivity and critical resistance within social work. Reasserting the profession's normative foundations—rooted in social justice, human dignity, and collective empowerment—is essential for navigating these ethical concerns and for sustaining the relevance of social work in addressing India's complex social realities.

8. Toward a Context-Sensitive and Transformative Practice

Reorienting social work in India toward a transformative practice requires moving beyond standardized, institution-driven models and engaging more deeply with the social contexts in which interventions



unfold. A context-sensitive approach recognizes that social problems are embedded within specific historical, cultural, and structural conditions and cannot be effectively addressed through uniform or externally imposed frameworks. Such an orientation demands that social work practice be grounded in local realities while remaining critically informed by broader principles of social justice and human rights.

Central to this reorientation is the reintegration of community knowledge and participation into social work practice. Communities are not merely recipients of welfare but repositories of experiential knowledge, resilience, and collective agency. Transformative social work must therefore prioritize participatory processes that enable communities to define their own needs, strategies, and measures of success. This shift challenges hierarchical practitioner–beneficiary relationships and fosters collaborative forms of engagement rooted in mutual respect and accountability.

Equally important is the cultivation of professional reflexivity among social workers. Reflexivity involves critically examining one’s own positionality, assumptions, and institutional constraints in relation to practice. By encouraging reflective practice, social work education and training can equip practitioners to navigate ethical dilemmas, resist depoliticization, and maintain alignment with the profession’s normative commitments. Reflexivity also enables social workers to adapt interventions creatively in response to complex and evolving social conditions.

Transformative practice further requires a deliberate shift from service delivery to structural engagement and advocacy. While immediate support remains essential, social work must also engage with policy processes, institutional reform, and collective action aimed at addressing root causes of inequality. Strengthening linkages between grassroots practice and policy advocacy can amplify marginalized voices and contribute to more responsive and equitable social welfare systems.

Ultimately, a context-sensitive and transformative approach positions social work as a dynamic and ethically grounded practice capable of mediating between tradition and modernity. By reclaiming its critical and emancipatory potential, social work in India can move beyond managing social crises to actively participating in the creation of more just and inclusive social arrangements.

9. Conclusion

This paper has examined social work practices in India through the intersecting lenses of tradition, modernity, and social crisis, highlighting the structural conditions that shape both the possibilities and



limitations of the profession. By tracing the historical evolution of social work, analyzing key domains of practice, and critically engaging with policy and ethical challenges, the study underscores that social work in India cannot be understood as a neutral or purely technical enterprise. Rather, it is a socially embedded practice deeply influenced by power relations, institutional frameworks, and cultural contexts.

The analysis reveals a persistent disconnect between the stated goals of social welfare and the realities of implementation. While policies and programs often articulate commitments to inclusion and empowerment, social work practice frequently remains constrained by bureaucratic imperatives, standardized models, and donor-driven priorities. These constraints limit the capacity of social work to address the structural roots of inequality and risk reducing the profession to a mechanism of social management rather than social transformation.

At the same time, the paper affirms the continued relevance and potential of social work in responding to India's complex social challenges. By adopting context-sensitive, reflexive, and justice-oriented approaches, social work can move beyond remedial interventions and engage more effectively with community realities and structural change. Reintegrating indigenous knowledge, strengthening practitioner autonomy, and fostering meaningful community participation are essential steps in this direction.

The study is limited by its reliance on secondary sources and illustrative observations, pointing to the need for further empirical research that captures diverse field experiences across regions and practice settings. Future research could explore practitioner narratives, community perspectives, and comparative policy analyses to deepen understanding of transformative social work practice in India. Ultimately, reaffirming social work's ethical and political commitments remains crucial for its role in advancing social justice and human dignity in contemporary Indian society.

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