

Towards a Theory of Tribal Social Work: Some Reflections on its Methodological Foundation

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This paper engages with the theoretical evolution of Tribal Social Work in India, and attempts to provide a conceptual overview of some key constitutive elements of its methodological foundation. It uses the historical approach to trace the politico historical processes beginning 1935 and lays a framework that brings to bear significant processes that went into shaping meanings of categories and frames of reference vis-à-vis tribes. While unraveling varied processes surrounding the tribal debate in India from a critical perspective, the article posits a theoretico-methodological outline of tribal social work sourced from the author's own experiences. This is done with the intention of advancing the theory of tribal social work within the Indian context and thus deepening and enriching social work discipline further.

Key terms: tribes, tribal social work, perspectives from within

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Introduction

Social workers in India are faced with an extremely diverse reality. The interplay of social, cultural, economic, political and even geographical factors presents an extraordinarily complex context to engage with. Factors such as ethnicity, tribe, region, caste and religion greatly influence the culturo-historical and socio-political contexts often constructing intersections of realities that are difficult to decipher. India has more than two thousand ethnic groups with many more sub-groups. 'There are 4693 communities, which include several thousands of endogamous groups, speak in 325 functioning languages and write in 25 different scripts' (Ramachandran, 2008). With a population of 1.21 billion (2011), and supporting over 17.5 percent of world population, India is characterized by a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-lingual and multi-religious environment. The country is divided into 640 administrative districts (2011 Census) and adding to the already diverse situation, its citizens are spread far and wide, with 72.2 percent of the population living in about 638,000 villages and the remaining 27.8 percent residing in over 5,100 towns and over 380 urban agglomerations (Census of India, 2001). Coupled with the above, varying pace of industrialization, urbanization and modernization further enhance the complexities of India's realities.

With respect to social work education and practice, which is the focus of this paper, these intricate overlaps and forward-backward movements of "the pre", "the current" and "the constantly emerging new" makes it almost impossible to construct one overarching formula of social work curriculum and practice. It is not surprising that within the social work sorority in India, this extremely untidy reality blurs, obfuscates and bewilders even the most experienced of social work educators and practitioners.

The more recent challenge however in India for social work education has been to indigenize social work theory and practice. Through the years social work educators and practitioners have lamented about the poverty of organic social work theory in India pointing to the lack in efforts towards indigenization. The social work profession in India for decades has primarily relied on received Western models to analyze the Indian reality and also formulate paradigms of interventions. However, even after having stated the above, social work education has not remained as non responsive as generally perceived and has responded differently at various periods to the 'indigenization' question. Starting 1950s onwards, social work educators such as Mehta, B.

(1952), Gore, M. (1965, 1966), Dasgupta (1966,1967, 1968), Bannerjee,G.R. (1972) Desai, A.(1984), Siddique, H. (1987), Nanavathy (1993), Nagpaul (1972, 1993), Ramaiah (1998), Narayan, L. (2001), Desai, M. (2004), Kuruvilla (2005), Angharia, J (2007), Saldanha, D. (2008), Akhup (2009), Bodhi (2011, 2012, and 2013) have tried making advances in articulating a distinct Indian Social Work.

In the context of 'tribes' and social work, in the years when social work education became operational in India, there was an openness to the ideas espoused by M. K. Gandhi around the notion of 'constructive work' which brought the tribes into some focus. However these and many acts counted as paternalistic and charitable only, rarely going beyond lip service treatment. It is not until 2006 that a programme articulating a distinct Tribal perspective began, which led to the formulation of a separate Masters programme that positions itself within such a frame. This took place in the oldest school of social work in the country. It must be noted, however, that such processes have been operationalised only within the confines of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences. The emergence of a distinct Social Work content supposedly from a Tribal perspective, laid grounds for teaching of a well defined domain now known as Tribal Social Work for the very first time. Tribal Social Work is supposedly premised on the notion of respectful coexistence, respecting distinct politico historical realities with different historical trajectories coupled with distinct and identifiable culturo political differences.

Initial Period of Social Work in India with Reference to Tribes

Exactly one year before the setting up of the first social work institute in the country- the Dorabjee Tata Graduate School of Social Work in 1936; British India enacted the Government of India Act 1935. This Act is significant for tribal social work, because it was this Act that defined 'Excluded' and 'Partially Excluded' areas which had direct implications on the conception of the category tribe that later went into the debates in the constitutional assembly. However it must be noted that the formulation of the category 'tribe' by the British preceded much before this period. While many studies point to the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1874 as the first academic attempt to conceptualize the category tribe, the term was in usage much before, although it had no fixed meaning. Throughout the history of British India, there had also been an interchange of categories between 'tribe' and 'caste' which were used as synonyms in writings of the 18th century and later as cognates in administrative and ethnographic accounts. Despite this, the British treated the tribes as different from the rest of the Indian

population and had different administrative set-ups for the tribal societies.

Historical Evolution of the Category Tribe in India

The tracing of the historical movement of the conception of 'tribe' is imperative as the category forms the core of the arguments put forth in this paper. While there are tremendous fluctuations about its meaning and at different phases of British rule was inexplicit and blurred, 'tribe' remained in vogue throughout the period. For example, the Census 1891 used the term 'forest tribe' under the broad category of agricultural and pastoral castes. In the Census 1901 they were described as 'groups that practiced animism'; the Census 1921 used the category 'hill and forest tribes' and in Census 1931 the term 'primitive tribe' was used. Although consecutive census surveys attempted to arrive at a definitive criterion for tribes, they were often either ambiguous or inadequate. In the writings of the British a 'tribe' is referred to as a group claiming descent from a common ancestor or one which lived in primitive and barbarous conditions. In the era when social work education was offered, the term was still locked under British construction. Over the years there have been many debates surrounding the category and the process of unraveling these very intricate and nuanced arguments are still under way.

Intersection of the Category Tribe with Social Work Education in India

During the first quarter of the 20th century, a few organizations in India started social work training in order to study social problems and seek scientific solutions for the same; for example; Servants of India Society, Social Service League in Bombay, etc. The University Grants Commission states that, Social Service League of Bombay should be given credit for starting a short term training course, the first of its kind in the year 1920, for voluntary workers engaged in social welfare activity. The first professional school of social work, Sir Dorabji Tata Graduate School of Social Work (presently known as Tata Institute of Social Sciences) was set up in Bombay in 1936. The institute, till 1942, admitted mainly graduate students in every alternate year in order to offer two year Diploma in Social Service Administration. In 1964, Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) became a Deemed University under Section 3 of UGC Act. In order to enrich social work curriculum, three Review Committees in 1965, 1980 and 1999 were set up by the UGC. In the year 1936 when the first Graduate school of social work was set up by the Dorabjee Tata Trust, there was a generic understanding that trained welfare workers were needed to deliver services to the poor. Clifford Manshardt, the first Director was clear that he perceived such a process as

important as can be seen in his letter to the Trust pertaining to the same. Clifford Manshardt in 1936 wrote

When I began my work in the Nagpada Neighbourhood House, I had a completely untrained staff, and at once set about to instruct my own workers. Part of this training was on the job. The rest of it was in classes which I organised to present basic philosophy and information, which could not be learnt by doing. As our work expanded, the scope of the classes extended, until we came to have an institute of a month's duration, attended both by our own staff members and interested people from outside. As I thought about the matter of training, I became convinced that the standard of social work in India could not be raised appreciably until a permanent school of Social Work was set up to engage in a continuous study of Indian Social problems and to offer training of social work, on a post-graduate basis...The fundamental courses in social case work, child welfare, social statistics, public welfare administration, medical social work, social psychiatry, social legislation, organisation of welfare activities, and the history of philanthropy and public welfare are a necessary part of the equipment of all social workers.

In 1956 the Department of Tribal Welfare was established at the Tata Graduate School of Social Work. The department offered programmes of short-term and specialization studies to meet the needs of programmes for tribal welfare started by the Home Ministry, Government of India. 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 among which was also the difficulty for the Tata Graduate School of Social Work to handle a project located in Tamia in Madhya Pradesh which was at great distance from Bombay.

Locked within varied frameworks for nearly seven decades the category 'tribe' has been greatly determined by perpetual critical contestations of varied perspectives that has allowed for new ways of seeing, meaning and interpreting the category. The meaning of the category 'tribe' has come a long way since the British colonial conception that generally meant 'backward and uncivilized in an upward historical scale of cultural economic development'. Over the years there have been attempts to reformulate this conception within the Indian context by tribes themselves Xaxa, (1999, 2005), and especially within social work; Akhup (2009, 2013), bodhi s.r (2013), Riamei (2013), Leo (2013), Raile & Kamei (2013), Tripura (2013), Pegu (2013) towards

asserting a distinct tribal worldview articulated from tribes' differential epistemic positions in consonance with debates within Tribal studies. Such articulations resonate with the need to express, conserve and consolidate their assertion efforts within the modern Indian state. These theoretical formulations and articulations 'from within' could be considered as an important effort towards the advancement of organic theory in social work education in the country.

Processes that Led to the Emergence of Social Work Teaching Content Related to Tribes

Over the years in social work training, 'tribes' have been a target group and taught within the curriculum. M.V. Moorthy while talking to All India Radio, Bombay on 10th February 1961, identified eight separate fields of social work training that had emerged by this period. One of these was a specific reference to Tribes. He states

"Tribal Welfare as a professional field of social work is of recent origin. This seeks to do social work amongst the large number of backward tribal groups who are living remote in the hills, forest regions and other isolated areas. Many of these groups have their distinctive arts and cultures, some of them worth preserving and developing. Social Work would use these arts and cultures to bring about a greater ecological integration of the tribals and gradually adjust them to a changing social order in India. If this is not brought about in a planned manner, the tribals would disintegrate and develop problems of adjustment. Hence social workers have a new field of operation in tribal welfare. Work in this area implies work with the tribals in forest and hill regions. In the ultimate analysis, tribal welfare is a type of community organization in a peculiar rural setting."

Through the years, paternalistic attitudes and paternalism defined the approach to engaging with the category 'tribe' within social work education. However the period beginning 2005 is significant as 'Tribal Social Work' as a conception emerged. While the debate currently revolves around perspective, there are a number of writings emerging that are attempting to clarify deeper processes both in content and pedagogy. At this stage it is important to note that such propositions are coming both from social work education and tribal studies albeit separately. What directions these efforts take finally is too early to predict but nonetheless they seem to be moving towards articulating a new theory.

Towards a Theory of Tribal Social Work

As it stands today, debates pertaining to Tribal Social Work theory revolve mainly around three interrelated components. One pertains to the source of tribal social

work knowledge, another related to the characteristics of this knowledge and the practice paradigm emanating from this knowledge. While the source of knowledge are pointed by writers such as Castellano, (2000) as being tradition, experience and revealed and its characteristics being oral, personal, holistic, empirical and narrative, in the practice domain four practice methods have emerged. These are (i) Policy Practice, (ii) Social Research (iii) Collective Action and (iv) Welfare Practice which includes an integrated model constituting of community work, group work and individual empowerment.

In consonance with the above and as an additive, the author, based on years of experience in indigenous social work theory building, proposes two formulations as represented in concept maps below, attempting to go beyond what exist theoretically by positing a more concrete conceptual framework of Tribal Social Work theory. These propositions constitutes of a philosophical foundation followed by clarifications about the possible elements that would go into forming a Tribal Social Work methodology. While a lot more detailing is needed

to clarify minute processes, due to the limitations of this article, a minimalistic framework is articulated.

i) Philosophical Foundations

Those who engage in a philosophical inquiry into the nature, condition and extent of social work knowledge in India are confronted with methodological incredulities that have left many bewildered. The process of how do we seek information as well as how do we acquire and organize the information constitutes the key in the knowledge acquisition process. Under what conditions knowledge is produced, what are its guiding principles and what are the limits or boundaries of knowledge. There is no doubting the fact that knowledge is useful as it not only clarify our intervention but also shapes our own moral premise. Social Work knowledge generally rely on empirical sources which are gained through experience based on field based perceptual observations and applications. Sourced from the author’s own experience over the years, a conceptual framework of the philosophical foundations of Tribal Social Work is presented in Diagram1. These include ontological, epistemological, axiological, rhetorical and methodological assumptions.

Diagram 1: Philosophical Foundations of Tribal Social Work

Assumption	Questions	Characteristics	Implication for Practice
Ontological	What is the category representing the reality?	-historically pejorative ascription, -socially and structurally distinct, -egalitarian, -ecologically embedded communities	Provides different perspective to social work practice
Epistemological	What are the processes involved in arriving at an understanding of the reality?	Informal knowledge systems, based on trust and respect, premised on community, traditional, experiential	Working ‘through’ as compared to working ‘for’ or working ‘with’
Axiological	What is the direction and for what purpose is the process of knowledge acquisition committed?	Towards egalitarianism within a justice framework	Help comprehend the beauty of working towards preserving and promoting such realities
Rhetorical	What is the language that will allow the distinct articulation of the reality?	Literary informal style based on oral, personal, holistic, empirical and narratives	Uses engaging style of -narrative, -experiential, -at times in first person, -employing language that conceives humans as part of ecological system
Methodological	What are the premises, process and strategy of engagement within and without the reality?	-Focus on the immediate, thrust on the structural, -Universalize the particular and particularize the universal	Methods include -policy practice - social research -collective action -welfare practice

ii) Methodological Framework

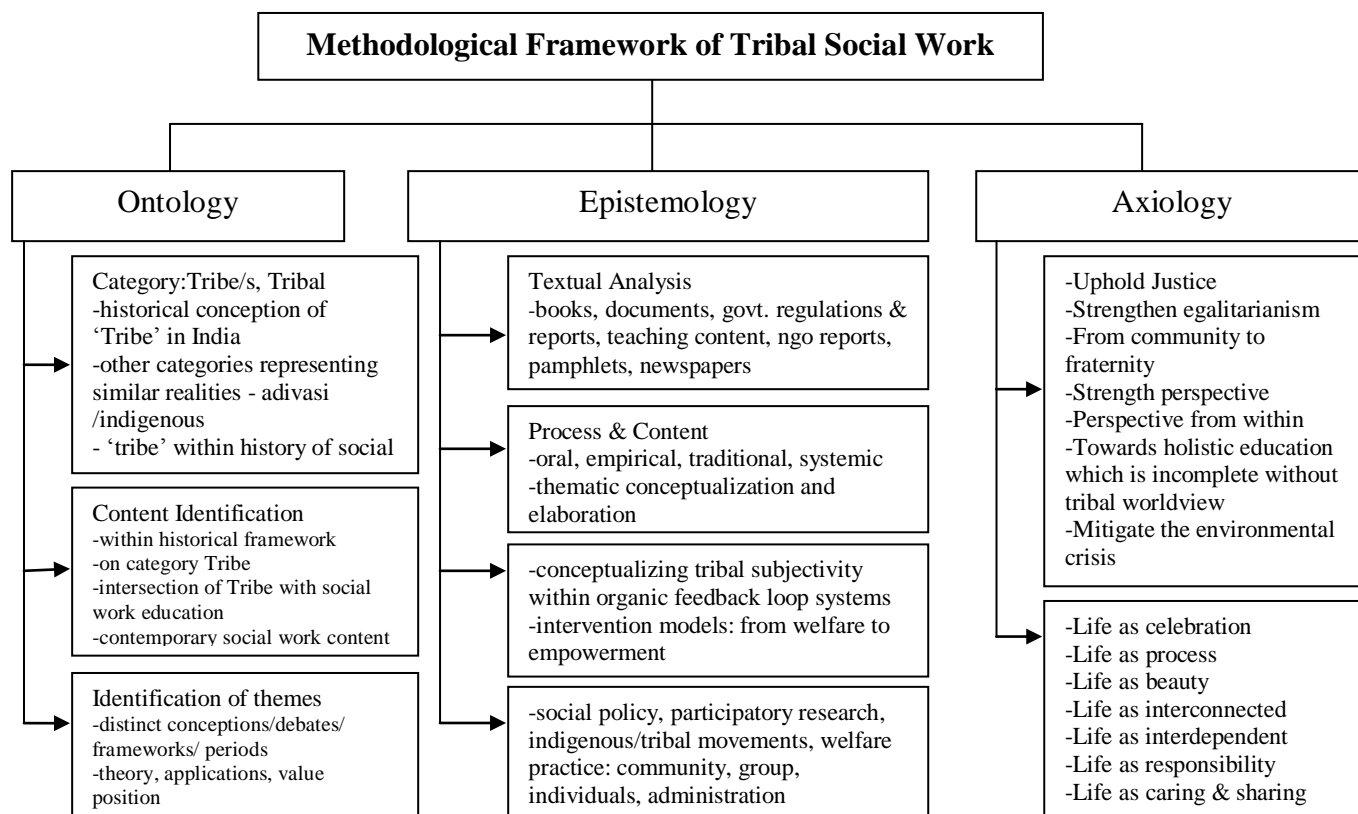
Drawing insights from the above, the diagram below represents some conceptual elements of a possible methodological framework for Tribal Social Work. The below framework can be elaborated in much detail as it encompasses overarching methodological foundations but for the limitation of this article, the same is presented at the conceptual level only.

Some Concluding Remarks

Tribal Social Work theory is a new entry into a discipline that has not shown much flare for theorization. As it stands today, while its theoretical framework is beginning to take shape, the subject matter is still being formulated and further consolidated. Across the world practice paradigms evolving from tribes and aboriginal peoples that have come to be known as Aboriginal Social Work is widely acknowledged. Morrissette, McKenzie and Morrissette (1983) in Campbell, C. (2003) contend that an “Aboriginal (Social Work) framework of practice rests on four key principles: The recognition of a distinct Aboriginal world view; the development of Aboriginal consciousness about the impact of colonialism; cultural knowledge and traditions as an active component of retaining Aboriginal identity and collective consciousness; and empowerment as a method of practice” (pp. 91-92). They also distinguish between culturally sensitive and culturally appropriate practice stating that “while culturally sensitive service advances awareness of issues in the Aboriginal

community in the context of involvement with an ethnic minority, culturally appropriate service integrates core Aboriginal values, beliefs, and healing practices in program delivery” (p. 101). These and many formulations (Baskin, 2006) have greatly enriched social work education.

At a historical juncture where social work education seems lost and confused about its mission, the entry of tribal social work is both novel and theoretically enriching. While one would expect the growth of these emancipatory ideas to be received positively and thus pick up pace in acceptance within the discipline, it is unfortunate to state that the degree of receptivity of these emancipatory ideas within the Indian context seems restricted. Like in many other occasions, some of the impeding factors to the advancement of tribal social work theory are the common enemies of regional, ethnic and caste locations of educators and programmes. Such restrictions and impediments needs to be worked at before any theoretical advancement could take place. Notwithstanding such roadblocks, tribal social work has brought in renewed energy and vigor providing new directions for social work education to deepen itself towards more meaningful and efficacious practice. For a profession committed to the cause of traditionally and structurally marginalized communities, the emergence of tribal social work however minimal provides some reason to celebrate.



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