

DECOLONISING INTERSECTIONALITY IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

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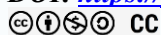
ABSTRACT: *The purpose of this conceptual paper is to examine why and how intersectionality, predominantly shaped by Western epistemologies, requires decolonisation for Indian social work education and practice, given India's historically rooted hierarchies. Drawing on the evolution of intersectionality globally and in India, the history of social work education from its colonial origins, and the idea of epistemic decolonisation, the paper also highlights past and ongoing efforts to reimagine curricula. Methodological approach applied is a critical interpretive synthesis and decolonial hermeneutic reading of scholarship in social work, feminist/anti-caste studies, education, alongside key institutional texts (e.g., curriculum frameworks, prospectuses). Evidence was abductively organised across micro/meso/macro levels and epistemic/cultural/political/economic domains to derive suggestions for decolonising intersectionality within Indian social work education and to articulate testable propositions for future empirical work. Originality/value Amid global calls to diversify curricula, this paper contributes an India-specific, decolonised intersectionality agenda for social work that is theoretically coherent and immediately actionable in pedagogy and field education. It consolidates dispersed Indian scholarship into a transferable framework, offers practice and policy blueprints (learning outcomes, modules, supervision models, assessments), and states propositions to guide empirical evaluation. The work reframes social work education as a site of cognitive justice, advancing inclusive knowledge production and more effective, context-sensitive professional preparation. Findings Imported, single-axis, and race-centric variants of intersectionality insufficiently capture India's caste-gender matrix and risk reproducing epistemic dependency. Curricular redesign embedding caste-consciousness and multilingual learning outcomes; fieldwork reconfiguration through co-supervision with community mentors and reciprocal, movement-linked placements; and assessment reform that values oral, embodied, and community authored artefacts alongside textual outputs. Such redesign strengthens critical consciousness, improves classroom-field alignment, and equips graduates for justice-oriented practice.*

KEYWORDS: *Intersectionality; Epistemic Decolonisation; Social Work Education; Caste-Gender Intersection; Indigenous Epistemologies*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Social work, as both an academic discipline and a professional practice, is inherently committed to the ideals of equity, justice, and human dignity. However, in the Indian context, this commitment is often compromised by the discipline's continued reliance on Western theoretical models and colonial pedagogical legacies (Desai, 2006; Gray, Coates, & Yellow Bird, 2008). One of the most influential frameworks to emerge globally in recent decades for understanding compounded systems of oppression is intersectionality, originally developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to highlight the unique marginalisation faced by Black women in the United States due to the interlocking effects of race and gender (Crenshaw, 1989). India's social fabric is shaped by distinctive and deeply rooted systems of inequality, including caste, class, gender, religion, indigeneity, and regionalism. These axes of marginalisation intersect in complex ways that do not always align with the identity categories prevalent in Western feminist and social theory (Guru, 2002; Rege, 1998; Chakravarti, 2003). Therefore, there is a critical need not only to adopt intersectionality as a theoretical lens but also to decolonise it, to reconfigure the framework so that it resonates with and responds to India's histories of oppression, resistance, and epistemology (Mohanty, 2003; Collins, 2000; Oyěwùmí, 1997). Decolonising intersectionality in the Indian social work context involves a reorientation from Western universalism toward frameworks that are rooted in local knowledge systems, indigenous philosophies, and grassroots struggles (Rao, 2009; Smith, 1999). It calls for epistemic humility, recognising that valid forms of knowledge exist beyond the West, and that cognitive justice is central to any effort to address social injustice (Santos, 2014; Mignolo, 2009).

The urgency of this decolonial turn is further underscored by the limitations of social work education in India. Since its formal inception during the colonial era, social work has largely drawn upon British and American curricular models, often failing to engage critically with India's socio-political realities. While some institutions have made efforts to localise content by introducing courses on caste, tribal welfare, and gender justice, these initiatives remain fragmented and uneven across the country. Furthermore, the integration of intersectionality into social work pedagogy has often been superficial, lacking the theoretical depth and contextual grounding needed to make it a transformative tool.

This paper situates itself at the intersection of two critical imperatives: the need to meaningfully incorporate intersectionality into Indian social work and the necessity of decolonising the discipline itself. It begins by exploring the origin and evolution of intersectionality, tracing its emergence from Black feminist thought and its adaptation across global contexts. It then examines the trajectory of social work education in India, highlighting its colonial roots and the challenges faced in adapting intersectional and indigenous frameworks. The discussion then turns to the concept of decolonisation, with a focus on epistemic decolonisation, an effort to dismantle Western dominance in knowledge production and validation in favour of pluriversal, context-sensitive ways of knowing.

Ultimately, this study argues that decolonising intersectionality in Indian social work is not an optional reform but a moral and professional necessity. It challenges the discipline to become a site of cognitive justice, where diverse and often marginalised ways of knowing, oral, spiritual, embodied, and experiential are recognised as valid and essential.

2. CONCEPT OF INTERSECTIONALITY

The concept of intersectionality originates in the efforts of Black feminists in the United States to theorise about their experiences and social position, but the concept has great potential to illuminate other national contexts as well. Intersectionality was introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to articulate the specific experiences of Black women who were marginalised not solely by race or gender, but by the interlocking effects of both. Crenshaw argued that existing legal and civil rights frameworks failed to account for the multidimensional nature of discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989).

Crenshaw's seminal works, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex" (1989) and "Mapping the Margins" (1991), provided a foundational lens for understanding how systemic injustices intersect and compound. In the latter, Crenshaw expanded the application of intersectionality beyond legal studies to include areas such as domestic violence, immigration, and public policy. Her work laid the groundwork for a new epistemological orientation that rejected single-axis frameworks and encouraged analyses sensitive to multiple identities and power dynamics.

Subsequent developments in intersectionality theory have seen it adopted across a wide range of disciplines, including sociology, gender studies, education, political science, and, notably, social work. Scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins (2000), in her book *Black Feminist Thought*, further expanded on the matrix of domination, a framework illustrating how race, class, gender, and other categories are mutually constitutive and experienced simultaneously. Collins's work underscored that intersectionality is not merely additive but integrative, allowing for a holistic understanding of oppression.

Theorists such as Ange-Marie Hancock (2007) have also contributed to the development of intersectionality as a formalised methodology for political science and public policy. Hancock argues that intersectionality should not only identify intersecting identities but must also examine the structures that produce and perpetuate inequality. Leslie McCall (2005) proposed different methodological approaches to intersectionality, inter-categorical, intra-categorical, and anti-categorical, each aiming to capture different dimensions of complex social realities.

Despite its evolution and global application, critics have noted that the theory, as it has become institutionalised in academia, risks becoming depoliticised and disconnected from the radical roots of Black feminist activism (Bilge, 2013). Moreover, as intersectionality travels beyond the U.S. context, scholars such as Sumi Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall (2013) urge for its localisation and critical adaptation, warning against uncritical universalisation that flattens distinct socio-political contexts.

Thus, intersectionality's development reflects a rich, evolving discourse that began as a critique of legal invisibility and grew into a powerful analytic for examining interlocking systems of oppression. It demands contextual specificity and must be grounded in the histories and struggles of those it seeks to represent.

3. GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES OF INTERSECTIONALITY

Globally, intersectionality has become a central analytical framework across various disciplines, including law, sociology, education, gender studies, public health, and social work. It has evolved to account for a broad range of identity categories and systems of oppression beyond its initial focus on race and gender. These include but are not limited to disability (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009), sexual orientation and gender identity (Valentine, 2007), immigration status (Enriquez, 2011), religion, age, and indigeneity (Hankivsky & Cormier, 2011).

The Global North, particularly the United States, Canada, and parts of Europe, has played a dominant role in theorising and institutionalising intersectionality. This dominance has resulted in a proliferation of scholarly literature and policy frameworks that are shaped by the socio-political contexts of those regions. For example, the European Union's gender equality strategies often incorporate intersectional thinking by recognising compounded discrimination (Lombardo & Verloo, 2009). However, these frameworks are frequently built upon categories and experiences that may not fully align with the structural and historical realities of societies in the Global South.

Critics argue that this export of intersectional models from the North to the South can lead to epistemic imperialism, where locally rooted axes of identity and systems of oppression—such as caste in India, or ethnicity and indigeneity in Latin America—are either inadequately addressed or entirely omitted (Mohanty, 2003). The assumption that intersectionality can be universally applied without context-specific adaptation has been challenged by scholars advocating for "situated intersectionality"

(Hancock, 2016), which emphasises grounding the framework in local histories, struggles, and epistemologies.

Moreover, the mainstreaming of intersectionality in Western academia has sometimes led to its depoliticisation and commodification. Bilge (2013) notes that intersectionality has, in some contexts, become a buzzword stripped of its radical potential, used more for academic branding than for transformative praxis. This raises concerns about the dilution of its foundational commitments to social justice, particularly in contexts of colonial and postcolonial oppression.

In response, efforts have emerged to re-theorise intersectionality from Southern perspectives. Scholars like Amina Mama (2011) and Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí (1997) argue for the development of intersectional frameworks that emerge organically from non-Western feminist traditions. These approaches highlight the need to decolonise intersectionality by recognising alternative ontologies and epistemologies rooted in local cultures and movements.

Thus, while intersectionality's global influence has been significant, its effectiveness in non-Western contexts depends on its capacity to adapt and evolve in relation to indigenous and local knowledge systems. A critical, reflexive, and decolonial engagement is essential for intersectionality to remain a powerful tool for analysing complex oppressions across global contexts.

4. INDIAN PERSPECTIVE OF INTERSECTIONALITY

In India, the application of intersectionality must account for deeply entrenched and context-specific axes of marginalisation such as caste, tribal identity, religion, class, regionalism, and linguistic diversity. These forms of oppression are structurally embedded and historically constituted, often manifesting in multiple and overlapping ways that require analytical frameworks sensitive to the Indian socio-political context (Guru, 2009).

Feminist scholars such as Uma Chakravarti (2003), Sharmila Rege (1998), and Gopal Guru (2002) have long foregrounded the necessity of integrating caste and gender within analytical discourses, thereby anticipating the intersectional turn in Indian scholarship. Chakravarti's work on Brahmanical patriarchy illustrates how caste and gender hierarchies reinforce one another within Hindu social structures. In her influential essays, she argues that the control of women's sexuality has historically been a crucial mechanism for maintaining caste boundaries (Chakravarti, 2003). Rege's pioneering contributions in *Dalit Feminist Standpoint* and her engagement with the testimonies of Dalit women in *Writing Caste/Writing Gender* (2006) underscore the need for a caste-conscious feminist methodology. Gopal Guru (2002) critiques the epistemic marginalisation of Dalit knowledge and voices within dominant feminist and academic discourses. He advocates for an 'ethical' sociology that takes seriously the lived experiences and epistemic contributions of subaltern communities. These Indian scholars have contributed significantly to developing indigenous approaches to intersectionality, even though the term itself is often retrospectively applied.

Despite these intellectual developments, intersectionality in India has frequently been imported as a readymade theoretical tool from the Global North, with limited contextual adaptation. The deployment of intersectionality in Indian academia, particularly within social work and gender studies, often lacks engagement with local socio-historical processes, such as caste endogamy, communal violence, or linguistic nationalism. Scholars such as Satish Deshpande (2013) and Anand Teltumbde (2010) argue that caste remains under-theorised in broader social science research, overshadowed by frameworks focused on class or gender in isolation.

Recent scholarship has begun to address these limitations. For instance, Kalpana Kannabiran (2012) integrates legal and sociological insights to examine how caste and gender-based exclusions operate through institutional and discursive formations in India. Similarly, Anupama Rao (2009) highlights the intersections of caste, gender, and colonial modernity through her historical work on Dalit activism.

Overall, while the terminology of intersectionality may be relatively new in Indian academic circles, the underlying analytical impulse has deep roots in anti-caste, feminist, and Adivasi intellectual traditions. The challenge lies in developing a truly decolonised intersectional praxis that honours these traditions and resists epistemic dependency on Western theoretical models.

Social work education and practice in India have historically addressed marginalised populations, but often within compartmentalised frameworks focusing on gender, class, caste, or tribal identity separately, without engaging with their interactions. As V. V. Nadkarni (2011) has observed, Indian social work pedagogy is situated in a “crossroads,” challenged by globalisation and Western models, requiring responsiveness to social, cultural, and economic contexts.

Much of the current discourse on intersectionality within Indian social work education draws on Eurocentric frameworks prioritising race, gender, and class. These frameworks often sideline caste, religion, language, and tribal identity, categories that are central to oppression and social stratification in India. Consequently, theoretical models fail to align with field realities, such as caste-gender violence or marginalisation in tribal communities.

Experts such as Nadkarni and colleagues have emphasised the need to integrate human rights and social justice perspectives into Indian social work curricula to confront this fragmentation. The publication *Transforming Social Work Education in India: Integrating Human Rights* (Nadkarni & Sinha, 2016) underscores the growing demand for curricula that equip social workers to address structural inequalities tied to caste, gender, religion, and poverty within the Indian socio-political context.

At institutional levels, efforts at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) and other universities are emerging to revise curriculum content and fieldwork. Edited volumes such as *Field Instruction in Social Work Education: The Indian Experience* (Nair, Juvva, & Nadkarni, 2020) emphasise the importance of integrating social justice-oriented perspectives and contextual field supervision in training Indian social workers. These works call for a theoretical orientation rooted in Indian realities, moving beyond imported frameworks.

Grassroots fieldwork itself often reveals intersectional realities: Dalit women experiencing gendered violence cannot be understood without accounting for caste. Adivasi communities face compounded marginalisation in health, education, and livelihood, due to intersecting factors like tribal identity, religious discrimination, and geographic isolation. These lived intersections present opportunities for praxis-based reform of social work training and interventions.

While expert contributions point to the urgency of decolonising Indian social work education, system-wide change is yet to be realised. Most curricula still reflect Global North paradigms, and intersectionality remains under-integrated, especially around caste and religion. For social work to effectively serve as an agent of social justice in India, critical rethinking of curricula, supervision, pedagogy, and field instruction is essential.

5. SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION IN INDIA

Social work education in India formally began in 1936 with the establishment of the Sir Dorabji Tata Graduate School of Social Work in Bombay, now known as the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS). This marked the beginning of institutionalised social work education in the country, heavily influenced by American models of professional social work that emphasised casework, group work, and community organisation (Desai, 2002; Nair, 1981).

The curriculum and pedagogy adopted in early Indian social work education mirrored the Euro-American frameworks, prioritising clinical methods and psychosocial interventions. These approaches were introduced without adequate contextual adaptation, leading to a profession that was, in its formative years, somewhat distanced from the local socio-political realities of India, including issues such as caste-based oppression, communalism, and rural poverty (Desai, 2006). As many scholars

have noted, the early phase of social work in India reflected the colonial legacy that privileged Western knowledge systems over indigenous practices and knowledge traditions (Pathak, 2012).

Post-independence, the expansion of social work institutions across India was largely supported by philanthropic organisations, missionary groups, and state-driven welfare programmes. While this helped institutionalise the profession, it also reinforced a welfare-oriented and often apolitical vision of social work. Courses continued to reflect Western-centric epistemologies, with limited attention to the unique structural inequalities prevalent in Indian society, such as caste hierarchies, tribal displacement, gender-based violence, and linguistic marginalisation (Nadkarni, 2011).

Over time, a growing body of Indian scholars and practitioners began to critique this dependence on Western models. Efforts were made to reorient the curricula towards more indigenous and rights-based approaches. Institutions such as TISS, Delhi School of Social Work, and Loyola College began integrating critical perspectives into their training modules, gradually expanding the focus to include participatory development, social justice, and community empowerment (Bhatt & Nair, 2013).

Despite these changes, challenges persist in decolonising social work education. The profession still grapples with reconciling imported theoretical frameworks with India's complex realities. The lack of adequate emphasis on caste, indigeneity, religion, and regional disparities in foundational courses continues to hinder the development of a truly context-sensitive curriculum. The University Grants Commission (UGC) attempted to address some of these concerns in its Model Curriculum for Social Work Education in 2001, but the framework still reflected structural limitations and failed to integrate the epistemologies of marginalised communities (UGC, 2001).

Therefore, a historical analysis of social work education in India highlights both the colonial roots of the discipline and the continuing struggle to make it relevant to the country's diverse and deeply stratified society. These historical trajectories continue to influence how intersectionality is (or is not) conceptualised within Indian social work curricula, as discussed in the following section.

Challenges in Indigenisation Despite growing critiques, social work education in India has struggled to meaningfully incorporate local knowledge systems, philosophies, and practices into its curricula. The legacy of Eurocentric epistemologies remains dominant in most institutions, often marginalising indigenous approaches rooted in the lived experiences of Dalits, Adivasis, and other minoritised communities (Gray, Coates, & Yellow Bird, 2008).

Several educators and scholars have emphasised the urgency of decolonising the curriculum to reflect Indian social structures, values, and epistemologies. For example, Desai (2006) has called for a more critical, reflective pedagogy that integrates perspectives from Gandhian, Ambedkarite, tribal, and feminist thought. Likewise, Dash and Roy (2016) advocate for incorporating community-based knowledge, oral histories, and region-specific practices into fieldwork and theoretical instruction.

However, systemic barriers continue to inhibit such reform. These include institutional inertia, lack of political will, resistance from accrediting bodies, and inadequate training for faculty in alternative pedagogies. Additionally, the dominance of English as the medium of instruction further alienates students and practitioners from non-urban, non-English-speaking backgrounds, limiting the accessibility and cultural relevance of the discipline.

Efforts toward indigenisation are emerging in select institutions, particularly in courses that address tribal development, rural livelihoods, or community-based rehabilitation. Yet these remain the exception rather than the norm. Without a broader transformation in how social work knowledge is produced, taught, and validated, the discipline risks perpetuating the very hierarchies it seeks to dismantle.

6. INTERSECTIONALITY IN INDIAN SOCIAL WORK CURRICULA

Intersectionality as a conceptual tool has gradually entered the discourse of Indian social work education, often appearing in courses on gender studies, human rights, and marginalised groups.

However, its incorporation tends to be superficial and largely derivative of Western theoretical models. In many cases, intersectionality is introduced as a term without a nuanced engagement with the specific socio-political and cultural contexts of India.

The dominant usage of intersectionality in Indian curricula often centres on categories like gender and class, with limited attention to caste, religion, tribe, language, and region as equally important axes of identity and oppression. As a result, the intersectional analysis risks becoming reductive or disconnected from the lived experiences of diverse Indian communities (Rege, 2006; Guru, 2009). Furthermore, the theoretical training of faculty often mirrors Western literature, thereby constraining the development of indigenous intersectional frameworks.

Scholars such as Sharmila Rege and Gopal Guru have long argued for intersectional analyses that place caste and gender at the centre, but such contributions have not yet been systematically integrated into mainstream social work syllabi. The few instances where intersectionality is employed meaningfully such as in Dalit feminist studies or tribal rights courses remain isolated efforts rather than part of a holistic curricular vision.

The reluctance to structurally embed intersectionality in pedagogy also stems from broader institutional challenges. These include curricular standardisation across universities, limited academic autonomy, and the continued marginalisation of subaltern scholarship in social work research. Addressing these issues would require not only curricular reforms but also faculty development, inclusion of community voices, and support for interdisciplinary approaches that reflect India's socio-cultural complexity.

7. CONCEPT OF DECOLONISATION

Decolonisation is a dynamic and ongoing process aimed at dismantling the legacies of colonialism in every facet of society. It encompasses not just the withdrawal of colonial powers or the achievement of political independence but a deeper transformation of social, cultural, economic, and intellectual systems that have been shaped by colonial domination. The colonial enterprise imposed foreign values, languages, systems of governance, and epistemologies on colonised societies, often marginalising or erasing indigenous cultures, traditions, and knowledge systems. Decolonisation, therefore, is not merely about replacing colonial rulers with indigenous leaders; it is about reimagining and reconstructing societies in ways that prioritise and validate local experiences, wisdom, and agency.

At its core, decolonisation challenges the colonial matrix of power that continues to influence global structures and local realities. This includes confronting how colonial ideologies persist in educational curricula, governance, legal frameworks, economic policies, and even interpersonal relationships. It requires a fundamental interrogation of what is considered legitimate knowledge, whose voices are amplified or silenced, and how social systems reproduce historical inequalities. Importantly, decolonisation also involves healing from the psychological and cultural impacts of colonisation, such as internalised inferiority, language loss, and cultural alienation.

In academic contexts, decolonisation calls for transforming the production and dissemination of knowledge by centring indigenous epistemologies and subaltern voices. It urges scholars, educators, and institutions to reflect critically on the colonial underpinnings of disciplines, canons, and pedagogical practices. Decolonisation is thus both a critique of existing power structures and a constructive project of rebuilding from the margins. In the Indian context, it is inseparable from efforts to address caste oppression, tribal marginalisation, religious exclusion, and linguistic diversity. These complex historical and structural inequalities necessitate a decolonial approach that is rooted in the lived experiences and intellectual traditions of India's multiple communities.

The following section outlines the different types of decolonisation, each of which addresses a specific dimension of colonial influence: political, economic, cultural, and epistemic. These categories are not mutually exclusive but interlinked in the broader pursuit of justice, dignity, and self-determination.

7.1 Types of Decolonisation

Decolonisation is not a singular event but a complex and ongoing process that involves challenging and dismantling the enduring structures, ideologies, and practices inherited from colonial rule. While it is often equated with the political independence achieved by many formerly colonised nations, true decolonisation extends far beyond sovereignty and addresses the deep-seated colonial imprints on social, cultural, economic, and intellectual domains. It aims to transform relationships of power and knowledge that have historically privileged the coloniser's worldview while marginalising or erasing those of the colonised. The major types of decolonisation include political, economic, cultural, and epistemic, each contributing uniquely to the broader project of liberation and justice.

Political Decolonisation: Political decolonisation refers to the formal process through which colonised countries attained statehood and national independence from colonial empires, often through protracted struggles involving resistance movements, negotiations, or armed conflicts. While this form of decolonisation marked the end of direct colonial rule, it did not necessarily dismantle the colonial administrative structures or policies that persisted post-independence. In many instances, the political elite that took over retained colonial bureaucratic models and governance strategies, limiting the scope of transformative change. Thus, political independence, although symbolically significant, often remained incomplete in terms of altering the colonial mindset and hierarchical systems.

Economic Decolonisation: Economic decolonisation seeks to reclaim control over a nation's economic resources, institutions, and development pathways. Colonial economies were structured to serve imperial interests, leading to the extraction of raw materials, exploitation of labour, and the underdevelopment of indigenous industries. Postcolonial states continue to grapple with these legacies, especially in the face of global capitalism and neo-colonial dependencies through international trade agreements, multinational corporations, and financial institutions like the IMF and World Bank. Economic decolonisation involves creating self-reliant and equitable models of development rooted in local contexts and needs, and resisting exploitative global structures that perpetuate economic subjugation.

Cultural Decolonisation: Cultural decolonisation involves a conscious effort to revive, valorise, and promote indigenous cultural expressions, traditions, knowledge systems, and languages that were historically denigrated or erased under colonial rule. Colonisers often imposed their own cultural norms, religion, and education systems to establish hegemony, thereby devaluing and marginalising the native cultures. Cultural decolonisation is both a reclamation and a resistance, a way to assert identity, dignity, and self-definition against the continuing dominance of Western cultural standards. It entails embracing and revitalising festivals, oral traditions, spiritual beliefs, artistic practices, and community ways of knowing that form the backbone of indigenous and subaltern life worlds.

Epistemic Decolonisation: Epistemic decolonisation focuses on the transformation of dominant knowledge systems and epistemologies that have long privileged Western ways of knowing while suppressing or invalidating indigenous, non-Western, and subaltern knowledge traditions. This form of decolonisation is particularly relevant to academic institutions, research, and pedagogy, where the colonial legacy remains evident in the privileging of Eurocentric theories, methodologies, and canons. Scholars such as Walter Mignolo (2009) and Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) argue for the recognition and legitimisation of diverse knowledge systems that emerge from lived experiences, community practices, and historical contexts outside the Western gaze. Epistemic decolonisation requires a fundamental rethinking of what counts as valid knowledge, who produces it, and whose voices are heard or silenced in knowledge production.

In the context of Indian higher education and social sciences, epistemic decolonisation holds particular significance. The continued reliance on Western theoretical frameworks often obscures the lived realities of caste, tribe, gender, and religious marginalisation. As we explore in the subsequent sections, social work education in India must confront these epistemic imbalances and strive to build a

more contextually grounded and inclusive discipline that honours the intellectual traditions and resistance histories of India's diverse communities.

7.2 Why Decolonising Intersectionality in the Indian Context is Required

The need to decolonise intersectionality in India arises from the inadequacy of Eurocentric frameworks in addressing the unique and historically rooted forms of marginalisation embedded in Indian society. While intersectionality originated as a powerful analytical tool to understand overlapping systems of oppression, its adoption in India often lacks contextual sensitivity. Decolonising intersectionality is essential for building an inclusive, grounded, and transformative framework that speaks to the lived realities of Indian communities.

Colonial Legacies in Knowledge Production: The intellectual foundations of social sciences, including social work and gender studies in India, have been shaped by colonial and Western epistemologies. These frameworks often ignore, simplify, or misrepresent the intricacies of Indian society. Colonial knowledge production privileged Western categories such as race and class, while marginalising or excluding Indian categories like caste, tribe, and religious identity. As a result, Indian academic discourse continues to operate within borrowed paradigms, which do not adequately capture the structural and intersectional nature of oppression in the Indian context. The continued use of these frameworks limits the scope for radical critique and social transformation.

Indigenous Social Categories: The Indian experience of marginalisation is characterised by deeply entrenched and interwoven axes of identity and hierarchy, including caste, tribe, religion, region, class, and linguistic identity. Unlike the Western focus on race and gender, these categories function within a historically unique framework of social stratification that cannot be fully understood through imported models. For instance, the caste system represents a form of graded inequality that is both socially pervasive and spiritually sanctioned, necessitating an analytical lens that is locally grounded. Ignoring these categories results in a fragmented and distorted understanding of injustice and inequality. A decolonised intersectionality would prioritise these indigenous social categories, making analysis more inclusive and actionable.

Marginalisation of Indigenous Epistemologies: India has a rich intellectual and philosophical tradition that includes Buddhism, Jainism, Bhakti movements, Sikhism, Adivasi worldviews, and Ambedkarite thought. These traditions offer profound insights into social justice, community life, and ethical conduct. However, mainstream academia has historically excluded such knowledge systems, deeming them inferior or non-scientific compared to Western paradigms. The marginalisation of these epistemologies reinforces the dominance of colonial frameworks in education and research. Decolonising intersectionality requires the integration of these indigenous philosophies into the conceptual toolkit of social sciences. For example, Ambedkar's analysis of caste and his emphasis on dignity, justice, and fraternity offer a powerful intersectional critique grounded in the Indian experience.

Toward a Praxis-Oriented Intersectionality: A decolonised approach to intersectionality in India must move beyond theory to engage with praxis, that is, the lived experiences, struggles, and resistances of marginalised communities. This involves grounding academic inquiry in grassroots realities and aligning research with social movements such as Dalit feminism, Adivasi rights activism, and LGBTQ+ struggles. These movements embody the principles of intersectionality in practice, often articulating nuanced critiques of oppression that cut across caste, gender, sexuality, and region. A praxis-oriented intersectionality would not only bridge the gap between theory and practice but also generate more accountable, transformative, and community-driven scholarship.

In sum, decolonising intersectionality in the Indian context is not just an academic exercise; it is an ethical and political imperative. It calls for reclaiming indigenous categories, validating suppressed epistemologies, and reshaping educational frameworks to reflect the lived realities of India's diverse and marginalised populations.

8. INDIAN HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICE

Indigenous Philosophies of Justice Ancient Indian traditions offer a wealth of philosophical reflections on justice, ethics, and social organisation. Despite their complexities and contradictions, many of these traditions promote egalitarian and inclusive worldviews. For example, Buddhism advocates for compassion, non-violence, and the rejection of caste-based hierarchy. Jainism emphasises non-possession and ethical conduct toward all living beings, including marginalised groups. The Bhakti and Sufi movements, which emerged as popular spiritual and social reform currents, challenged orthodox religious structures and embraced values of love, equality, and devotion beyond caste and religious boundaries. These traditions provided alternative frameworks to Brahmanical patriarchy and exclusion, and remain critical for rethinking justice through an intersectional and decolonial lens.

People's Movements and Grassroots Practices Long before the academic articulation of intersectionality, India witnessed grassroots movements and intellectual traditions that embodied intersectional thinking in practice. Social reformers such as Jyotirao Phule, Periyar E.V. Ramasamy, and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar developed radical critiques of caste, patriarchy, and social inequality. Phule's work, grounded in the lived experiences of oppressed castes, highlighted the interconnectedness of caste and gender oppression. Periyar's Self-Respect Movement questioned the legitimacy of Brahmanical dominance and advocated for rationalism and gender equality. Ambedkar's work on caste, religion, and constitutional justice offered one of the most comprehensive intersectional critiques rooted in the Indian context.

Contemporary social movements continue this legacy. Dalit women's collectives, Adivasi rights movements, LGBTQ+ activism, and anti-caste student protests are spaces where multiple identities intersect and collective resistance is forged. These movements challenge both structural and epistemic oppression, offering rich material for rethinking intersectionality in decolonised, practice-oriented terms. They remind us that intersectional thought has always existed in India—not necessarily in the language of academic theory, but in the everyday acts of resistance and survival by marginalised communities.

8.1 Previous Efforts to Decolonise Social Work Education and Intersectionality in India

Decolonising social work education in India involves challenging the epistemological dominance of Western theories, methods, and pedagogies while reclaiming indigenous frameworks rooted in India's socio-cultural and historical contexts. Social work as an academic discipline in India emerged during the colonial period, heavily modelled on British and American frameworks (Desai, 2002). Consequently, much of its curriculum, fieldwork structure, and theoretical orientation remained disconnected from the lived realities of Indian communities, especially those on the margins such as Dalits, Adivasis, women, and religious minorities (Nadkarni, 2016; Dash & Roy, 2016). In recent decades, there has been a growing call for the decolonisation of the discipline, particularly by integrating intersectionality in ways that reflect India's complex caste-gender-class-religion matrix (Rambaree & Powers, 2015; Das C, 2020).

This section explores some of the earlier and ongoing efforts to reshape social work education in India, highlighting three key areas: alternative curricula and indigenisation initiatives; critical scholarship; and attempts to integrate intersectionality with Indian socio-cultural realities.

8.2 Alternative Curricula and Indigenisation Initiatives

Indian social work institutions have made varied efforts to localise curricula and fieldwork practice. Prestigious institutions like the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) and the Delhi School of Social Work (DSSW) have historically incorporated themes such as caste, tribal welfare, and gender into their courses (Desai, 2006). For instance, TISS launched specialised programmes in Dalit and Tribal Studies, Rural Development, and Social Justice, which aimed to bring India's marginalised voices into mainstream discourse (TISS Prospectus, 2018). The Rajiv Gandhi National Institute of Youth

Development (RGNIYD) and Madras School of Social Work have also introduced regional and community-focused electives.

Moreover, many universities have revised their fieldwork practicum to include placements in rural, tribal, and urban poor communities. This move seeks to expose students to grassroots realities and facilitate experiential learning beyond urban-centric development models (Nair, 2020). These efforts resonate with indigenisation as articulated by scholars like Gray and Coates (2005), who advocate for adapting social work practice to fit local cultural and social contexts.

However, these curricular changes often remain institution-specific and lack systemic support or inter-university coordination. The University Grants Commission (UGC) has yet to mandate a widespread indigenisation or decolonisation framework for social work education.

8.3 Critical Scholarship

Indian social work scholars have long critiqued the colonial underpinnings of the discipline. Pioneering voices like Dr. G.R. Banerjee, one of the earliest Indian social work educators, emphasised integrating indigenous methods and community-centric approaches as early as the 1950s (Banerjee, 1972). Dr. Vimla Nadkarni has highlighted how Western models of casework and psychotherapy often fail to account for caste oppression, poverty, and religious exclusion in Indian society (Nadkarni, 2016). She argues for a shift toward structural approaches that consider social justice and rights-based frameworks.

The Indian Association of Social Work Education (IASWE), a professional body of educators, has also voiced the need for curricular reforms that reflect India's socio-political diversity. Their national consultations have emphasised rethinking fieldwork ethics, cultural competency, and inclusion of indigenous knowledge systems (IASWE, 2014).

8.4 Integration of Intersectionality with Indian Realities

While intersectionality as a concept originates from Black feminist thought (Crenshaw, 1989), its adaptation in India has been uneven and fragmented. Scholars and educators have begun to explore how caste, gender, class, and religion intersect to shape social exclusion, but much of this work remains in early stages.

Some institutions, such as TISS Mumbai and Ambedkar University Delhi, have incorporated intersectionality into courses on gender studies, social justice, and human rights. Research initiatives like the Centre for Equity Studies (CES) and the Dalit Women Fight campaign have also highlighted intersectional issues, especially caste-gender violence (Rege, 1998; Rao, 2010).

However, integration at the curricular level is inconsistent. Often, intersectionality is discussed as a theoretical import rather than a lived experience rooted in India's historical struggles against Brahminical patriarchy, religious fundamentalism, and economic marginalisation (Paik, 2014). The lack of institutional training and theoretical clarity around adapting intersectionality in Indian classrooms leads to superficial inclusion rather than transformative pedagogy.

Moreover, most social work programmes still fail to teach students how to apply intersectionality in practice, be it in field placements, community organisation, or policy analysis. What is needed is an epistemological shift that takes seriously how India's social hierarchies interact and sustain inequality.

9. FINDINGS

The paper identifies that the current use of intersectionality within Indian social work education is limited, fragmented, and largely derivative of Western epistemological models (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2000; Rege, 1998). Imported race- and gender-centric variants of intersectionality fail to capture India's caste-gender-class-religion matrix and often reproduce epistemic dependency (Dash & Roy, 2016). This dependence on Euro-American theoretical frameworks results in curricula that inadequately address indigenous hierarchies such as caste and religion, leading to a disjuncture between theory and field realities (Desai, 2006; Nadkarni & Sinha, 2016).

Findings also indicate that despite several indigenisation attempts, such as curricular reform and field-based experiential learning at institutions like the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) and Delhi School of Social Work (Nair, 2020), systemic transformation remains incomplete. Most programs continue to be guided by Western pedagogical templates, privileging textual and written knowledge over community-based, oral, and embodied epistemologies (Gray, Coates, & Yellow Bird, 2008).

Through its critical interpretive synthesis, the study proposes that a decolonised intersectionality for India must embed caste-conscious and multilingual learning outcomes, co-supervision with community mentors, and reciprocal, movement-linked field placements. It also recommends assessment reforms that validate oral and community-authored artefacts alongside written submissions. These elements, the paper finds, are crucial for building critical consciousness, aligning classroom and field realities, and preparing graduates for justice-oriented practice (Santos, 2014; Mignolo, 2009).

10. DISCUSSION

The discussion situates intersectionality within India's colonial and caste-based hierarchies, arguing that uncritical importation of Western theories results in epistemic injustice. Intersectionality, originally developed to address the racial, gendered oppression of Black women in the United States (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991), becomes inadequate in India if it does not account for caste and religion, structural categories that predate colonialism and shape every aspect of social life (Guru, 2002; Chakravarti, 2003). It is emphasised that decolonising intersectionality requires recognising and integrating India's indigenous epistemologies, such as Ambedkarite, Gandhian, Adivasi, and Bhakti traditions, which have long theorised social justice and human dignity (Ambedkar, 1936/2014; Phule, 1873/2002; Periyar, 2009).

The paper's findings further show that intersectionality in Indian curricula is often confined to gender and class, sidelining caste, tribe, and linguistic diversity. This reductionism risks obscuring the lived realities of marginalised groups such as Dalit women, whose experiences of oppression are simultaneously gendered and caste-bound (Rege, 2006; Paik, 2014). The discussion highlights how a decolonised intersectional framework should prioritise "situated intersectionality" (Hancock, 2016), grounded in India's historical struggles and social movements. Dalit feminism, Adivasi activism, and LGBTQ+ collectives are identified as practice sites that already embody intersectional and decolonial thinking in action (Shah, 2020; Rao, 2009).

The study argues that social work education must move beyond token inclusion of indigenous content toward structural transformation. This involves epistemic decolonisation, dismantling the dominance of Western theories and validating diverse knowledge systems rooted in community life (Mignolo, 2009; Smith, 2012). A pedagogy informed by cognitive justice (Santos, 2014) would treat oral histories, community rituals, and embodied practices as legitimate sources of knowledge. Moreover, fieldwork must evolve into reciprocal partnerships with communities, co-supervised by local mentors, rather than remaining hierarchical or extractive (Rambaree & Powers, 2015).

Finally, the discussion reframes social work education as a site of **cognitive justice** and **transformative praxis**. By decolonising intersectionality, social work in India can move from a service-delivery model toward one of solidarity, empowering students to challenge systemic injustices across caste, class, gender, and religion. This transformation is not optional but necessary to realise the profession's ethical commitment to equity and human dignity (Desai, 2006; Nadkarni & Sinha, 2016).

11. CONCLUSION

Decolonising intersectionality in Indian social work is not merely an intellectual pursuit; it is a moral, political, and professional imperative. The task transcends theoretical engagement; it demands the reconstruction of epistemologies, pedagogies, and practices that have long been shaped by colonial, Eurocentric frameworks. In India, where axes of oppression such as caste, gender, class, religion, and

ethnicity intersect in complex and historically entrenched ways, applying an uncritical Western model of intersectionality risks erasing the specificities of local experiences. Therefore, decolonising intersectionality entails the re-rooting of social work education and practice in the socio-cultural, political, and historical realities of Indian communities.

Such a transformation calls for an intentional shift from universalist paradigms to contextually grounded frameworks, those informed by the lived experiences of Dalits, Adivasis, Bahujans, religious minorities, gender non-conforming individuals, and other historically oppressed groups. It necessitates epistemic humility, the recognition that Western knowledge systems do not hold a monopoly on truth and those indigenous philosophies, grassroots wisdom, and subaltern narratives are equally valid sources of social work knowledge (Santos, 2014; Shah, 2020).

This reorientation must begin within the curriculum itself. Curricular reform should include courses that critically interrogate colonial legacies, foreground anti-caste and feminist epistemologies, and teach students to think reflexively about power, identity, and positionality. Furthermore, fieldwork placements should be designed not as mere exposure to “underprivileged” communities but as opportunities for reciprocal learning and political engagement with sites of resistance, resilience, and transformation.

Equally important is the engagement with grassroots social movements, many of which have long been articulating intersectional critiques, such as Dalit women's movements, queer-trans rights groups, environmental justice campaigns led by Adivasi communities, and struggles for land, water, and livelihood. These movements offer insightful critiques of the Indian state, civil society, and global capitalism and must be recognised as critical knowledge producers in their own right.

Decolonising intersectionality also implies that social work education becomes a site for cognitive justice, a space where plural ways of knowing and being are not only tolerated but actively centred. This includes acknowledging spiritual, oral, and embodied knowledges, and creating academic spaces where intergenerational, community-based, and lived experiences are valued alongside scholarly texts. Ultimately, a decolonised and intersectional social work in India would foster praxis-based engagement, bridging theory and action in pursuit of social transformation. It would cultivate professionals who are not merely service providers but co-creators of justice and solidarity, attuned to the multiple, layered oppressions that shape Indian society, and committed to dismantling them through inclusive, participatory, and accountable social work practice.

12. REFERENCES

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