Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information can be found at: http://uwindsor.ca/critica1socialwork
Shifting the Ground in Nepali Social Work: A Decolonizing Perspective

Critical Social Work 19(2)

Raj K. Yadav

The University of Newcastle, Australia

Author Note

I would like to acknowledge Professor Mel Gray for her guidance to develop this paper.

Abstract

Nepali social work has Western liberal roots and traditions that impose cultural imperialism, professional sectarianism, and political colonization. There is a mismatch between what is taught in social work education programs in Nepal and Nepali culture. Further, this borrowed social work concept is out of step with the structural problems that Nepali people face on a daily basis, such as casteism, ethnocentrism, poverty, and exclusion. In this study, being inclined to critical pedagogy and decolonization discourse, I argue that Nepali social workers should emphasize and engage in decolonizing social work practice in Nepal. It must listen to the voice of the people at the grassroots and engage in ‘people-centred development’ to address structural problems perpetuating injustice and inequality in Nepal.

Keywords: ethnicity and cultural diversity, social structure and social inequality, social work and social justice, critical social work, Nepal
Introduction

Nepal is often characterized as a “‘Shangri La’ – a place of complete bliss and delight” (Riaz & Basu, 2010, p. 1). The Nepali nation was established in late 18th century when King Prithvi Narayan Shah, from a small hill kingdom of Gorkha, conquered most of the Himalayan foothills along with other tiny nations of the North Indian plane, and shifted his capital to Kathmandu in 1768-1769 (Whelpton, 2005). From these tumultuous beginnings, sudden and violent political changes have frequently jeopardized political progress and social, cultural, and economic development (Hangen, 2009).

Approximately 80% of Nepali population is rural, dependent on subsistence agriculture, and subject to the disparities arising from caste, gender, and geography (International Fund for Agriculture Development [IFAD], 2014). Poverty, unemployment, and declining natural resources have crippled peoples’ day-to-day lives in recent years (Thieme et al., 2005). This is exacerbated by the fact that Nepal does not have a strong human rights and social justice culture. This is especially so for the marginalized sections of Nepali society – Dalits (untouchable castes), indigenous nationalities, Madheshis (people from the plain region of country), and Muslims (Lawoti, 2012), many of whom lack even the rights to adequate food, health, education, employment, and housing (FoodFirst Information and Action Network, 2014).

Nepal has borrowed social work from Western countries, especially from the United States of America and the United Kingdom. As Yadav (2017a) argued, the west-centric social work, mainly its imperialist bias and advocacy of a universal profession, creates tensions with Nepali local values and customs. Like other Third World nations that have imported social work from these Western contexts, Nepal struggles to popularize the profession at the grassroots level (Yadav, 2017a). Hence, the failure for social work to gain legitimacy in Nepal is due primarily to Western origin, epistemology, and practice base (Yadav, 2017a).

Nepal reached a major milestone with the establishment of a multi-party democratic system in 1990 (Giri, 2006). It marked the peoples’ victory over a 30-year monopolizing, absolute monarchy (Lawoti, 2010). Coincidently, social work, as an academic discipline, also appeared during this tumultuous decade, starting in 1996 at St. Xavier’s College, Kathmandu by Jesuit missionaries. Although, they had already introduced ‘social work’ training at Social Work Institutes in 1987 (Yadav, 2017a).

Given Nepali social work education and practice’s colonial roots, which came through its Indian connections, it is described as a “Western cuisine with an Indian flavour” (Yadav, 2017a, p. 5). Similar to its African, Cuban, and Chinese social work compatriots, there is a need for a decolonized social work in Nepal, one that embed indigenous approach and community development perspective in social work education and practice (Osei-Hwedie 2002; Strug, 2006; Yan & Tsui, 2007).

**Nepali Society and its Quest for Social Justice**

**Social Structure**

As the “ethnic turn-table of Asia” (Hegen, 1961, p. 59), Nepal is a country of great cultural, racial, ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity. Today, it is a home to 125 castes and ethnic groups with 123 languages spoken as the mother tongue (Government of Nepal [GoN], 2011). The castes and ethnic communities are broadly divided into two major groups: the Indo-Aryan language-speaking Caucasold group and the Tibeto-Burman language-speaking...
Mongoloid group (Gurung, 2009). Socially, Nepal is divided into several distinct groups: (a) the Hindu groups with caste origins; (b) the Newars, the ethnic/tribal groups; (c) the Muslims; and (d) other minority groups, including Sikhs, Bengalis, Marwadis, and Christians (Mishra, 2005).

Similarly, the social universe of Nepali societies is categorized into four classes and 36 castes defined in terms of Char Varna and Chhatisat, which serves as the basis of the touchable and untouchable caste system that remains deeply embedded in the Nepali social structure (Gurung, 2009; Whelpton, 2005). “On June 4, 2006, [the House of Representatives] declared Nepal an “Untouchability-Free” country” (Vasily, 2009, p. 216). Despite this measure, deep-rooted caste and ethnicity based discrimination endures (Sob, 2012. The dominant Hindunized way of life continues to promote caste classification of the Muluki Ain promulgated in 1854, which divided Nepali peoples as Chokho Jat (pure caste) or Pani Chalne Jat (water-acceptable caste), and Pani Nachalne Jat (impure or water unacceptable caste) as shown in Table 1 (Hofer, 2004).

**Table 1**
*Caste Classification (Muluki Ain 1854)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Caste category</th>
<th>Caste groups incorporated in the category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pure (Chokho Jat) or water acceptable castes (Pani Chalne Jat)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Wearers of the sacred thread (Tagadhari) Hill Brahman, Tarai Brahman, Thakuri/Kshatriya, Sanyasi (ascetic sect), some Newars</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Non-enslavable alcoholic-drinkers (Namasiny Matwali Jat) Magar, Gurung, Sunwar, some Newars</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Enslavable alcoholic-drinkers (Masinya Matwali Jat) Bhot, Chepang, Kumal, Hayu, Tharu, Gharti</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impure or water unacceptable castes (Pani Nachalne Jat)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Impure but touchable (Pani Nachalne Chhokhito Halna Naparne) Kasai, Kusle, Dhobi, Kulu, Muslim, Mlechha</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Impure and untouchable (Pani Nachalne Choi Chhito Halha Parne) Kami, Sarki, Khadara, Damai, Gaine, Badi, Pode, Chame</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Hofer (2004)

According to the 2011 Census, Nepal’s total population was about 26 million with an annual population growth rate of about 1% (GoN, 2011). This census identified the following main ethnic groups: Kshatriya (17%), Brahmin (12%), Magar (7%), Newar (5%), Tamang (6%), Tharu (4%), Yadav (4%), Muslims (4%), and Dalit/Untouchable (12%) (GoN, 2011). Therefore, writing an account of Nepal’s social structure would be incomplete without an account of intergroup associations, the multidimensional relations of the various caste groups, and the social issues experienced vis-à-vis poverty, literacy, land ownership, and access to decision making. To this, Gurung (2009) explained,

> [t]he cultural discrimination, economic exploitation, social exclusion, and political oppression have become the national characters of Nepali state policies ever since the formation of greater Nepal through territorial conquest by the Gorkha rulers in 1769. (p. 4)
Gurung (2009) also noted that 44% of indigenous peoples, 46% of Dalits, and 41% of Muslims were below poverty line while the national poverty rate was only 31%. Likewise, the annual per capita income of indigenous peoples excluding Newar, Madheshis, and Dalits was NRs 37,726 (USD 321.40), NRs 33,288 (USD 326.92), and NRs 33,786 (USD 331.81), respectively, while that of high-caste Brahmans and Kshatriyas was NRs 49,878 (USD 489.85) in 2011 (GoN & United Nations Development Programme, 2014).

Cultural, geographic, linguistic, caste, and ethnic factors determine access to education, land, and the economy. For instance, in 2011, the literacy rate of socially and economically privileged groups ranged between 71% (Kshatriya) and 82% (Brahmin-Hill), whereas among the most disadvantaged groups, it was as low as 20% (Dom) and 37% (Chamar) (GoN, 2014). The literacy rate of Muslim was also low, with only 44% of the them being able to read and write compared to the overall national literacy rate at 66% (GoN, 2014). Likewise, in the first Constitution Assembly formed in 2008, compared to their share of overall population, indigenous, Madheshis, Muslims, and Dalits were still underrepresented; whereas the dominant groups, such as Brahmin, Kshatriya, and Thakuri were overrepresented. Out of 601 seats in the 2008 Constitution Assembly, indigenous, Madheshis, Muslims, and Dalits occupied 219 (36%), 117 (19%), 17 (3%), and 49 (8%) seats respectively, while three dominant caste groups, such as Brahmin, Kshatriya, and Thakuri obtained 199 (34%) seats, for example (Gurung, 2009).

Although Nepal’s new Constitution recognizes its multiethnic, multicultural, and multilingual nature, its long tradition of Hindu hegemony endures (Pariyar & Lovett, 2016). This leads to a practice of nepotism and favouritism through which the high-caste and class people “prohibit indigenous peoples, women, Madheshis, Dalits, and other marginalized groups from religious, linguistic, and political rights and thereby exclude them from mainstream development programs” (Gurung, 2009, p. 8). Nevertheless, due to the rise of ethnic identitarian politics (Hangen, 2009; Yadav, 2017a), the representation of marginalized communities in decision-making is improving, in piecemeal, in recent years (Bishwakarma, 2016)

Economic Status

Between 1961 and 1990, under direct rule of a Monarch, socio-economic development was sluggish with mass poverty levels remaining high in Nepal (Whelpton, 2005). After 1990, in post-democracy, the ten-year long Maoist insurgency hampered development, which also confronted the dominance of political and economic power of the ruling elites (Lawoti, 2010). The government’s efforts to reduce poverty and improve human well-being notwithstanding, Nepal faces challenges to foster broad-based economic growth as Nepal’s political situation continues to deteriorate and the ensuing internal conflict and suppression of democracy is worsening (World Bank, 2011, p. 4). The Nepali government has overlooked deep-rooted poverty and sluggish economic growth, which is contributing to political unrest and violence in Nepal (IFAD, 2014). This is eroding the strength of these fledgling democracy, social harmony, and citizen’s rights as well as socio-economic development of the country (Meier, 2001).

The primary reasons for Nepal’s slow economic growth lie in its political instability, adverse external shocks, and slow progress on key structural reforms (Independent Evaluation Group-World Bank [IEG-WB], 2010). Its landlocked geography, a weak industrial production base, high import and low export economy, dependence on a single transit route via India, and failure to keep pace with globalizing world markets also contribute to slow economic growth in Nepal (Sharma & Bhandari, 2005).
All these factors have led to an economy dependent on remittances, with many citizens working abroad, especially in the Gulf Countries – the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, and Kuwait (Sapkota, 2013). This foreign inflow of capital has improved domestic consumption substantially, helping to reduce rural and urban poverty (IEG-WB, 2010). However, despite short-term gains, upward pressure on the real exchange rate of remittances and reductions in the domestic work effort in the long term might severely hamper national development (Sapkota, 2013).

Political Movements and Nepal’s Quest for Social Justice

Nepal’s quest for social justice has always pivoted around ensuring political rights for marginalized population such as woman, Dalit, Madheshis, indigenous populations, and Muslims. As Ghai (2011) noted, in Nepal “[t]he great antidote to singularisation is social justice, directed at ensuring fairness, equal opportunities, affirmative action, respect for different cultures and traditions, and above all, inclusion, representation and participation” (p. 317) of Nepali marginalized populations in the mainstream politics. To ensure social justice, the most marginalized communities demand for pro-active policies and affirmative actions on the part of Nepali state. Those include,

- fair and effective representation in state institutions, equality, affirmative action including ‘reservations’ or quotas, secure citizenship, a secular state, political recognition of the diversity of cultures and languages, and self-government through federal type autonomy, preferably based on language and ethnicity (Ghai, 2011, p. 322).

Therefore, at present, Nepali political activities concentrate on restructuring Nepali state through a secular, inclusive, and federal-democratic republic practice to begin an era of reconciliation, rehabilitation, and reconstruction (IFAD, 2014). The idea of secularism, inclusiveness, and federal-democratic republic as the new characters of Nepali state emerged in the backdrop of the ‘April uprising’ of 2006, which demanded to abolish Monarchical rule on the one hand and “define and design new [Nepali] institutions… and promise to live up in a new to the ideals of democracy” (Bhandari, 2014, p. 3) and social justice on the other. Yet, overcoming ethnic and caste conflict, and emerging regional armed groups, threatens political and social stability, as does the task of mainstreaming marginalized groups and institutionalizing democratic political governance (Hangen, 2009; Riaz & Basu, 2010).

To date, two major peoples’ movements, ‘the spring awakening’ of 1990 for multi-party democracy system and ‘the April uprising’ of 2006 to abolish Monarchical system, instilled high hopes and expectations for social justice among Nepali peoples. Nepali peoples expected those movements would establish the new political system by shifting power from the Monarch to the Parliament that would ensure civic and political rights as well as economic growth in the country (Lawoti, 2012; Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2004). Of the two, the peoples’ movement of 2006 in particular assumed to uplift marginalized and historically oppressed groups of Nepal through social inclusion and representation in state institutions, such as in the parliament, bureaucracy, and judiciary (Lawoti, 2012).

In addition, in terms of quest for human rights, inclusive state, and social justice, the decade long Maoist insurgency (1996–2006) was a turning point for the country (Hutt, 2004; Lawoti & Pahari, 2010). The Maoist insurgency not only challenged the exclusionary democracy that “alienated ideological and cultural minorities through denial of political space in
governance” (Lawoti, 2010, p. 19) but also demanded to address existing socio-cultural inequality based on language, caste and ethnicity, and religion (Crane, 2009; Hutt, 2004). Nepali Maoist followed Mao Zedong’s, Chairman of Chinese Communist Revolution, radical doctrine ‘power comes from barrel of gun’ and Peru’s ‘Shining Path’ believing ‘class struggle’ would liberate many Nepali rural, economically deprived, low caste, and indigenous peoples from systematic oppressions (Crane, 2002; Lawoti, 2010). The essence of the insurgent’s cause was:

-the need to end a ‘despotic monarchy’, change the ‘feudal regime’ in Nepal and give a ‘voice to the people’ … land for the landless, jobs for the unemployed, representation and money for the provinces, and an end to the exploitation of labor and discrimination against caste. (Crane, 2002, p. 11)

However, peoples’ movements and Maoist insurgency just seemed to be a rhetoric, ensuring the prolonged political transition until today, as well as failing to produce improvements especially in the socio-economic spheres of excluded and minority peoples’ lives. To this, von Einsiedel, Malone, and Pradhan (2012b) noted that in the post peoples’ movements and Maoist insurgency,

Nepal is struggling with multiple interlocking transitions: from war to peace, from autocracy to democracy, and from an exclusionary and centralised state to a more inclusive federal one … state transformation, has not been linear, has suffered setbacks, is likely to see future reversal, and is unlikely any time soon to be “completed” (p. 361)

This stagnation has not only led to disappointment among Nepali people, but has also pushed the country towards a failed nation status (Panday, 2012). In the backdrop of two constituent assemblies, elected in 2008 and 2013, lawmakers still struggle to establish peoples’ faith in democracy, socio-economic development, inclusion, and justice for all, and thus slogan of political parties a ‘New Nepal’ seems to be a rhetoric (Yadav, 2017b). Nepal’s quest for human rights, social justice, development, and democracy remains tenuous, at best, and a legitimate state (Lake, 2010) and free civil society (Mozaffar, 2010) are yet to materialise. According to Crane (2002), “… higher castes … [were and continue to be] at the center of the intellectual and political elite of the country. Middle and lower castes are under-represented” (p. 7). Likewise, Lawoti (2012) observed,

Dalit, indigenous nationalities, Madheshis, and Muslims were particularly discriminated against and repressed. [The state’s] … tight control and effective oppression largely succeeded in surpassing public resistance, resulting in deceptive façade of peace and ethnic harmony, which the state tirelessly propagated through school textbooks, an official narrative of Nepal’s history, and the media. It was a ‘peace’ based on hierarchy and inequality among groups and maintained through coercive force. (p. 129)

Thus, social justice is not high on the national agenda, as Nepal continues to straddle the authoritarian-democratic divide (Freedom House, 2015). Political elites continue to dominate its post-republic ‘partitocracy’ more concerned with power than democracy (Michels, 1915). At the inception of Nepal’s experience with multi-party democracy, Shah (1993) argued Nepal required additional motifs to become a nation; it needed to institutionalize democracy in a manner that would include its diverse ethnic and cultural groups; and incorporate the meaning of social inclusion and social justice in its apparatus, which, has yet to be accomplished.

There are 211 international non-government organizations (INGOs) and 39763 non-government organizations (NGOs) in Nepal and several of them work closely with Nepali
government and grassroots-based rights groups to manage Nepal’s democratic transition (Social Welfare Council, 2015; Yadav, 2017a). They continue to support Nepal’s evolving public administration and institutionalize the ‘rule of law’ (that is, law must govern the nation; not the arbitrary power) to create better conditions for democracy, human rights, and social justice (Yadav, 2017a).

In this alarming situation of Nepal’s transition phase, social work too has to face the challenge of its responsibilities to institute inclusive, ethnic, and culturally responsive practice (Yadav, 2017b). Nepali social work has to shift its ground from Western epistemology, imperialist values, and a universal approach to a transformative, peoples’ centered, decolonized, and developmental profession and practice. Yadav (2017a) has argued that a shift from Western version of social work to a decolonized, developmental social work in Nepal equips “social work[ers] with community building and locality development skills to mobilise community members to decide on their own goals and strategies, and … [also guarantees] their autonomy over issues affecting them” (p. 300). Only then can Nepali social work attain authenticity, legitimacy, and community sanction for their recognition (Yadav, 2017a).

Problems with Social Work in Nepal: A Step Forward and Two Steps Backward

The focus of Nepali social work varies from medical and psychiatric models to rights-based and community development practice (Nikku, 2010). However, the country lacks an authentic localized model of social work, despite the fact that social work was introduced almost three decades ago (Yadav, 2017a). Initial, the aim of social work in Nepal was to produce para-professionals in the development sector, which currently seeks to produce trained human power for non-government organizations, such as NGOs and INGOs. During its beginning period, the Nepali people were oblivious as to what social work meant and what it had to do in the larger Nepali developmental framework (Yadav, 2017a). Early social work courses drew heavily on Western ideologies and epistemologies, especially from the United States (Yadav, 2017a). Early social work founders seemed little concerned to the situation of the country and its struggle to sustain fledgling democracy, quell the Maoist insurgency, and overcome social crises, including poverty, starvation, and acute economic slowdown (European External Action Service, 2010; Yadav, 2017a).

Applying the colonial model of social work is not only alienating people from their right to self-determination, but also is unethical by today’s professional standards surrounding cultural relevance (Gray, Coates, Yellow Bird, & Hetherington, 2013a). Hence, Nepali social work education is undergoing a period of disillusionment. It lacks a clear direction, and there is a growing dissatisfaction with its lack of government recognition and community sanction among social work graduates (Nikku, 2010). Besides, the dominance of Western models significantly fails to integrate social work with the fundamental bases of Nepal’s multilayered societies, cultures, and ethnicities (Yadav, 2017a). Thus, a systematic institutional framework is needed to make social work more accountable to Nepali society. In other words, a process of ‘Nepalization’ is needed to enhance social work’s reach to the unique caste and ethnic masses where its services are on demand (Yadav, 2017a).

Western rooted social work, with its individualistic approaches, has already moved away from its historic mission to the poor, community, the community’s most needy, and the oppressed citizens for the pursuit of therapeutic individualism (Hardcastle, Wenocur, & Power, 1997; Specht & Courtney, 1994). Its growing tendency in favour of private practice, status, and
income has transcended therapeutic-individualism and entrepreneurship and has equipped the market with power to decide its agenda and direction (Specht & Courtney, 1994). Thus, “the profession is removing ‘social’ from ‘social work’” (Powell, 2001, p. 13), which is out of step with Nepali societies, in which blood bonds, responsibilities to the collective family system, and mutual interdependence are core values along with the call to respond to caste and ethnic conflict, ethnic-based identity, and social discrimination (Yadav, 2016, 2017a). Given this backdrop, Nepali social work cannot afford to be politically neutral and conservative in fulfilling its commitment of social justice and the emancipation of the indigenous and oppressed people. Further, Nepali social workers need a closer look to analyse imperialistic aspects of global and international social work and must employ humanistic, democratic, and justice values to excel a bottom-up participatory rather than a top-down professional model that acknowledges and develops alliances with ‘right holders’ (i.e., beneficiaries and clients; Ioakimidis, 2013; Tanaka, 2011; Yadav, 2017a).

The country is in a transitional phase following the decade-long Maoist insurgency (von Einsiedel, Malone, & Pradhan, 2012a) and is defining human rights and social justice and inclusion, particularly citizens’ rights to participate in the development agenda and its democratic process (Hangen, 2009; Langford & Bhattarai, 2011; Lawoti, 2012) through the recently promulgated constitution. In this stage, there is no doubt that social work can play vital roles alongside government agencies, internal non-government, and international non-government organizations to enhance social service and social justice at the individual, group, and societal level. Particularly, social work has a great potential to contribute to Nepal’s ongoing nation building process (Yadav, 2016). However, until now, social workers are unable to establish a foothold internally in government organizations but have found a receptive environment in mushrooming internationally funded NGOs and INGOs. In these organizations, social workers are hired on short-term contracts, which prevent them from practicing any lasting changes or instilling culturally appropriate services and practices (Yadav, 2017a). Consequently, social workers are becoming agents of neoliberal aid regimes bent on structural adjustment – an enduring form of colonialism and imperialism – equipped as they are with Western theories and models of practice (Devkota, 2007; Yadav, 2017a). This keeps social workers away from mainstream planning and policy formulation and hampers their struggle for recognition, authenticity, and legitimacy in Nepal.

Therefore, Nepali social work must be multi-sectoral, dynamic, and community oriented since collectivism is valued over individualism in Nepal. Equipping social work with community building and locality development that mobilizes community members to decide on their goals and strategies guarantees their autonomy over issues affecting them (Yadav, 2017a). Nepal is economically a poor country that needs a massive production of social workers equipped to deal with poverty within a cultural frame of reference befitting local communities and cultures. It needs indigenous culturally relevant practice models to address the needs of Nepal’s diverse cultures (Nikku, 2014; Yadav, 2016, 2017a). Further, a home-grown approach to social work will help social work educators and practitioners to gain the support of local communities and address poverty and structural injustice at the grassroots level (Yadav, 2017a).

**Decolonizing Social Work in Nepal: Need and Prospect**

The terms ‘indigenous people’ and ‘decolonization’ need clear definition while discussing decolonization of social work. ‘Indigenous people’ refers to ‘first people’ or ‘native people’, ‘first
nation’ or ‘people of the land’, ‘aboriginals’, or ‘fourth world people’ (Corntassel & Primeau, 1995; Gray, Coates, Yellow Bird, & Hetherington, 2013b; Manuel & Posluns, 1974). The term indigenous people emerged in the 1970s out of the struggle of the American Indian Movement and Canadian Indian Brotherhood (Smith, 2012). The term also internalizes the issues and struggles of the colonized peoples (Wilmer, 1993). As Wilmer put forward, the word indigenous population belongs to a network of peoples to share experiences of colonization of their lands, culture, and sovereignty. More specifically, “indigenous peoples represent the unfinished business of decolonization” (Wilmer, 1993, p. 5). However, defining indigenous people is not only contested, but a political phenomenon as well. In social work discourse, indigeneity is a gateway to decolonize education and profession that enhance culturally informed and locally oriented social work interventions (Gray et al., 2013b).

The term colonial social work refers to the limitations and imperialist frameworks inherent in the Western social work that have victimized ‘Other’ by altering their identity, culture, and, likewise their lived experience (Midgley, 1981, 2008). On the contrary, decolonization is deconstructing the ideals of colonialism and imperialism. It is the act of reordering, recollecting, reclaiming, and reconstituting indigenous and colonized peoples’ voice in social work (Smith, 2012). Decolonization in social work refers to the process of detaching colonial sentiments from mainstream social work especially while transferring to the Third World nations (Gray et al. 2013a). Especially drawing on from its critical focuses, such as anti-racist social work (Dominelli, 1997), feminist social work (Bricker-Jenkins, Hooyman, & Gottlieb, 1991), structural social work (Mullaly, 2009), and critical theory (Gray & Webb, 2013), decolonizing social work also refers to its long-standing struggle against hegemony in mainstream social work (Gray et al., 2013b). It is in this premise that Nepal seeks to decolonize imported social work education and practice as its own historical context completely differs from those of West.

Social work imported from the West to Nepal is not suitable within its social framework because of its colonial nature. Moreover, the psychologized and clinical bent social work education (Nikku, 2014) borrowed from the West barely fits into Nepali society in which social interactions have been defined through social cohesion (Yadav, 2017a). More than a helping profession, it has contributed in silencing and marginalizing indigenous and ethnic peoples across the underdeveloped and developing nations including in Nepal (Gray et al. 2013b; Yadav, 2017a). Therefore, decolonizing social work is the Third World’s struggle against the hegemonic nature of social work, thus promoting culturally relevant helping and healing system. Yellow Bird (2008, 2013) has provided detailed justification on the need of decolonizing social work:

- Many nation states have colonized indigenous lands and their colonial mindset has not only territorialized but also has confined indigenous culture, social rights, and sovereignty. The act of colonizing is still prevailing in several forms.
- Under colonial policies of many settler government and agencies, indigenous peoples are still being subjugated, including genocide, ethnocide, ecocide and linguicide.
- Historical injustices and oppression yet form barriers for the indigenous people to exercise their rights to development according to their needs and interest.

In spite of need for decolonization of social work, there are only handfuls of scholars theorizing in this discourse. So far, ‘Decolonizing Social Work’ edited by Gray et al. (2013b) is the only extensive attempt to theorize this concept. In their book, they conceptualized
decolonization of social work in terms of – theory (thinking about indigenous social work), practice (from the bottom up), education (facilitating local relevance), and research (decolonizing methodologies). In this sense, decolonizing social work in Nepal is not only a resistance against imperialist and hegemonic Western social work practice but is also an opportunity to craft social work intervention from its own insider worldview. The act of constituting decolonized social work is the Nepali peoples’ concern for self-determination and sustainable lived experiences.

The decolonization debate, according to Osei-Hwedie (1993), denoted the effects of colonization in reducing the importance of local cultures while promoting Western mode of social work. Decolonizing social work also explores imperialist frameworks within Western social work and their negative impacts on Third World people (Midgley, 1981, 2008). By acknowledging and crediting Nepali peoples’ traditions, culture, practice, knowledge, and rights, decolonizing social work calls to withdraw participation in colonial projects and to condemn openly the past and continuing effects of colonialism (Yadav, 2017a). This way, decolonizing social work in Nepal emphasizes unique cultural heritage and lived experiences of unique caste and ethnic groups. In this respect, the horizon of decolonization is not only the concern of Nepali populations but also for others from developed and developing nations’ peoples since lived experience of indigenous people would be beneficial to solve global problems, such as climate change, pollution, poverty, and hunger (Wilson, 2013).

The ultimate goal of decolonizing social work is to “protect and restore indigenous peoples’ territories, natural resources, sacred sites, languages, beliefs, values, relationships, system of governance, sovereignty, self-determination, human rights, and intellectual property” (Gray et al., 2013a, p. 5). In that sense, decolonization of social work in Nepal aims to make the profession suitable to its people of specific culture or indigenous sections and thus promote maximum justice in the country. Moreover, the decolonized position will equip Nepali social workers with autonomy to institute home-grown and competence-based culturally diverse values, knowledge, and frameworks in order to cater the needs of Nepal’s marginalized diverse population (Yadav, 2017a). Inter alia, it will acknowledge that social conditions are in constant transition and transaction, which will make social workers accountable to revisit their “… social – cultural – political environments through a process of construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of identities and experiences…” (Guadalupe & Welkley, 2012, p. 55). Above all, decolonizing social work aims for a paradigm shift from psychologized bent Western social work to development and rights-based macro level social work education and practice. This way, social work can collaborate and can become a part of broader human rights and social justice campaign currently ongoing through NGOs, INGOs, civil society, and grassroots organizations to confront the cultural discrimination, social exclusion, and political oppression in Nepal (Yadav, 2016, 2017a).

However, in the decolonization process, Nepali social workers must be sensitive to the circumstances that loosen the debate of decolonizing social work in the Third World. For instance, indigenization often promoted by Western social workers or their allies advocate adaption of social work in the Third World context (Gray & Coates, 2008). There are mainly two reasons to claim how indigenization affects decolonization epistemology and technology. First, it is based on the interplay between ‘soft power’ and ‘hard power’. According to Nye (1990) ‘soft power’ influences other states through the appeal of its cultural and ideologies wherein ‘hard power’ is domination based on economic and military strength. The proponents of indigenization debate either within or outside of social work somehow manage to balance their debate. In other
words, they use a win-win approach to please both indigenous and Western people by opting middle path in indigenization debates. For instance, whether it is a dialogical model (Nimmagadda & Martell, 2008) or two-way exchange model (Yip, 2005), there is a compromise to assimilate ‘West’ and ‘rest of West’ in the indigenization process. Even outside of social work, this trend is very common. Despite hue and cry for decolonization, Smith (2012) concludes her arguments poorly saying “[d]ecolonization, however, does not mean and has not meant a total rejection of all the theory or research or Western knowledge” (p. 41). In addition, Huntington’s (1998) idea of reformism in response to West and seeking to embrace western modernization is not justifiable for indigenous peoples.

In the process of building new models (indigenous or the Third World oriented) by combining ‘West’ and ‘rest of West’, there is maximum probability of West using both ‘soft power’ and ‘hard power’. The West is already powerful and has control over resources, knowledge, and relationships. In this situation Nepal’s own status of an underdeveloped nation, there are very few chances that in long run the West would allow Nepali social workers to institutionalize decolonization by releasing their own power. In this model of decolonization, at the end, the West will put the clock back and a new form of indigenous movement has to start again in Nepal. Thus, there is every chance Nepali social workers will be trapped in a vicious cycle of colonization – decolonization of social work.

Secondly, the indigenization debate excessively emphasizes culturally sensitive or cross-cultural issues, but significantly fails to explain political aspects of decolonization (Yadav, 2017a). In this situation a key question arises – “how can social work amend its ways and contribute to social change when most social workers choose not to recognize the political dimensions of their practice and when political activism is not expressly advocated through social work professional bodies” (Briskman, 2008, p. 83)? At present, Nepal stands at the crossroad of implementing inclusive, secular, and participative constitutions for its heterogeneous caste and ethnics groups. The issue of minorities’ rights, identity, and participation in mainstream development process requires a political commitment. Therefore, decolonizing social work best fits in today’s Nepal as its political agenda involves the issues of identity, sovereignty, achievements of community, access to land, and language for those systematically pushed into the margin. This could be also referred as struggle for continuing survival of indigenous, ethnic and low caste groups, and marginalized peoples in Nepal (Gray et al., 2013b; Yadav, 2017a).

Nepali development agendas have to deal with ‘state of exception’, ‘third way economy’, and ‘totalitarian of political parties’ for safer passage of its peoples and communities towards sustainable progressivism (Gray & Yadav, 2015). It is only possible when an activist profession like social work engulfs localized and contextualized ways of knowing and doing, and thereby resists neo-liberal policies of the governments and promotes new social movements (Gray & Yadav, 2015; Yadav, 2017a). To this end, Nepali social workers must be mindful to the situation of the nation as outlined by anthropologist Devkota (2007) and shift the Western ground of social work to transformative, emancipative, and development oriented social work practice to uplift the quality of life of its population,

… the market economy has penetrated into non-market economy, participation has been sustained through political paternalism, self-sufficiency is measured under narrow indicators of economic abundance, self-reliance is identified under state-sponsorship, and thus, local autonomy has been framed under new and better imported institutions …
decentralization and self-governance are justified through centralized planning and decision making and sustainability is evaluated in terms of patchy and fragile achievements (p. 31).

Way Forward

At this point, given the present context of social work in Nepali society, there is immediate need that Nepali social workers engage themselves in redefining and reordering borrowed Western social work education and practice. They need to understand decolonizing social work is a project with political dimensions that discards irrelevant theoretical and practical framework harmful to the indigenous peoples (Briskman, 2008).

Borrowing from Rao (2012), social workers in Nepal must understand neoliberalism’s insidious effects, act politically to mainstream excluded groups, develop cultural and indigenous healing systems, and learn how to translate private troubles into public issues. In short, Nepal requires a unique decolonized standpoint that listens to voices from the frontline and addresses structural problems perpetuating injustice and inequality, which is simply out of step with the Western elitist model of the social work currently promoted.
References


Mozaffar, S. (2010). States and civil societies following civil wars. In M. Hoddie & C. A. Hart (Eds.), *Strengthening peace in post-civil war states: Transforming spoilers into stakeholders* (pp. 53-78). Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.


