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GREEN SOCIAL WORK IN INDIA: AN INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVE

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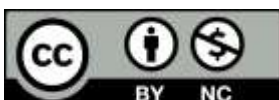
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Keywords	Abstract
<i>Green Social Work, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Ecological Justice, Environmental Sustainability, Indian Context, Climate Justice</i>	The intensifying ecological crisis has underscored the need for social work to engage more directly with environmental justice, sustainability, and climate resilience. Green Social Work (GSW), as conceptualised by Dominelli (2012), expands the traditional scope of social work by linking environmental degradation with social inequality and human rights. In the Indian context, environmental challenges such as climate change, deforestation, and pollution disproportionately affect marginalised populations, including tribal communities, rural poor, and urban informal settlements (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2023). At the same time, India possesses rich indigenous ecological knowledge systems that have historically sustained environmental balance through community-based practices and ethical stewardship (Gadgil & Guha, 1992). This paper critically examines Green Social Work from an indigenous perspective by integrating ecological theory, environmental justice frameworks, and Indian traditional knowledge systems. Using a conceptual and critical review of authentic scholarly sources, the study argues that indigenous ecological knowledge provides both normative and practical foundations for contextualising GSW in India. The paper proposes an indigenous Green Social Work framework that strengthens culturally relevant practice, promotes ecological justice, and contributes to the



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Navinkumar M. Rohit (2026). Green Social Work in India: An Indigenous Perspective. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews*, 5(4), 466-476.

Indianisation of the social work profession.
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1. Introduction

The contemporary world faces unprecedented ecological challenges, including climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, and displacement, with significant social, economic, and health consequences for vulnerable populations. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2023) notes that developing countries, including India, are disproportionately affected due to structural inequalities, population density, and dependence on natural resources. In India, floods, droughts, extreme heat, and coastal erosion intensify poverty and social vulnerability.

Green Social Work (GSW) has emerged as a transformative approach integrating environmental sustainability with social justice. Dominelli (2012) conceptualises GSW as a framework linking ecological crises with inequality, marginalisation, and human rights. This perspective expands the traditional “person-in-environment” approach by incorporating ecological systems and requires social workers to engage in structural advocacy, disaster response, and community resilience building.

However, Indian social work education and practice have historically emphasised welfare administration, casework, and community development, with limited attention to ecological dimensions (Desai, 1994). Despite growing environmental movements and policy initiatives, integration of ecological concerns into professional social work remains inadequate. This is particularly significant given India’s rich traditions of indigenous ecological knowledge and environmental ethics. Gadgil and Guha (1992) document community-based practices of sustainable resource management embedded in local governance and moral regulation.

Indian indigenous knowledge systems emphasise community participation, intergenerational transmission of ecological wisdom, and holistic human–nature relationships. Yet, these systems remain marginalised within formal education and development planning that often privilege technocratic approaches.

This paper examines GSW from an indigenous perspective, integrating global ecological social work theory with Indian knowledge systems to develop a culturally grounded framework for professional practice. It focuses on GSW theory, indigenous ecological practices, environmental injustice, and an India-specific Green Social Work framework.

2. Conceptual Foundations of Green Social Work

Green Social Work (GSW) has emerged as an important development within the social work profession in response to environmental crises and their social consequences. Traditional social work largely focused on individual and community well-being, with limited attention to ecological systems. However, climate change, environmental degradation, and resource depletion have expanded the profession’s scope. Midgley (2014) notes that earlier social work models emphasised social development and welfare while often overlooking environmental dimensions.



Navinkumar M. Rohit (2026). Green Social Work in India: An Indigenous Perspective. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews*, 5(4), 466-476.

Dominelli (2012) provides a comprehensive framework linking environmental concerns with social justice. She argues that environmental degradation disproportionately affects marginalised populations and should therefore be a core social work concern. GSW addresses social and environmental crises holistically, recognising the interdependence of ecological sustainability and human well-being. This perspective expands the traditional “person-in-environment” concept by recognising natural ecosystems as determinants of human life.

The ecological systems perspective further strengthens GSW’s theoretical foundation. Bronfenbrenner (1979) explains how individuals are influenced by interacting systems, a perspective that can be extended to ecological conditions such as climate, biodiversity, and natural resources. Coates (2005) advocates an eco-centric approach that recognises humans as part of nature and argues that environmental sustainability should be central to social work practice.

Environmental justice is another key component of GSW. Bullard (2000) demonstrates that environmental risks are unequally distributed, disproportionately affecting disadvantaged communities. In India, this is evident in the displacement of tribal communities, farmers’ vulnerability to climate change, and environmental hazards affecting urban poor populations. UNEP (2019) similarly highlights the disproportionate impact of environmental degradation on low-income populations.

Besthorn (2012) advocates a transformative ecological justice approach that challenges development models prioritising economic growth over environmental sustainability. This requires structural interventions addressing the root causes of ecological and social inequalities.

Overall, GSW integrates ecological systems thinking, environmental justice, and sustainability. Combined with indigenous ecological knowledge, these foundations can support a culturally relevant framework for addressing environmental challenges and advancing social justice in India.

3. Indigenous Ecological Knowledge in India

Indigenous ecological knowledge in India represents a diverse body of practices, beliefs, and values developed through long-term interaction with local environments. Community-based, context-specific, and transmitted across generations through oral traditions and lived experiences, it integrates ecological, social, cultural, and spiritual dimensions. Gadgil and Guha (1992) note that traditional communities developed sustainable resource management systems that maintained ecological balance while meeting subsistence needs.

Tribal communities provide important examples of indigenous ecological practices. In forest regions, collective decision-making and customary norms historically regulated resource access, sustainable harvesting, and biodiversity conservation. Baviskar (1995), studying the Narmada Valley, highlights how tribal communities perceive forests not merely as economic resources but as integral to cultural identity and survival. Such perspectives reflect ecological consciousness consistent with sustainability and environmental justice.



Navinkumar M. Rohit (2026). Green Social Work in India: An Indigenous Perspective. International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews, 5(4), 466-476.

Traditional water management systems further demonstrate indigenous ecological wisdom. Communities in water-scarce regions developed techniques such as *johads*, tanks, and stepwells to conserve and manage water collectively. Agarwal and Narain (1997) document how these decentralised systems were adapted to local climatic conditions, ensuring long-term water security and reducing dependence on external interventions. Their revival demonstrates continued relevance to contemporary water crises.

Indigenous agricultural practices also reflect sustainable interaction with nature. Traditional farming systems emphasise crop diversity, soil conservation, and limited external inputs, supporting ecological resilience and food security. In contrast, industrial agriculture based on monoculture and chemical inputs has contributed to soil degradation and biodiversity loss. Indigenous agricultural knowledge therefore offers valuable alternatives for sustainable development.

Women play a crucial role in preserving and transmitting ecological knowledge. Shiva (1988) emphasises rural women's contributions to biodiversity conservation, seed preservation, and sustainable agriculture. Their knowledge of local ecosystems supports food security and environmental sustainability. Mies and Shiva (1993) further argue that women's ecological roles are closely connected with their social and economic responsibilities, making them important agents of environmental protection. Recognising their contributions is therefore essential for inclusive Green Social Work.

Spiritual and cultural beliefs also shape indigenous ecological practices. The protection of sacred groves, reverence for rivers, and ritual-based conservation reflect worldviews in which nature is regarded as sacred. Gadgil and Guha (1992) show that sacred groves have historically functioned as biodiversity-rich areas protected through community norms and cultural beliefs, demonstrating how cultural values can support environmental conservation.

Despite their significance, indigenous knowledge systems have been marginalised by colonial resource policies and post-independence development models favouring centralised control, industrialisation, and technocratic approaches (Gadgil & Guha, 1992). Consequently, community-based practices have often been undervalued or displaced.

From a Green Social Work perspective, integrating indigenous ecological knowledge is essential for culturally relevant and sustainable interventions. Smith (2012) emphasises participatory and community-driven approaches to recognising indigenous knowledge. Social workers can contribute by documenting, validating, and integrating local knowledge into professional practice while respecting community ownership.

Overall, indigenous ecological knowledge provides a strong foundation for sustainable development and environmental justice in India. Its integration into Green Social Work can strengthen community participation, enhance intervention effectiveness, and ensure that ecological initiatives are grounded in local realities and cultural contexts.



Navinkumar M. Rohit (2026). Green Social Work in India: An Indigenous Perspective. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews*, 5(4), 466-476.

4. Environmental Injustice in the Indian Context

Environmental injustice refers to the unequal distribution of environmental risks and benefits, where marginalised populations disproportionately bear the burden of ecological degradation. In India, this inequality is evident across rural, tribal, and urban contexts, where vulnerable communities face greater exposure to environmental hazards while having limited access to resources and decision-making processes. Bullard (2000) highlights that environmental risks are closely linked to social and economic inequalities, a pattern that is clearly visible in the Indian context.

Climate change has emerged as a major driver of environmental injustice in India. The IPCC (2023) reports that rising temperatures, changing rainfall patterns, and extreme weather events have increased the vulnerability of communities dependent on natural resources. Frequent floods in states like Assam and Bihar, prolonged droughts in central and western India, and cyclones along the eastern coast have disrupted livelihoods and forced migration. These environmental changes disproportionately affect small farmers, landless labourers, and tribal communities who rely heavily on natural resources for survival.

Displacement caused by development projects further intensifies environmental injustice. Large-scale infrastructure initiatives such as dams, mining, and industrial expansion have led to the displacement of millions of people, particularly indigenous communities. Baviskar (1995) demonstrates how such projects in the Narmada Valley disrupted traditional livelihoods and ecological relationships. Guha and Martínez-Alier (1997) describe these struggles as part of the “environmentalism of the poor,” where marginalised communities resist environmental degradation that threatens their survival. These conflicts highlight the tension between economic development and ecological sustainability.

Urban environmental inequality is another significant concern. Rapid urbanisation has resulted in the expansion of informal settlements that lack access to basic services such as clean water, sanitation, and waste management. The UNEP (2019) notes that air and water pollution in urban areas pose serious health risks, particularly for low-income populations. Residents of slums are often located near industrial zones, waste dumping sites, or polluted water bodies, exposing them to hazardous living conditions. These environmental risks are compounded by limited access to healthcare and social protection.

Environmental injustice also has significant health and psychosocial impacts. Exposure to pollution and environmental hazards can lead to respiratory diseases, waterborne illnesses, and other health problems. At the same time, climate-related events such as floods and droughts can cause psychological stress, anxiety, and loss of social support systems. These impacts are often overlooked in policy and practice, despite their long-term consequences for community well-being.

From a Green Social Work perspective, addressing environmental injustice requires a structural and rights-based approach. Dominelli (2012) argues that environmental degradation should be understood as a violation of human rights, particularly for those who are most vulnerable. Social



Navinkumar M. Rohit (2026). Green Social Work in India: An Indigenous Perspective. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews*, 5(4), 466-476.

workers have an important role in advocating for equitable resource distribution, supporting community resilience, and facilitating participation in environmental decision-making processes.

In India, this involves engaging with environmental policies, supporting grassroots movements, and promoting sustainable development practices that prioritise the needs of marginalised communities. It also requires recognising the knowledge and capacities of local communities in managing environmental resources. By integrating environmental justice into social work practice, professionals can contribute to more inclusive and sustainable development.

In conclusion, environmental injustice in India reflects deep structural inequalities that are exacerbated by climate change and development processes. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that combines ecological sustainability with social justice, making Green Social Work a crucial framework for intervention.

5. Limitations of Conventional Social Work in Addressing Environmental Issues

Conventional social work in India has made significant contributions in areas such as welfare administration, community development, and social justice. However, its engagement with environmental issues has remained limited. One of the primary limitations lies in its historical reliance on Western theoretical frameworks, which have largely prioritised individual and social dimensions of problems while overlooking ecological factors. Desai (1994) notes that the professionalisation of social work in India was heavily influenced by Euro-American models, which shaped both curriculum and practice. As a result, environmental concerns have not been systematically integrated into mainstream social work education.

Another limitation is the predominance of individual-focused interventions. Traditional methods such as casework and counselling tend to address personal and social problems at the micro level, often neglecting broader structural and ecological determinants. Midgley (2014) argues that such approaches may fail to address systemic issues, including environmental degradation and climate-related vulnerabilities. In the context of increasing ecological crises, this narrow focus restricts the profession's ability to respond effectively to emerging challenges.

The lack of ecological integration in social work curriculum further contributes to this gap. Environmental issues are often treated as peripheral topics rather than core areas of study. Consequently, social work graduates may lack the knowledge and skills required to engage with environmental justice, climate change, and sustainability. Coates (2005) emphasises that ecological awareness should be central to social work education, as human well-being is closely linked to environmental conditions.

A significant concern is the neglect of indigenous knowledge systems within professional practice. Despite the presence of rich ecological traditions in India, these have not been adequately incorporated into social work frameworks. Gadgil and Guha (1992) highlight how indigenous resource management systems have historically ensured sustainability, yet such knowledge remains



Navinkumar M. Rohit (2026). Green Social Work in India: An Indigenous Perspective. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews*, 5(4), 466-476.

undervalued in formal practice. This disconnect limits the cultural relevance and effectiveness of social work interventions.

Additionally, conventional social work has shown limited engagement with environmental policy and advocacy. While the profession has been active in social welfare and rights-based issues, its involvement in environmental governance and policy processes has been relatively weak. Dominelli (2012) argues that social workers must play a more active role in advocating for environmental justice and sustainable development.

In conclusion, the limitations of conventional social work in addressing environmental issues stem from its theoretical orientation, methodological focus, and institutional priorities. Addressing these gaps requires a shift toward ecological perspectives, integration of indigenous knowledge, and stronger engagement with environmental policy. Green Social Work offers a pathway for overcoming these limitations and enhancing the profession's relevance in the context of contemporary ecological challenges.

6. Indigenous Green Social Work Framework for India

Developing an Indigenous Green Social Work (IGSW) framework for India requires integrating ecological justice, indigenous knowledge systems, and culturally grounded practice approaches. Such a framework moves beyond the adaptation of global models and instead builds upon local realities, community strengths, and traditional ecological wisdom. Dominelli (2012) emphasises that Green Social Work must address structural inequalities while promoting sustainability, making it essential to contextualise these principles within India's socio-cultural and ecological landscape.

At the core of the Indigenous Green Social Work framework are four key principles: ecological justice, community participation, sustainability, and cultural relevance. Ecological justice focuses on addressing the unequal distribution of environmental risks and resources, ensuring that marginalised communities have access to safe and sustainable environments. Community participation emphasises the involvement of local people in decision-making processes, recognising them as active agents rather than passive beneficiaries. Sustainability involves promoting practices that balance present needs with the well-being of future generations. Cultural relevance ensures that interventions are grounded in local traditions, values, and knowledge systems (Coates, 2005).

In terms of practice strategies, the framework prioritises community-based adaptation and participatory ecological planning. Social workers can facilitate local initiatives that draw upon indigenous knowledge, such as traditional water conservation, forest management, and sustainable agriculture. Gadgil and Guha (1992) demonstrate that community-led ecological practices are often more sustainable and contextually appropriate than externally imposed solutions. Participatory approaches also strengthen community ownership and resilience in the face of environmental challenges.

Another important component of the framework is the integration of indigenous knowledge into professional practice. This requires recognising local ecological knowledge as a legitimate source of



Navinkumar M. Rohit (2026). Green Social Work in India: An Indigenous Perspective. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews*, 5(4), 466-476.

expertise and incorporating it into intervention strategies. Smith (2012) highlights the importance of participatory and decolonising approaches that respect community knowledge systems. Social workers can play a key role in documenting, validating, and promoting indigenous practices, thereby bridging the gap between traditional knowledge and formal systems.

The role of social workers within this framework is multidimensional. As facilitators, they support community participation and capacity building. As advocates, they engage with policy processes to promote environmental justice and protect the rights of marginalised populations. As educators, they raise awareness about sustainable practices and ecological responsibility. Midgley (2014) emphasises that social workers must engage at multiple levels—micro, mezzo, and macro—to address complex social and environmental issues effectively.

Policy linkages are also critical for the success of the Indigenous Green Social Work framework. Aligning interventions with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those related to health, inequality, sustainable cities, climate action, and justice, can enhance the impact of social work practice (IPCC, 2023). Social workers can contribute to policy implementation by advocating for inclusive and environmentally sustainable development strategies.

In conclusion, the Indigenous Green Social Work framework offers a comprehensive approach that integrates ecological sustainability with social justice and cultural relevance. By grounding practice in indigenous knowledge and community participation, this framework enhances the effectiveness and legitimacy of social work interventions in India.

7. Implications for Social Work Education and Practice

The integration of an indigenous perspective into Green Social Work (GSW) has significant implications for social work education and practice in India. One of the foremost requirements is curriculum reform. Existing social work education has largely emphasised welfare administration, casework, and community development, with limited attention to environmental issues (Desai, 1994). Incorporating ecological justice, sustainability, and indigenous knowledge systems into core courses can enhance the relevance of professional training. Coates (2005) argues that ecological awareness should be central to social work education, as environmental conditions directly influence human well-being.

Fieldwork training also needs to be reoriented to reflect ecological realities. Social work students should be exposed to community-based environmental initiatives such as forest management, water conservation, and sustainable agriculture. Such exposure can help bridge the gap between theory and practice while promoting experiential learning. Gadgil and Guha (1992) highlight that local communities possess valuable ecological knowledge that can inform sustainable development practices. Engaging with these communities during fieldwork can strengthen students' understanding of indigenous systems.



Navinkumar M. Rohit (2026). Green Social Work in India: An Indigenous Perspective. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews*, 5(4), 466-476.

Research within social work must also expand to include environmental and ecological concerns. There is a need for more studies that document indigenous ecological practices, analyse environmental injustice, and evaluate community-based sustainability initiatives. Smith (2012) emphasises the importance of participatory research approaches that involve communities as active contributors rather than passive subjects. Such approaches can generate context-specific knowledge and support the integration of indigenous perspectives into professional practice.

Interdisciplinary collaboration is another important implication. Environmental issues are complex and require engagement with fields such as environmental science, public health, and development studies. Social workers can contribute by bringing a human-centred perspective to ecological issues while collaborating with other professionals to design holistic interventions.

Finally, professional practice must shift toward a more proactive and preventive approach. Dominelli (2012) argues that social workers should engage in environmental advocacy, policy development, and community resilience building. By integrating indigenous knowledge and ecological perspectives, social work in India can become more responsive to contemporary environmental challenges and contribute to sustainable and inclusive development.

8. Conclusion

The growing ecological crisis has made it imperative for social work to expand its scope beyond conventional social concerns and engage with environmental sustainability and justice. Green Social Work (GSW) provides a framework that connects ecological degradation with social inequality and human well-being (Dominelli, 2012). In the Indian context, this framework gains greater depth and relevance when viewed through an indigenous perspective.

India's rich traditions of ecological knowledge, community-based resource management, and ethical stewardship offer valuable insights for addressing contemporary environmental challenges. Gadgil and Guha (1992) demonstrate that indigenous practices have historically maintained ecological balance while supporting livelihoods. However, these systems have often been marginalised in formal education and development processes. Integrating indigenous knowledge into Green Social Work can enhance the cultural relevance and effectiveness of interventions.

Environmental injustice in India continues to disproportionately affect marginalised communities, highlighting the need for a structural and rights-based approach (IPCC, 2023). Social workers have a crucial role in promoting ecological justice, supporting community resilience, and advocating for sustainable policies.

In conclusion, developing an indigenous Green Social Work framework is essential for the Indianisation of the profession. By combining ecological sustainability with indigenous knowledge and social justice, social work in India can contribute to building a more equitable and environmentally sustainable future.



Navinkumar M. Rohit (2026). Green Social Work in India: An Indigenous Perspective. International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews, 5(4), 466-476.

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The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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