



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Social Science

MASS DISCOURSE OF CLIMATE CRISIS AND THE FUTURE OF ECOLOGICAL SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

KEY WORDS: Ecological Social Work, Environmental Justice, Anthropocene, Human-Environment Relation, Community Fieldwork

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ABSTRACT

Background: This article proposes an understanding of the relationship between humans and the environment in the Anthropocene. It argues that human society has altered and conditioned nature by realigning it and not adapting to it. **Methodology:** Using ethnographic observations and a critical framework, it critically examines the deeply rooted naturalist notions that humanity has innate harmony with nature, the biological underpinnings of social institutions, and the ubiquity of kinship rooted in genetics. The argument is extended to the present-day context by analysing the lived experience of a researcher as a social work educator in Delhi. **Result:** The situation exposes a gap in social work pedagogy that continues to overlook highly evident ecological injustices. It integrates ecological social work, environmental justice, and anthropological critique. **Conclusion:** The article concludes by arguing for a reorientation of social work practice and education. It proposes that we need to treat the environmental crisis not as an external backdrop but as central to social vulnerability, community wellbeing, and professional responsibility.

1. INTRODUCTION

Amid the social media voice that dominates discourse around climate change and role of human beings, the present study is dwelling with the Fundamental Question: If human societies have always reshaped and dominated their environments, rather than adapted to them, what does this reveal about today's ecological crisis, from global climate change to Delhi's toxic air, and about the deeper human impulse to position ourselves as superior to all other creations of nature?

The climate crisis is no longer a distant or abstract phenomenon. In Delhi, one of the world's most polluted megacities, the impacts of environmental degradation are now directly shaping the practice, training, and ethical responsibilities of social work. The issue has escalated to such an extent that the University and Department are deliberating replacing the standard concurrent fieldwork model with block fieldwork during the most polluted months.

The present proposition exposes a wide gap within social work education. Even though social work students are regularly placed in environmentally hazardous field sites, social work as an academic discipline has not failed to integrate Delhi's pollution crisis into curriculum, teaching, pedagogy, or practice-based risk-assessment frameworks. This rejection is a reflection of a loud disciplinary silence around environmental determinants of well-being. Social work needs to acknowledge that environmental harm is neither "natural" nor inevitable; it is socially produced, politically maintained, and unequally distributed (Gautam & Kaushik, 2023).

The researcher argues that the crisis of climate change and Delhi's toxic air pollution, in particular, should become the basis for re-examining human world-making, re-evaluating naturalistic assumptions in anthropology, and revisiting social work education within ecological justice frameworks. To build this understanding, we need to expand on the idea that humans do not adapt to nature; rather, they adapt nature to suit themselves. There is a need to see this as structurally embedded realities shaping both community life and professional formation.

2. Humanity and Nature - A Relationship of Domination or Harmony?

The Myth of Natural Harmony

Anthropological and popular discourses often glamorise "traditional" or "indigenous" societies as living in harmony with nature. However, detailed ethnographic observation

suggests contrasting realities. Human societies have historically engaged in a continuous struggle against natural hazards. Hunters extract as much as they can from their environment and surroundings. Distanced from being ecological stewards, society and communities at large become resource exploiters once market demands intervene.

Social Construction of Space: Village and Bush

Communities and societies often demarcate "safe spaces" (villages, habitations) from "wild spaces" (bush, forest, hinterland), constructing symbolic and physical boundaries. The human habitats become a space of social familiarity, socialisation, kinship, and human order. Beyond lies the 'jungle', a negative spectrum cursed with darkness, danger, unpredictability, spiritual and natural threats. In certain cosmologies and languages, the word for "forest deep in the wild" overlaps with the word for "far-away city," capturing the sense of social alienation associated with displacement. Through labour, ritual, architecture, and social institutions, humans extend the domain of the social world into formerly wild zones.

Human Adaptation as Environmental Transformation

Contrary to biologically deterministic models of human adaptation, human beings adapt environments to themselves. The history of human survival in varied ecological zones, shows not physiological adaptation but cultural, technological, and social innovation. Human evolution thus depends not on morphological adaptation but on symbolic, cultural, and institutional capacity.

3. Human Society as Historical Construction Cultural Memory and Human Environments

Environments are not static containers, but historically produced terrains shaped by collective memory, knowledge transmission, and symbolic practices. Desert routes, forest paths, seasonal gathering grounds, irrigation systems, terraced agriculture, and settlement patterns are all cultural artefacts. These environments are shaped by generations of human labour, memory, negotiated social practices, and ecological knowledge. To inhabit such spaces is to inhabit human history, not "nature" per se.

The Distinctiveness of Human Evolution

Human evolution diverges fundamentally from that of other species because of symbolic thought, representation, social learning, and cumulative cultural change. In the proposed symbolic representation, humans can anticipate environ-

mental challenges and thus transform their surroundings accordingly, courtesy – 'logical reasoning and intelligence'. This capacity obviates the need for genetic adaptation: rather than evolving biologically, humans evolve culturally. Institutions, tools, social norms, and symbolic forms substitute biological adaptation as the instruments of survival and progress.

Social Institutions as Protection Against Nature

Human vulnerability necessitates social institutions. These include kinship, cooperative labour, moral codes, governance structures, prescribed rituals, shared labour, structured rules, and shared memory. These institutions provide collective protection against environmental hazards, illness, social conflict, and resource scarcity. Through institutions, humans create a stable social world—a constructed environment more decisive for human well-being than terrain, climate, or natural adversity.

The Limits of Biological Determinism

Animal societies, regardless of ecological niche, do not produce long-term care for old age, cultural memory, institutions of governance, moral norms, or symbolic meaning. Their social organisation remains oriented toward reproduction and immediate survival. By contrast, human societies are fluid, plural, symbolic, and historically layered. Their complexity cannot be reduced to genetics or instinct. Human diversity—cultural, social, political—requires a framework of cultural-historical analysis rather than biological determinism.

4. Rethinking Kinship: A Critique of Naturalism

Kinship as Social, Not Biological

Kinship arises not from biological processes alone, but from societal interpretation of birth, filiation, nurture, co-residence, ritual, obligation, and symbolic meaning. Conception, birth, parenting only become kinship when societies decode them within cultural norms. Thus, kinship is a social construction, not a natural fact (Carsten, 2004).

Consanguinity as Ideology

The Western model of kinship—consanguinity, blood, lineage, male filiation, inheritance—originated in Roman patriarchy, aristocratic inheritance systems, and colonial property regimes. These ideas were later universalised in anthropological theory, often being projected onto societies with entirely different relational logics and social practices (Schneider, 1984). This ideological imposition distorts ethnographic realities and naturalises social inequality.

Colonial Records and Manufactured Kinship

Missionaries, colonial administrators, and early anthropologists often imposed Western kinship categories—father, mother, bloodline, descent—on indigenous populations, altering or erasing existing relational systems. Ethnographic descriptions based on those records reproduced these distortions, presenting them as “traditional” or “authentic.” Thus, genealogical thinking itself becomes part of a colonial-imperial matrix of knowledge production.

Alternative Grounds for Social Relations

Other bases for social organisation exist: shared residence, food exchange, shared labour, routes and trade paths, ritual cooperation, reciprocal obligations, collective memory. In regions like New Caledonia and Mozambique, relatedness is defined not by blood but by co-residence, mutual support, shared history, and communal work (Bensa & Rivière, 1982; Geffray, 1990). Accepting these alternatives supports deconstructing universalised and normalised assumptions of kinship theory and broadens our understanding of human sociality.

5. Misrepresentation, Exploitation, and the Politics of Naturalism

Exoticizing the Other

Anthropology, colonial vocabulary, and global tourism have

proposed non-Western societies as timeless, “close to nature.” These parts of the world are framed as unspoiled by modernity, exoticizing them for external audiences. These projections fade out history, agency, and social change, reducing living communities to static primitives or 'romanticised primitives'. This naturalisation supports global inequalities and hence unequal power dynamics.

The Global Politics of Environmental Sacrifice

Environmental degradation significantly affects marginalised populations, urban slum dwellers, low-income groups, industrial workers, people living with disability, and informal settlers. These groups often live in “sacrifice zones” where pains due to environmental conditions are tolerated because these populations lack political power or visibility. Toxic air of metropolitan cities, polluted waterways, industrial waste sites, and climate-vulnerable regions exemplify the structural inequalities underlying environmental harm (Chakraborty & Basu, 2021).

6. Implications for Social Work Practice

Environmental Crisis

Delhi's pollution crisis demonstrates that environmental degradation is not peripheral, it shapes everyday life for millions. The dump yards, also called Kooode ke pahad (Mountains of garbage), in Delhi are the testimony of Human greed and policy paralysis. Political slogans are louder than government concerns. But can the solution be proposed without accepting collective failure and complete disconnection with nature? Social work must treat ecological determinants as central to human welfare. Social workers can integrate environmental risk assessment, ecological justice, and community vulnerability into their standard practice, rather than treating pollution as merely external or incidental.

Challenging Naturalistic Ideologies

Social work must challenge the narratives that portray vulnerable communities as inherently fragile, passive, or “close to nature.” Such narratives often obscure structural inequalities, environmental racism, compromised identity and power imbalances. A justice-based approach to ecological social work recognises that vulnerability appears from the political economy, discriminatory policies, unequal development, and systemic blindness (Grey, Coates, & Hetherington, 2013; Alston, 2013).

Student Safety and Ethical Fieldwork Planning

The change in aptitude of social work students towards fieldwork due to hazardous air pollution reveals an urgent need to revisit standard fieldwork practices. Universities and social work departments, and other institutions must assess direct and indirect environmental risks before assigning field placements (Gautam, 2025). The Human response to its immediate context must become part of social work pedagogy, not only as an optional elective but as core content (Smith, Singh & Pearl, 2022). Environmental justice must be the central thought behind the proposal.

Integrating Ecological Justice into Social Work Education

Social work curricula must be redesigned to include environmental justice, climate vulnerability, urban ecology, public health, and disaster risk reduction frameworks. But all this should be studied in harmony with nature. This repositioning would prepare students to respond to climate-driven displacement, pollution-induced health crises, environmental trauma, and community resilience needs. Recognising environmental determinants of human wellbeing raises social work's relevance in the era of intoxicated surroundings.

Decolonized and Rights-Based Practice

Ecological social work must also be decolonised, questioning the Whiteman's burden and its established imposition of Western categories, challenging and resource-exploitation

logics. The privileging of local knowledge, community agency, and collective decision-making will lead to grounded and permanent solutions. Social work in India should join global movements for environmental justice, human rights, and climate equity (International Federation of Social Workers & national organisations). By focusing on ecological justice and human agency, social work can reshape itself as a transformative profession in a world shaped by human-made environments.

7. CONCLUSION

Human beings are craftsmen of the world. Through symbolic thought, social labour, biased innovation, and sapiens-centric collective institutions, humans have historically transformed environments, far beyond mere adaptation. This world-making capability has led to agriculture, cities, trade networks, social institutions, civilisations, and culture. But it has also produced environmental degradation, inequality, exploitation, and ecological collapse.

Delhi's climate inequalities, and the withdrawal of social work students from fieldwork due to health risks reveal the stark consequences of this man-made transformation. This situation demands that social work recognise environmental crisis not as an external context but as a structurally embedded reality.

Ecological justice is not an optional add-on; it is an inevitable aspect of social justice. A social worker committed to human dignity, equity, and structural transformation has to confront environmental injustice head-on. The challenge is not only to adapt to changing conditions and environmental context, but to support communities, institutions, and professions. They have to redefine their relationship with the immediate environment, long-term sustainability, universal rights, and collective responsibility.

Human societies have always been and will also be world-making. The urgent task now is to shape worlds we can live in, justly, sustainably, collectively.

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