

# THE INDIGENOUS BASE OF SOCIAL WORK PROFESSION IN INDIA

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Professional social work as it has evolved in India is a graft on the ancient heritage and not an independent transplant. As for the production of indigenous literature on social problems, welfare services, and the entire social work scene in India, the country has produced immense amount of literature on a wide variety of social work subjects almost from 1947, the year of India's independence. In terms of origin, initial efforts and evolution in the pattern of training, areas of specialisation, types of jobs and the status and composition, the professional social work in India has a very distinct model of its own. It has undoubtedly adopted and adapted a lot from other countries but it has a soul and a body of its own.

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While inviting contributions for this special issue *The Indian Journal of Social Work* the guest editor had circulated a note on the theme and its coverage. This article is intended to be a response to some of the assumptions and observations stated in "the note". In all fairness, those assumptions etc. may be quoted first:

- (1) "... the models of social work education that have developed in the developing countries seem to be *imported from Western social work education*". (Kendall)
- (2) "... these (developing) countries which were *predominantly rural had adopted the American urban models of education*". (Brigham)
- (3) "... social work arose in the West to help a few marginal people to *adjust to the society*; whereas, in most developing countries, the poor are the vast and significant majority!"-
- (4) "... the profession's value orientations of self-reliance, self-determination and such like have been considerably fostered and influenced by the *liberal values and beliefs* of the American society and *may not be acceptable* to other countries". (Hammond)
- (5) The note then quoting Kendall again (1986) that adds "*particularly in Asia, the efforts towards indigenisation of the curriculum to increase their relevance to the local situation seem to move rather slowly. Equally important is the slow process of indigenisation of the body of knowledge in these countries which is the key to the indigenisation of social work education and practice*".
- (6) The note finally sums up to say that".... the *distinguishing features of Asian social work profession do not emerge*".

This article confines itself to social work education and practice in India only. The attempt is to outline the background, the origin and evolution of social work education and practice in India. In the light of the review one hopes to find out to what extent, any or all of these assumptions and observations are valid. The review and the analysis are presented in one continuous flow. It may, therefore, not necessarily tally with the sequence in which the points quoted from the quest editor's note are

listed above. However, it would hopefully indicate sufficiently clearly whether, if at all, social work profession in India is indigenous and if so, its nature and extent.

## Historical Background

It is customary to date the beginning of professional social work in India to the year 1936 when the first school of social work was established in Bombay. But those who have studied the history and philosophy of social work in India know that there has been a long and ancient tradition of social work practice. The inspiration for it may have been varied; religious, humanitarian, secular or rational secular. There were several streams comprising charity, relief, social reform and institutionalised welfare services. Most of it was voluntary effort; some of it had state support during intermittent periods of history. It was extended under official orders or administered with legislative support. It is too long and chequered a history even to be summarised here. But the cognisance of the fact that such a history existed (Wadia, 1968: 393-400) is essential to recognise an important point that when social work was launched as a profession in India, it was *not a transplant* from a foreign soil. Rather, it was like the formation of crystals in an already saturated chemical solution. It is a well known scientific fact that, suspending in such a solution a crystal picked from another lot previously formed acts as a catalyst to accelerate the formation of crystals in the solution.

In other words, the emergence of social work as a profession was not occurring in a vacuum, nor was it being written, as it were, on a clean slate. There was an indigenous base already in existence and the process of professionalisation (to change the metaphor) was in the nature of a grafting. This point gathers weight and lends conceptual and operational significance to the very act of setting up the Sir Dorabji Tata Graduate School of Social Work in 1936. The fact that the founder Director of the school was an American is always cited as proof of import of social work training and practice from the U.S.A. A little closer look into the circumstances that led to the establishment of the school wards off that impression and reveals its indigenous roots.

### *Local Adaptation*

Dr. Clifford Manshardt, the first Director of the school had arrived in India as far back as 1926 i.e., a good ten years before the actual founding of the school. He had come to work with the American Marathi Mission, begun in 1925. It had chosen to set up a Neighbourhood House in a poor locality in the commercial port city of Bombay. This neighbourhood was known to be suffering from various socio-economic problems of poverty, destitution beggary, delinquency, crime and prostitution. Apparently, the Nagpada Neighbourhood House tried out a combination of the methods of professional social work under the direction of Manshardt. It was found that those methods, judicially adapted to the local situation, changed the very life of that community from one of depression and pathology to one of zealous buoyance and positive achievements of all age groups of both sexes. Then the idea of introducing formal training of social workers through a permanent institution came up. Thanks to the vision of the progressive House of Tatas, a leading business-cum-industrial group in Bombay, Manshardt was invited to set up the school and to head and direct it.

Some of the observations of Manshardt himself, made on the occasion of the foundation of the school (Desai, 1985: 41-60) are clues enough of how he has convinced of the need to marry the professional with the indigenous. Manshardt is on record to clarify explicitly that the "Western content (of curriculum) was subjected to critical analysis for its adaptability to India". He has also stated unambiguously that the Sir Dorabji Tata Graduate School of Social Work was "an attempt to root training of social work in experience". Obviously, the experience he was referring to was the Indian experience acquired while developing the Neighbourhood House in India and earlier by social work practitioners elsewhere in India. He also made it clear that the Tata school "did not believe in narrow specialisation....for one type of social work".

### *Indian Forerunners*

It may also be added here that although the Tata School was the first graduate school to train social workers, there had been other indigenous forerunners of the formalised process of training. In the late 20s a Social Service League in Bombay, an agency of the Servants of India Society, established by Gopal Krishna Gokhale in 1905, had taken the lead (Ranade, 1987: 134-137). The League used to offer a series of lectures on social problems and welfare services in India to social work practitioners based in several welfare agencies. The principle that knowledge of facts and concepts (data and theory) was an essential prerequisite for effective social work was thus already recognised.

### **Curriculum Content**

The most important single point of criticism has been that the curricula in the Indian schools of social work are a blind copy of the American social work syllabi. The inclusion of case work, group work and community organisation comprising the 'methods of social work' course is cited as the conspicuous example of a blind copy. The reasoning given is that, in a developing country like India, the main social problem was not of adjustment of marginal or deviant individuals, but of upgrading, through development and structural reform, the very quality of life of the overwhelmingly large masses of the population mired in poverty.

This criticism calls for a little deeper analysis. For a start, it is essential to note that casework, groupwork and community organisation methods of social work have neither been invented nor patented by American social workers. Long before social work was articulated as a profession, priests, parents, teachers, elders and friends have been practising one or more of these helping methods in all societies. Only, they were not given universally standardised designations nor was the knowledge of the processes and techniques formulised enough to be transmitted as a package of social work methods. But then, this has happened in all professions when they evolved from adhoc preprofessionalism to sustained apprenticeship and further on to systematised formal training.

The second aspect of this criticism is not so much on the origin of these methods, but on their relevance to the social problems of different economies and different cultures. There again, the viewpoint should accept a small correction. To say that

the major problems that need to be addressed in India are of the masses and not of a few stray individuals is to completely overlook the operational reality that, side by side with structural changes, individual motivation, and orientation, group activation and community preparation have to go on syncretically. Structural reform or systemic change is not an abstract exercise to be carried out in a vacuum. So long as humans remain as much the agents as the beneficiaries of change, all methods of working with individuals, groups and communities will be relevant and even indispensable. Retention of casework, group work and community organisation in Indian or any other social work education is valid for another reason. American casework was heavily based on individual psychology; a pioneer casework teacher, steeped in Indian philosophy, introduced a sociological approach to it (Banerjee, 1968:63-70).

The Curriculum Development Centre in Social Work Education in its report as recently as in 1990 has reached the following conclusion after prolonged deliberation. In its own words "...the major tasks would be to promote social change and development while recognising that groups or individuals already affected by the problems emanating from the structural factors in society will need help in meeting their immediate problems and needs. Thus, while the overall thrust of the task of social work should be developmental and promotive, tasks which are remedial and rehabilitative cannot be overlooked" (Government of India, 1990).

### **Indian Broadbase**

It must also be noticed that the curricula in the Indian schools of social work were not exclusively centered around the methods courses. In fact, from the beginning they have been organised field-wise and focused on target groups unlike agency related (Desai, 1987: 208-219) or methods-based as in the USA.

History and Philosophy of Social Work, Man in Society, Dynamics of Human Behaviour, Indian Social Problems, Fields of Social Work, Organisation of Welfare Services have been the kind of courses included in social work syllabus. In the History and Philosophy one part would be global or international, but equally, if not more significant, and the other, is the Indian history and philosophy of social work. Being an ancient civilisation and a pluralistic society, India's history and philosophy (of social work including) is rich and varied. That is not just the forerunner of professional social work nor does it just provide the context of framework. It in fact constitutes the broad base of the pyramid of social work practice in India (Swami Ranganathananda, 1968: 46-53). Every school of social work has such a course in its syllabus. Or take the course, 'Man in Society'. In addition to whatever it draws from the universal reservoir of social sciences, it has a sizeable content of cultural anthropology which provides the profiles of Indian communities.

Similarly, there cannot be a course more indigenous than a course on 'Indian Social Problems'.

Even in the 'Dynamics of Human Behaviour' indigenous cultural milieu is woven into the common human features. The level of generalisations or specificities is determined by the nature of the problem in hand. Simply because the same title appears in the prospectus of American/Western schools and Indian schools does not by itself

signify that the detailed content or the reading and reference material would be identical. The allegation of continued reliance on the foreign reading material is separately discussed in the later part of this paper.

### **Field Orientation**

What needs to be stated first is that the original qualification acquired at the Tata School was a Diploma in *Social Service Administration* and not in case work, group work or community organisation. That indicates an altogether original thrust and purpose and not an imitation. Further, the field-wise plan of the syllabus covered subjects such as Labour Welfare and Personnel Management (since redesignated as Personnel Management and Industrial Relations), Family and Child Welfare, Medical and Psychiatric Social Work, Crime and Correctional Administration, Rural and Urban Community Development, etc. In these, Labour Welfare and Personnel Management was a course unique to Indian social work schools, which alone accounted for a major part of the students' intake and the largest single percentage of jobs to which they were recruited.

It is not relevant here to go into the why or how of this speciality of Indian social work education. Suffice here to note that this pattern or model was no copy of American/Western social work education or practice.

### **Common and Exclusive**

Christian missions and other humanitarian welfare agencies of India had been running institutions for the orphans, the physically and mentally handicapped, the destitute and the poor etc. long before professional social work was even heard of in India. Courses such as Family and Child Welfare, Institutional Management, Social Welfare Administration, were directly useful for employment in these fields. Likewise, even before the first social work school was established there was a network of institutions in some parts of India functioning under Correctional Administration. The course of Criminology and Correctional Administration prepared graduates directly for jobs in those services and there again, there was nothing non-indigenous about it. The legislation was Indian and so was the management of these institutions. As for the course on Social Pathology, the basic factors such as poverty, broken homes, drug addition or alcoholism or emerging industrialisation and growing urbanisation, were so similar to the earlier Western phenomena that a lot could be learnt from their experience. Whatever is of universal validity has to be shared, it does not become Western or American simply because it was first articulated there. Nor does it become a blind copy if it is suitably adapted to Indian conditions.

Every country does not have to reinvent the wheel as it were. The point may as well be made here when one talks of social sciences; there is bound to be a common broad spectrum as part of a universal continuum. It is only when one talks of interventions, policies, plans and programmes that the local socio-economic and cultural factors come into play. Over the years the Indian experience has been extremely rich and varied to provide hundred per cent data base and policy perspectives all its own. Some of the major elements of this Indian scenario are identified in the following paragraphs. Since the syllabi of Indian schools of social

work are organised field-wise and oriented to target groups, they are mainly based on social problems and welfare services of India.

### **Rich Harvest of Indian Literature**

So far as literature on Indian social and welfare information is concerned, there has been a veritable explosion over the last four and a half decades. One need cite only some of the major sources and areas of social work data to be convinced of the vast mass readily available to Indian social work educators and practitioners.

The Indian Conference of Social Work (since renamed as the Indian Council of Social Welfare, ICSW), in the foundation of which professional social workers had taken the initiative, has been holding annual sessions since its inception in 1947. At every session (more recently changed to biennial) there have been a long series of papers written and presented by Indian social workers on the pressing Indian social problems of the day. Each contribution is one hundred per cent indigenous, based on the contributor's own knowledge and experience of the Indian social work scene, the ICSW itself compiled a thematic collection of its annual papers into a single publication called "Social Work Forum" towards the end of 1950s. Later, it has been publishing its papers in some form or another, together adding up to a rich source of indigenous literature. The topics for instance were: relief and rehabilitation of displaced persons as a result of partition of the country, problems of beggary, delinquency or crime, the issues in population growth and family planning, national programme of rural community development, working and living conditions of Indian labour, life and living in the slums of Indian cities, the problems of Indian tribal communities, the need for setting up Ministries and Departments of Social Welfare, national social policy, policies on children, youth, women, etc., the role of voluntary effort in social welfare, minimum standards of welfare institutions, etc. The nature and variety of the topics themselves suggest that there was little, if any, need to copy or borrow from American or any other Western literature.

After the ICSW, other NGOs such as the Indian Council of Child Welfare, All India Conference of Women, started producing their own crops of annual literature. It is possible that all these papers are not characterised by a uniform level of academic rigour or professional finesse, but it provided a gold mine of source material to the social work educator. Those who cared more for data papers could very well refer to the scholarly and well-researched and competently edited papers that have been appearing for half a century and more in *The Indian Journal of Social Work* published by the premier school of social work, namely the Tata Institute of Social Sciences. The wide range and massive volumes of literature on Indian social work were annotated in a full-fledged article way back in 1968 (Herlekar, 1969). Since then it has grown immensely.

### **Numerous Sources**

In addition, the Social Welfare and Backward Classes Divisions of the National Planning Commission, the Programme Evaluation Organisation, the Central Social Welfare Board, the Ministry of Social Welfare, the Indian Council of Social Science Research, the Census of India, the ministries of Education, Health, Labour, Home,

Community Development, Rural Development and the various autonomous institutions under the government such as the National Institute of Rural Development and the National Institute of Public Cooperation and Child Development have all been pouring out torrents of literature, which together constitute an immense reservoir of reference material of Indian society directly relevant to the various courses taught in the schools of social work in India. Several bibliographies of Indian reference material have since been prepared. If all the listed publications by Indians on India are brought together they would fill a library and more.

After India adopted in 1951 national and state planning as the major instrument of national development, extension and community development blocks for local development, the curricular content in the schools reflected the macro and micro concerns of social development. Courses such as social policy, social planning, social administration, social action, social research, social legislation, etc. were expanded or introduced *de novo*. They were naturally able to draw directly and heavily from the kind of rich and varied material that is briefly mentioned above and in turn added to it.

### **Native Impulse**

It may also be added here that the emergence of these sources in response to the nation's own priorities took place entirely as a result of the initiative of senior social work educators and practitioners in India. It did not need any foreigners to point out that Indian social work should indigenise and produce its own literature. In fact quite a few Western social work educators obtained their first exposure to mass problems in countries like India and then started repeating the obvious that social work in developing countries should be indigenised. Their own awareness of the existence of structural problems of mass dimension in their own society got sharply etched only after the movement of civil rights of ethnic minorities, immigrants etc. hit their national scene, after their Peace Corps volunteers returned home from developing countries, and after national programmes like 'War on Poverty' and 'Great Society' were launched in their countries. Developing countries may be lagging behind in development (depending on the meaning one attaches to the term), but they were pioneers in imparting developmental orientation to social welfare. Indian social work did not need any imported wisdom about indigenisation because it has itself been a major theatre of developmental thrust to social welfare.

How many countries have compiled, published and revised two editions of an Encyclopaedia of Social Work? India has. That is more than enough source material for social work teachers. Probably, the whole criticism seems to have been based on the non-existence of text books on case work (one has been recently published by TISS in 1992) and group work based exclusively on Indian case material. But, for that matter, the Indian schools do not have a system of text books; they only have recommended readings. Secondly, even the lack of Indian case material has not remained as acute as it might have been in the earlier years. Many leading teachers in schools of social work have grown up in Indian philosophical and cultural ethos and have plugged into service centres and welfare institutions where such cases are handled. They do form part of their classroom teaching as well as in the consultative conferences on field work placement and supervision.

## Integrated Methods

In most schools now the methods courses have been integrated into one course. Yet there is cross-referencing of the methods in the field-wise courses. That is, the teacher would cite, possibly also illustrate and demonstrate, how a particular method or a combination of two or more would be appropriate and effective in different settings in that particular field. Vice-versa, while teaching methods course(s) the teacher would mention the different field situations in which the method or a combination would prove efficacious. Since the field scenario which constitutes the milieu for practice is wholly Indian, the application and adaptation of methods is the most direct process of indigenisation. This has been operational in practice. Probably it has gone unnoticed by the critics because it has not been printed profusely or disseminated widely and visibly.

Apart from the internal exercises in indigenisation and external forces generating widely divergent literature on the welfare scene, there are two other forces which cannot but keep the social work profession in India rooted directly into the Indian social reality, as described below.

## Influence of NGOs

The first of these influence is that of the lay or voluntary social workers and non-governmental social welfare agencies. They have a long and strong tradition of service and experience (Chowdhury, 1991). Many of them are among the leading employers of professional social workers. Their roots are very much in the Indian soil. They are the ones who often set the agency policies, programmes and practices. They naturally influence, even direct the approach of the professional social workers employed by them. There again, no professional social worker in India can possibly function on any alien philosophy or method of social work. This is not to say that the voluntary social workers and agencies only exercise some kind of restraining influence in the matter of not straying away from the national mainstream. There are instances of more active interaction between the professional and other social workers.

The best example that comes to mind is the dialogue leading to better understanding and appreciation of respective roles between the professional social workers and those who are known as constructive workers or followers of Gandhian philosophy and creed (Dasgupta, 1967). This latter group comprises those who believe in SARVODAY (development and welfare of all) or ANTYODAYA (development and welfare of the poorest or the weakest segments of society comparable to the philosophy enunciated by John Ruskin in his classic *Unto This Last* which had influenced Mahatma Gandhi very deeply). These workers believe in working towards a non-exploitative society based on truth and non-violence with appropriate technology and decentralised power structure. They live a simple, almost austere life (analogous to the vow of voluntary poverty) identifying their lifestyle with the poor and disadvantaged communities they seek to serve.

Some of the leaders had known some senior professional social workers, had heard of their scientific approach to social problems and seen some of them in action. The Gandhian workers thought it worthwhile to enter into an organised and sustained



dialogue with some of the leading professional social workers. One discernible result of the dialogue was that the constructive workers appreciated the fact-based diagnosis and the need-based programming within a broad framework of national policy as enjoined by the Indian Constitution and outlined in India's successive Five Year Plans. This, they recognised, was in the short run, more effective from the viewpoint of problem solving. Mere service, they realised, was only a symptomatic approach. On the other hand, the professionals saw considerable force in the importance of folksy life-style, dedication and commitment to the cause of the disadvantaged as an effective reinforcement of competent professionalism. This is not to say that there were no differences on the place of modern technology or in the ultimate picture of society each group envisaged. The important point to note here is that there was nothing alien or imported about this significant interaction.

The constructive workers are known to be "true to the soil" group of inspired workers. They found the trained social workers worthy of a dialogue and of some degree of emulation. Surely, this could not be if the latter were mere imported dummies. That was but one of the surest tests of the trained social workers also being rooted in the Indian ethos.

### **National Policies**

Then there has been the other very dominant national force keeping the professional social workers as a small but significant player in the vanguard of placing social work on the map of new India. In 1950 India adopted a democratic, republican Constitution, which incorporated, apart from Fundamental (Human) Rights, the Directive Principles of State Policy as well. It had embodied the quintessence of the philosophy of political, economic and social justice which had inspired and guided India's struggle for Independence. Then immediately, from 1951 onwards India launched a series of Five Year Plans as part of the strategy for national development (Kulkarni, 1979). In the following years the Government of India formulated national policies on population and family planning, education (1968 and 1986), health (1983), housing development, welfare of the weaker sections of the population (Article 44 and 46 of the Indian Constitution), child welfare (1974), women's development and youth development (1988) etc. (Kulkarni, 1982). All these set out not only the objectives of development in the respective areas but also the plans and programmes to be formulated and implemented within a certain time frame, the resources allotted for the purpose and recruitment and training of the field level and supervisory staff required to staff them. In the beginning some social workers trained in the early years in the schools of social work got a chance to be placed near the hub of national policies and plans. Later, as the Plans unfolded in their various dimensions, a few more professional social workers were associated with the planning groups, staffed the Ministries and Departments of social services at the central and state levels, and a slightly larger number at the administrative and supervisory positions in the states, districts and blocks in the rural areas.

Then again, the schools of social work as institutions and senior social work educators as individual specialists were invited to plan the large scale, short term training and orientation programmes. They trained supervisory and field personnel,

including professionals at the beginning level of practice or para professionals and auxiliary personnel.

At the policy level the professional social workers were like technical backstoppers. At the planning level they were staffing the sectoral divisions; at the administrative level, as members of bureaucracy; and at the supervisory level, as members of multidisciplinary teams. Later, they have also served as researchers, evaluators, consultants and specialists in the countrywide programmes. Some of them have also become social activists working for a society qualitatively entirely different from the Western model.

This bird's eye view of the national developmental scene is presented again to stress the same point. If the professional social workers in India were cast in the American mould they would not have been able to discharge the several key roles in India's development which has been described as a mighty enterprise. In fact, it could be claimed without exaggeration that social workers of very few countries, developed or developing, have been lucky enough to acquire this quality and scale of planning and developmental experience as the trained social workers in India have done. It must be said to the credit of professional social workers that even those who acquired their training in the American schools of social work have given very authentically indigenous performance insightful of Indian social reality and useful in the Indian conditions. Some of them gave a lead in keeping social work education and practice true to the soil.

There is, however, one aspect in which the professional social work in India is not different from the American or other social workers of democratic countries. The guest editor's note attached to the invitation to contributors to this Special Issue quotes Hammond (1988) to say that "the profession's value orientations of self-reliance, self-determination and such like have been considerably fostered and influenced by the liberal values and beliefs of the American society and may not be acceptable in other countries". While the comment talks about liberal values it is not in itself a very liberal comment. A full-fledged discussion of this view may extend into international politics. Perhaps, it is occasioned by Hammond's experience in some of the countries which are perceived to have authoritarian or fundamentalist regimes. They are capable of speaking for themselves.

As for India, suffice to state briefly but emphatically that India began its independent government as the largest parliamentary democracy based on adult franchise. Moreover, despite intermittent internal tensions arising within its pluralist society, and in spite of emergence in several countries in its neighbourhood of authoritarian and fundamentalist regimes, India has not swerved from the path of representative democracy, accountable executive, independent judiciary and a free press. To launch an enterprise of planned national development within a democratic policy was a deliberate choice. So was it unique. Beset with many risks, there was no model for it to follow. Yet in its 46 years of chequered development it has not wavered about its commitment to the liberal values Hammond talks about.

Professional social work in India, therefore, shares the same values with a commitment second to none. But, in this respect, it derives its strength as much from its

long and rich civilisational heritage as from the global forces of modernisation. It is a shared ideal pursued in a distinctive style of its own.

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About National Association of Professional Social Workers in India ( NAPSWI ), NAPSWI is a non-profit, non-political, national level organization dedicated to the promotion of standard and status of social work profession. NAPSWI intends to fulfill twin purpose : to promote the social work profession across the country with the aim of improving the quality of services in the social welfare and social development sectors on one hand and to protect interests of social work professionals. Vision. To create a compassionate fraternity of professional social workers. Mission. To advance excellence Social work is an academic discipline and practice-based profession that concerns itself with individuals, families, groups, communities and society as a whole in an effort to meet basic needs and enhance social functioning, self-determination, collective responsibility, and overall well-being. Social functioning is defined as the ability of an individual to perform their social roles within their own self, their immediate social environment, and the society at large. Social work applies social Working customs, hours, salaries: Working conditions and salaries in India are different from the ones in western countries. The official work week in India runs from Monday to Saturday, from 10am to 6pm each day. Working conditions and salaries in India are different from the ones in western countries. The official work week in India runs from Monday to Saturday, from 10am to 6pm each day. In reality, overtime is the norm and most local companies do not compensate their workers for it. The Indian work culture is immensely diverse. There are major differences depending on whether you work for small, local companies, for big Indian corporations or for international companies. Business practices also vary between regions. Work practices in India.