

Social Work in National Development as a profession in India

By:

P. John Prasad, MSW

Hanmakonda- Warangal (District) - Telangana state.

Concept and Definition of social work

Defining social work entails describing the roles and functions of social workers. Although many attempts have been made to define social work, there have been some disagreements in trying to come up with a universal definition of social work. Thus, without a general agreement on what constitutes social work, it is difficult to definitively delineate what the roles and functions of social work are or should be. The apparent failure to reach an agreement on what social work is partly accounts for the gap between what social workers say they want to achieve and what they are practically able to achieve (<http://www.scotland.gov.uk>).

According to Cree (2003:3), "it is almost impossible to find a simple definition of social work with which everyone is likely to agree". Be that as it may, various scholars have attempted to develop definitions of social work, ranging from the seemingly simple and straightforward ones to the relatively complex and comprehensive, including the following.

According to Farley and Smith (2006:7), "social work is an art, a science, a profession that helps people to solve personal, group (especially family), and community problems and to attain satisfying personal, group, and community relationships through social work practice". Probably the most comprehensive, authoritative and most widely used definitions of the concept is the one that states that social work is "a profession which promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilizing theories of human behavior and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work" (International Association of Schools of Social Work: 2001). From the above definitions, it follows that social work consists of organized and systematic efforts to secure the highest personal and social satisfaction for individuals, groups and communities. Its auspices may be voluntary, governmental or combination of both. Social work in its various forms addresses the multiple, complex transactions between people and their environments, and aims at enabling all people to develop their full potential, enrich their lives, and prevent dysfunction (<http://www.sozialarbeit.at/>).

The History of Social Work

From the time when Social Work emerged in Victorian England to the current postmodernist times, it has come a long way. With the move from charity organisation and service-delivery to organised social work practice, different methods of social work practice emerged. Currently, six methods of social work practice are recognised by the institutions of Social Work; Social Casework, Social Welfare Administration, Social Group Work, Community Organisation, Social Action, and Social Research. These methods evolved in Social Work with changes in the context of practice. The reference to the context is also important as certain methods came to be practised more in the developing and under-developed countries than in the developed countries of the West. In the Indian context, community organization emerged as one of the central methods of practice alongside casework. This is in contrast to the West, where casework has always remained the prominent method of practice. Comparing the individualistic society of the West with the Indian society, which has been predominantly based on community living, highlights why practice of community organisation gained prominence very early in India. However, as the origins of Social Work are located in the West, the western line of thought has had a strong impact on the development of Social Work in India during its early period. The two countries that have pioneered the development of Social Work in the world are United Kingdom (UK) and United States of America (USA). Of these two, India majorly adapted the USA model of Social Work in the beginning. Also, the training of early Social Work educators of four major institutions

of Social Work in India (twenty-six out of fifty-one social work educators) took place in USA (Yelaja 1969b). Even the literature that was and is referred to in teaching students in India was borrowed from the West (Nagpaul 1972). Thus, before discussing the Indian history of Social Work, it will be useful to have a discussion on the earlier developments in the West.

History of Social Work in the West

The emergence of Social Work can be located in the 'Charity Organisation' movement that developed in Victorian England in the 1860s. According to Mark Philip (1979), Social Work first formed in the space between the two major 19th century discourses of wealth and poverty. The first Charity Organisation Society was founded in London in the year 1869 with the following deal: Charity given indiscriminately and thoughtlessly demoralized; it encouraged habits of thriftlessness (sic) and dependence and these, the society considered were a root cause of poverty and pauperism. True Charity, administered according to certain principles, could encourage independence, strengthen character, and help to preserve family as the fundamental unit of society (Woodroffe 1961: 28). This highlights two important points about the trend in mid-Victorian thought. Firstly, during the shift from pre-modernity to modernity, there was a growing belief in the scientific method accompanied by transference of service from God to man; thus, a shift from philanthropy to organised charity. Secondly, the belief in individualism led to the distinction between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor. Thus, it was the character and not the circumstance that was considered for personal failure. According to Kathleen Woodroffe (1961), in the beginning, social work played the dual role of 'social sedative' and 'social regenerator'. As social sedative, it tried to damp down social discontent by stressing duties of the rich towards the poor. As social regenerator, it tried to create the power of self-help in poor, focussing on the individual rather than her/his environment. Based on the belief in individualism, coupled with the concept of organised charity, Social Work developed its first method of practice, 'Social Casework'. It evolved from a set of principles to guide volunteers into a technique that could be imparted by education and training from one generation of social workers to the next. Charity organisation in USA also developed on the pattern of English ideology with the underlying assumptions of individual initiative and self-reliance. The pioneering work to develop casework as a scientific method came from Mary Richmond (1917), who delineated its process in four stages: (i) thorough investigation, (ii) accurate diagnosis, (iii) co-operation with all possible sources of assistance, and (iv) treatment. She added three dimensions to give a scientific basis to this method: they are (i) the concept of a systematic method by which a social diagnosis could be made to serve as the basis of treatment, (ii) the knowledge of human behaviour, necessary for a better understanding of the individual, her/his family and the social relationships by which s/he lived, and (iii) the concept of democratic process of social work in which the caseworker and the client could co-operate to their mutual advantage. She highlighted the need to provide a sociological basis to casework. Thus, the focus of casework shifted from the person to the problem and process. This highlights an epistemological shift in the practice of social work, wherein the meaning of social in social work gained more prominence. After the First World War, Social Work came to be influenced by the teaching of Sigmund Freud and his disciples. Many concepts handed down by psychoanalysis, such as understanding of forces that control human behaviour and past experiences of the client, were learnt by the social workers who were now concerned with psychological maladjustment of

the client, rather than her/his material needs. Another important development that took place in the development of casework as a method of social work practice was the increasing emphasis on the word 'client'. This indicates that, as methods started to develop in Social Work, there was a gradual move towards developing social work as a profession. This was a major shift from philanthropy and charity; associated more with voluntary work. These shifts in Social Work had a close connection with the socio-economic context of the West as well. An examination of the socio-economic context of post-First World War throws light upon the emphasis which was put on private profit and growth of industry under 'liberalism'. Under liberalism, poverty was regarded as a moral problem of individuals and not as an economic problem. This was further strengthened by the survival of the system after the 'Great Depression' of 1929. These existential conditions had a direct bearing on Social Work as well, as is evident from the emphasis on psychological inadequacy and not the social realities of the industrialised and competitive society. Another factor that influenced the development of Social Work in the West was its close

association with the state. The establishment of Federal Emergency Relief Administration by the American government to suppress social conflict had its impact on the development of Social Work. Social workers were given the responsibility for the administration of public relief. This changed the social setting within which social work operated and enhanced the scope of social work to develop into a profession. Social workers could now enter the established structure of the government to carry on the activities entailed in the new programmes of public relief. This paved the way for the development of social welfare administration as a method of social work practice. In the midst of these developments, which promoted the growth of social work as a profession, lesser developed methods like social group work and community organization started to capture the attention of social workers. Like

casework, these methods also originated in England, but soon reached America, where they received more attention as compared to their English counterparts. According to Woodroffe, Community organisation and social group work, then, are two corners of the field of social work which have been tilled more sedulously in America than they have been in England. Perhaps the explanation for this is to be found in what de Tacqueville called the 'greater relish' which the more egalitarian Americans entertained for forming associations and for finding general principles underlying the myriad manifestation (1961: 180). The origin of group work can be located in the 'Settlement House' movement in Victorian England. Although main inspiration for founding this movement came from religion, the true intent behind founding these settlements was to establish a dignified form of relationship between the rich and the poor. The practice of group work involved creation of groups around selected interests in order to compensate for the sense of loss that an individual felt in the modern industrial state. Initially, social group workers focussed on discovering the characteristics of groups, the classification criteria for groups, the importance of human growth of free activity within groups, and the settings in which group work can best be used. In doing so, they borrowed from literature on progressive education and social psychology (ibid.). But then efforts were made to develop an independent theory of group work. This was initiated with the publication of Grace L. Coyle's book *Social Process in Organised Groups* in 1930. In her book, Coyle borrowed the concept of 'grouping process' developed by Charles S. Cooley and of 'structure' from John Dewey to explain how the structure of a group evolved. The discussion on group work also highlights that group work as a method of social work practice was also based on the assumption underlying casework about the nature of society. It did not advocate for any radical change in the structure of the society. It chose to operate within the dominant framework of the existing order and was careful not to threaten the *status quo*. The origin of community organisation as a method of social work practice can be located in the Charity Organisation Society (COS) itself. Within COS there were two distinct trends of thought that emerged. The first was leading to individualisation and casework, the second towards socialisation and community organisation. Under this second approach social workers started to advocate for changes within the existing framework of the society which would produce less adverse effects upon the individual. Community organisation as a method of practice has undergone many changes as the context of practice has changed historically. It was first recognised as a method by settlement house workers. Initially, during the progressive era, it included three core elements: (i) an integrated collaborative practice that delivered desperately needed services, intervened at the individual as well as the community level and sought to develop solidarity between the settlement workers and the neighbourhood residents, (ii) a sense of essential importance of community and community building, and (iii) a willingness to organise and advocate for social, political, and economic justice (Fisher 2005). Prior to the 1920s, aiding individuals, building community, and changing society were all integral parts of community organisation practice pyramid (Berry 1999). Responding to the conservative political economy in the West and the efforts within Social Work to gain credibility as a profession, between the 1920s till the onset of the 'Great Depression', community organisation concentrated on the reform impulse. Thus, experts in community organisation started to develop a more rigorous and exacting approach to the study and practice of community organisation (Schwartz 1965). When the world was hit by the Great Depression in 1929, community organisers turned back their attention towards social policy advocacy and social action. This initiated the move towards advocating for economic, political, and social change. But this change did not sustain for long within the realm of community organisation as during the period of the 'Cold War' social workers withdrew from the political scene. As Austin notes, Community organisation during this period (the 'Cold War'), like group work and casework, was primarily focussed on interpersonal processes – that is, how inclusively self-help groups were organised and how democratic decisions were made, not with specific outcomes impacting poverty, racial segregation, or general patterns of discrimination (1999: 196). Although social action started to take shape within the womb of community organization prior to the 1960s, especially during the post-depression phase in the 1930s, it started to develop and gain recognition as a method of social work practice during the 1960s. Many factors are responsible for this and it is hard to pinpoint which one played a more significant role. One probable reason for this was the rising influence of the Soviet Union and the Marxist ideology, which provided an alternative to individualised growth under capitalism in the USA. Even in America, there were mass social movements being organised by the coloured people for civil rights and power, by students against the war in Vietnam, and later on by women for gender equality. This reform context not only expanded the opportunities for community organisation, but also started to provide a legitimate basis for the development of social action as a method of social work practice. This also indicated the inclusion of a macro-framework in Social Work alongside the dominant micro-framework. But, with the expansion of the private marketplace post-1975 the micro-framework again exerted its influence on Social Work. Issues became highly private and individual, and people became highly isolated, moving away from social solidarity. Even in the sub-field of community organisation in Social Work, there was a turn towards more conservative approaches, as only these approaches received acceptance, support, and funding.

However, since social action had started to develop alongside the dominant model of Social Work, it led to the emergence of a new form of Social Work based on the Marxist ideology. These social workers came to be known as the radical social workers who advocated for collective action to bring about radical change in the society. According to Fred Powell (2001), radical social work emerged within a wider ambit of 'Left' critique of the welfare state. For radical social workers, the historic mission of social work could only be achieved by politicisation of social work role and tasks into an explicit alliance with people's movements and allies on the political left. The decade starting from 1970 characterised the publication of numerous texts and papers on radical social work. Various authors, such as Roy Bailey and Mike Brake (1975), Daphne Statham (1978), and Peter Leonard (1975) started to provide texts for radical social work. These texts clearly advocated the method of social action in social work practice. In addition, they talked of co-operation of Social Work with the progressive social movements of the time. During this period, *Case Con*, a British news-sheet, describing itself as a revolutionary magazine for social workers, advocated for replacement of welfare state with the workers' state. *Case Con* believes that the problems of our 'clients' are rooted in the society in which we live, not in supposed individual inadequacies. Until this society, based on private ownership, profit and the needs of a minority ruling class, is replaced by a workers' state, based on the interests of the vast majority of population, the fundamental causes of social problems will remain. It is therefore our aim to join the struggle for this workers' state (as cited in Bailey and Brake 1975: 146–47). In addition, radical social workers also started to attack the traditional methods of social work, namely, casework, group work, and community organisation. Underlying this critique of traditional methods was the larger attack on 'professional approach' of social work. One important tool for professional social work has been casework a pseudo-science . . . The casework ideology forces clients to be seen as needing to be changed to fit society. Social work now expanded to include new (and not so new) tricks, such as community work, group work, welfare rights work, etc., which, when professionalised, end up by becoming the same sort of mechanism of control as traditional casework, often with the additional merit of being less expensive for the ruling class . . . It must be fought at every opportunity (ibid. 145–46). However, towards the end of 1970s and in the beginning of 1980s, radical social work distanced itself from the orthodox Marxist position and started to advocate for an incremental struggle, calling it evolutionary Marxism. With the shift from modernity to postmodernity, radical social work started to incorporate the postmodern critique in social work. According to Robert Mullaly, The contribution of postmodernism to a structural analysis is to help us recognise that although oppression and exploitation may be universal phenomena, they will be experienced differently by different people living in different contexts . . . Marxism, for example, has often overlooked other forms of oppression, such as patriarchy and racism and has often viewed the working-class as homogenous group whose members are equally exploited, not recognising stratification, ethnicity, gender, and other types of differences within it (1997: 115–16). In addition to Mullaly, there have been others, such as Bob Pease and Jan Fook (1999), who emphasise the importance of postmodern theory and how it offers new strategies for social workers concerned with political action and social justice. The radical critique of traditional Social Work was met with a strong response. One important criticism of the traditional social workers has been that radical social work subordinates practice to theory. According to Karen Healy, "Radical analysis can overlook the emancipator potential in everyday social work practices by establishing standards that devalue much of the change activity in which social workers are involved" (2000: 5). Martin Davies (1981b) also suggests viewing social work in more positivistic terms of systemic maintenance, containment, control, and support. However, many radical social workers have asserted their influence despite the fact that, in Social Work, the radical branch has been consigned to a peripheral status. Jim Ife writes, Such [radical] social workers have often been perceived as being a minority within the profession, and many indeed have discarded the label 'professional'. They have, however, exerted an important influence on social work, in that they prevented social workers from feeling too comfortable in a 'professional' role, they have reminded social workers of the importance of the analysis of power, and they have held out a more radical alternative. This influence has been very important in preventing social work from becoming too complacent and maintaining a 'critical edge' to social work theory and practice (1997: 57). Thus, radical social work, with its socialist origins, differs in its analysis of problems from conventional analysis. Rather than locating the problem in individual inadequacies, it takes into consideration the broad social context. In giving importance to social action, it draws inspiration from the collective struggles of people that have the power to change their oppressive circumstances. Today, Social Work internationally includes many things, from the individual-centric work to the radical work. With the expansion of international NGOs, it has opened new opportunities for social work practice. But, this domain does not belong to only the social workers and involves people from various fields and disciplines. The analysis of the history of social work in the West highlights a few important points on the theory–practice relationship in Social Work. To begin with, social work practice has always influenced the development of the academic branch of Social Work. The earlier methods of social work practice were developed theoretically once they came to be practised in the field.

Rather, one may say that Social Work formalised and refined what was already being practised in the field. Then, a few methods of social work were developed as extensions of already existing methods of practice. For example, community organisation emerged from the practice of settlement workers who were initially only involved in practising group work. Social action emerged initially as a branch of community organisation before acquiring an independent status in Social Work. This also indicates that theory development in Social Work has largely been around the methodology of practice. Thus, in Social Work curriculum, methodology has always enjoyed a space as the core component. However, the context of practice has had a strong bearing on the development of Social Work. The ideologies of different times have come to influence not only practice but the academics of Social Work as well. These ideologies have been underpinned by different theoretical frameworks and have borrowed heavily from the knowledge of the social sciences. Therefore, the knowledge of theories and concepts borrowed from various Social Sciences (although in a limited frame) has also been included in Social Work. The developments that took place with respect to social work in the West, especially in USA, have had an impact on the development of Social Work in India. In the earlier times, the model developed in USA heavily influenced the components of Social Work in India. Later, with the realisation that the Indian context is not completely compatible with the western model, certain changes took place in Social Work. We shall now turn our attention to the development of Social Work in India.

Social Work as a Profession in India

The development of social work as a profession has been under debate both within the social work fraternity and outside of it. Over the years, the definition of a profession has undergone change and new vocations or semi-professions have come to be accepted as professions. Meher C. Nanavatty (1952) has cited four characteristics of a profession as enumerated by Carr-Saunders in the *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*: (i) the development of the body of knowledge upon which the skill rests, (ii) the reservation of functions to the qualified by means of licensing or the restrictions of the professional bodies, (iii) the development of the professional consciousness amongst the practitioners, and (iv) the contribution of the specialised skill and viewpoint to appropriate problems in the surrounding society. As regards development of social work profession in India, currently it is weak with respect to the first three characteristics. The first characteristic is weak as many educators and students complain that most of the knowledge base of social work is borrowed from the West and is not of much relevance in the Indian context. Till now, the professional bodies of social work have not been able to ensure licensing of social work practice in India. Also, in India the professional bodies of social work are rendered almost dysfunctional and there is not much professional consciousness among trained practitioners. The criteria to qualify as a profession, many a time, have been laid out in comparison to universally admitted professions such as medicine and law. Social work, in order to attain a professional status, has also resorted to such comparisons. In his lecture, Abraham Flexner (1915), 'Is Social Work a Profession?', delivered at the National Conference on Charities and Corrections, examined the characteristics of a profession with reference to social work. The characteristics of a profession, as listed by him in 1915 are still relevant for social work in India, as it is still struggling to establish a professional status for itself. Firstly, professions are intellectual in character, the professional assumes responsibility for her/his decisions, and there is a considerable degree of originality in the decisions that are made by the professional. Secondly, professions are learned in character, that is, they involve a steady stream of ideas. Thus, every profession involves the borrowing of ideas from either natural or social sciences which need to be learnt in order to become a professional in a particular field. Thirdly, every profession involves the component of practice. The knowledge that is learnt needs to be applied by every professional having a definite and practical objective to her/his work. In other words, every profession is definite in its purpose. Fourthly, a profession needs to possess an educationally communicable technique which can be imparted through a professional course (hence the importance of an academic discipline for every profession). As the profession gains more recognition, it should be backed by the simultaneous development of a highly specialised educational discipline, which should also involve a component of training. Fifthly, every profession should have its own professional body which advocates for a common social interest. This focuses on devotion to well-doing as an accepted mark of a professional activity in which the pecuniary interest of the individual practitioner is on increasing realisation of responsibility to a larger social end rather than promotion of individual interest. Thus, professional bodies are assigned the task of establishing a code of ethics for every profession. Lastly, every profession has a definite social status attached to it (ibid.). If we examine social work as a profession in India with respect to the characteristics given by Flexner then social work might qualify as a profession. For example, the learned character, the practical purpose, a professional course, professional bodies/organisations all exist in India but still many do not accept it as a profession. Many social workers argue that, in comparison with the West, the concept of professional social work came late to India and it is a matter of time before the work of social workers will be accepted and recognised as a professional activity. They also advocate that, it will require organisation and lobbying on the part of the social workers, with the academicians taking the lead, for the attainment of a professional status for social work in India. However, there are contrary views both

within and outside of social work fraternity on the acceptance of a professional status by academicians, bureaucrats, Government of India, and the society at large.

Professional Bodies of Social Work in India

In India, many efforts have been made to come up with national and state-level professional bodies of social work to foster the development of social work as a profession. Some of these include Association of Schools of Social Work in India (ASSWI), National Association of Professional Social Workers in India (NAPSWI), Indian Association of Trained Social Workers (IATSW), Maharashtra Association of Social Workers Educators (MASWE), Bombay Association of Trained Social Workers (BATSW), and Karnataka Association of Professional Social Workers (KAPSW). Out of these, ASSWI has been the most influential association, according to many social work educators. But many educators also highlighted that, with the passing years, especially post 2000, even the significance of ASSWI has gone down considerably in the social work fraternity and it has become almost dysfunctional. Meher C. Nanavatty, in his analysis of the literature on professional associations of social work highlighted, Coming to the promotion of professional associations . . . They have remained as peripheral activities. Though during the seventies and the early eighties, the professional associations had shown some signs of growth and vitality, due to internecine conflict arising out of individual motivation versus social motivation as well egocentric leadership, the IATSW ceased to exist. In spite of some efforts at revival a new spirit could not be infused. This is one of the most important handicaps of the profession of social work in India (1997: 298).

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