PROBLEMS AFFECTING THE INDIGENISATION OF SOCIAL WORK PROFESSION IN ASIA

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Professional development of social work is a phenomenon of industrial civilisation, and as such its structure and the supportive organisational base have remained primarily urban; and its growth, slow and truncated. While tracing various efforts at indigenisation of the methods, fields of service and their research-base to suit the cultural and social requirements of some of the countries of Asia, the author opines that the effort at indigenisation has its own constraint in view of the professional knowledge being universal in nature. Besides, as the world is rapidly becoming a "global village", the social work profession has to view its future from the larger perspective of advocacy and change towards social action and development.

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Urbanisation and its Impact

Most of the developing countries in the South East Asian region have emerged from a predominantly rural society. They were under foreign domination till the thirties and forties. Even after independence most of them adopted a model of development from their colonial masters — India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka from the British, Indonesia from the Dutch, and the Philippines from the Spanish first and later American masters. As such they all have gone through the "dilemma of development" from their colonial rulers.

The process of urbanisation began with the migration of people to urban cities as a result of the factors of push and pull. With the formation of metropolitan and large cities, more migration followed in search of employment and better facilities for education, health and recreation. With the rapid influx of population from rural areas, the limited resources of civic services and amenities suffered a break down. The poor became a factor to reckon with. The vulnerability of people increased, requiring more social services of caring for the poor and the marginals.

With growing industrialisation, the Western influence became more pronounced. It brought with it the impact of liberal thought of humanitarianism, equalitarianism, and secularism. Not that they were not imbibed in the ancient culture of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, prevalent in different countries, the urban elites became more conscious of development and change. With the spread of education and contact with the outside world, social reform movement took shape. Under these influences, new elites emerged in cities and towns, who, through their education and economic well-being, began to influence higher level of education, eventually resulting in professional training in agriculture and allied subjects, health and medicine, education, engineering, etc.

Professional training in social work came later. As knowledge became universal with the spread of written word, communication and transport, the training in different professions developed in the West began to find acceptance in developing countries of the region. Some of the trained professionals tried to indigenise their professional
knowledge and practice to meet the requirements of local conditions. But the process of adaptation of professional knowledge and practice remained truncated, the Western influences being more pronounced. For example, the medical profession, which was an early comer from the West, remained confined to institutional set-up of hospitals and clinics in cities without developing community based health services for the masses. It has as yet not been able to integrate the traditional system of herbal treatment and faith healing. Most of the professional practices thus remained confined to urban areas, which by and large, covered thirty percent of the total population in most countries, except in the Philippines which has reached sixty per cent.

Besides, as the professional practice is based on remuneration, either under private or public auspices, it is only an urban living standard of life that can avail professional services, thus confining them to urban areas. It is also an evidence of the acceptance of the professional services by an urban social milieu. Wherever professional services got extended outside the cities, it has spread only marginally to district areas, except where missionaries, like the Rural Missionaries of the Philippines, extended health and social services to rural areas. Thus the pre-dominance of the urban base of the professional services has been the main constraint of development as well as of finding roots in the traditional culture of rural society. While examining the indigenisation of social work knowledge and practice this basic factor remains to be taken into consideration.

**Different Levels of Social Work**

Different countries in Asia have adopted social work education at different levels of learning. India opted for the graduate course from the very beginning. Only during the Community Development movement, Rural Institutes were developed to meet the manpower requirement in rural areas. Some of these rural institutes were subsequently converted into undergraduate schools of social work. Although many of them attracted youth from rural areas to social work education, majority of the students (more than sixty per cent) opted for graduate course immediately after completing the undergraduate, due to limited availability of well paid social work jobs in rural areas as well as being drawn to urban life of higher status and more social amenities. Thus the objective of undergraduate training becoming a terminal degree for beginners in social work jobs, and subsequently becoming a continuing education for higher learning was not fulfilled. There thus occurred considerable wastage of human and monetary resources as well as repetition of learning.

The Philippines started with the recognition of undergraduate degree as a minimum requirement of professional qualification, as will be seen subsequently, and gradually extended to postgraduate studies in social work education. Indonesia began with undergraduate training and subsequently developed graduate studies for people with several years of practice experience and focused its advanced training on research, policy formulation, planning and social administration. Thailand, similarly, has both undergraduate and graduate training courses in social work.

All these institutions in the region have adopted the American model of social work education in one form or another.
Limited Effort at Adaptation of Professional Knowledge

Professional education in social work began in the Asian region in the thirties. Although, earlier, the purpose was visualised to be an inquiry into the causes of poverty and its elimination in a country like India, it acquired the method and programme to assist people to adjust to the industrial milieu. (India: University Grants Commission, 1980.)

Course of Studies

In India, they covered four major groups: teaching of social sciences related to social work, method courses, field of service courses and research, statistics, and administration; field work acquiring greater importance. Gradually other courses were included. The service courses covered Child Welfare, Youth Development, Women's Welfare, Substance Abuse, Welfare of the Aged, etc. The most adaptive approach related to two areas, viz., Teaching in social sciences related to social work as a foundation course; and Labour Welfare and Personnel Management, as a specialised course related to industrial development. This was distinctly different from courses taught in American Schools of Social Work. Recently, efforts are being made to revise the courses emphasising professional identity, social change and environmental rejuvenation (Curriculum Development Unit, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, 1989). A total emphasis of social development remains still to be provided.

Scholars like Gore (1965) and Pathak (1981) had shared their valuable reflections on development of courses of study in India, analysing the theoretical framework, making some effort at finding the roots of social work theories in the Indian culture. However, there existed very limited literature on theoretical models utilised in promoting the methods of social work. In relation to social casework, Mathew (1987) observed that a number of theories were studied, including psycho-dynamics, functional casework, cognitive behavioural modification, and crisis management. But those were not theories in strict sense. She concluded that there had not emerged any unitary theory in casework. As such efforts were made to adopt an eclectic approach using the best knowledge gathered from different theoretical orientation (Mathew, 1987: 59-66).

In the use of social group work, series of Western thoughts pronounced by John Dewey, Kurt Levin, Grace Coyle and others influenced the method, a brief account of which is listed below. No literature is available on the development of the method of social group work based on Socio-cultural influences prevalent in India. A reflection has been made, however, on the conflict of authoritarian culture prevailing among Indian families with the new emerging values of democracy and liberal thoughts incorporated in the teaching of social group work (Mehta, 1987: 7-20).

Community Development

During the sixties the community development movement initiated by respective governments and supported by the UN, gave an opportunity to relate the development services to rural communities. It offered an effective use of the method of community organisation. Although some efforts were made to utilise social work methods in developing rural communities in most of the developing countries, the
movement remained primarily an extension programme in agriculture and allied occupations and services. The profession of social work did not have enough political clout and administrative influence among the bureaucrats to get the programme related to the organisation and promotion of rural communities, utilising social work methodology and services. In Thailand the prevalence of Buddhist influence in villages provided social emphasis on development of rural communities. Similarly, in the Philippines the Roman Catholic Church through the Rural Missionaries helped the rural communities in extending benefits of developmental activities to the poor and the marginal.

**Social Action**

Social action as a method of bringing political and economic change, although known to developing countries in the region during their struggle for liberation from foreign rule, did not find commitment among the social work professionals as such. Those who believed in social action left the profession and joined the company of social activities.

**Research Studies**

Research studies on identification of social problems have emerged among social scientists, especially sociologists and social anthropologists, besides a few students of social work. Studies on methodology of social intervention as well as on strengthening social functions of individuals, groups, local communities and institutions, are few in number as Ramachandran concluded, saying, the growth of social work research in India was uneven (Ramachandran, 1988: 386-394). Greater attention, however, has been given in writings on social policy, planning and social administration (Kulkami, 1978). Recent development of doctoral studies in some schools of social work gives hope of advanced studies on adaptation and effectiveness of social work education in social conditions of Indian Society.

**Search for Specialisation**

In most developing countries, the conflict between generic and specialised courses of social work education emerged. With increasing opportunities of employment, the demand for specialised training began to be felt. It began with separate emphasis on contents of courses of Labour Welfare and Personnel Management and got extended to Medical Social Work, Psychiatric Social Work, School Social Work, etc. The detailed requirements of these fields, especially as reflected in case studies, offered opportunities at indigenisation. At the same time specialisation has divided the professional loyalty and disturbed the unity of the profession.

**Field Work Practices**

Field work practices offered the most effective opportunity to understand the requirements of people in the background of prevailing cultural traditions and values, and thereby, offered opportunities to indigenise practices. It also gave opportunities for innovation. Some schools adopted "floating field work", others the "see-saw approach". The most pronounced adaptation was carried out by the Department of
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Social Work, University of the Philippines, by shifting the faculty and the student body to rural areas for one full-term, adopting the rural-base in learning of theory, conducting survey and research, gathering case studies and integrating field work to rural requirements. This most effective effort at indigenisation did not last long in the urban culture of the profession.

U.N. and International Deliberation

A number of meetings and conferences were held by the U.N. Economic and Social Commission of Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and regional branches of International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Council of Social Welfare (ICSW) to relate social work to regional requirements. The most deliberative effort was made in Drucker's study of "Exploration" (Drucker, 1972). Unfortunately, the impact of these deliberations has been marginal. It would be a valuable exercise to study this impact on Social Work education and practice in the region.

It is our concluding observation that continuous efforts have thus been made to adapt the social work education model of the West to the needs of local population in India and other countries of the region. Unfortunately, most of these efforts have remained undocumented.

To say so is not to deny the fact that "predominantly rural societies have adopted the American urban model of social work education without adequately indigenising social work curriculum and body of knowledge to ensure its relevance to local culture" (Brigham, 1984). But, such criticism holds valid only to a point. Although it is correct to recognise slowness in adaptation of the programme of social work education in the region (Kendall, 1986), the expression "indigenisation", as reflecting "native knowledge belonging naturally to the soil" (Oxford Dictionary; 1968) is ill-conceived, if not exaggerated. The professional knowledge, being universal in nature, requires to be adapted to suit local cultural and social conditions. To consider "indigenous" social work knowledge as a must for indigenous social work education and professional practice is too simplistic to reckon with.

Inadequate Supportive Organisational Structure

It is a fact that every professional development requires supportive organisations of educators and practitioners besides an accrediting system of training institutes as well as licensing of practitioners. This is evident in the case of social work profession in the U.S.A. The National Association of Social Work (NASW) and the Council of Social Work Education (CSWE), and subsequently, their inter-relation of work, have played a vital role in strengthening professional development in America (Humphreys and Dinerman, 1984). In Asia, however, in addition to the slowness in adaptation of social work education model to suit the requirements of individual country, the supportive system to strengthen social work education and practice have remained weak.

It was in the sixties and seventies that efforts were made in India to activise the Indian Association of Trained Social Workers to make an impact on professional development. Although it worked for many years, and even obtained corresponding
membership with its American counterpart (NASW), it lapsed into non-existence due to internecine quarrels and absence of professional commitment. The Association of Schools of Social Work in India, which became active in the sixties organising workshops and conferences and bringing out useful publications, lost its vigour and has become ineffective. Some efforts were also made to establish the Council of Social Work Education by the Chairman of the Social Work Education Panel of the University Grants Commission (U.G.C. Report, 1980), but did not succeed then. Recently, the Ministry of Welfare, Government of India, has proposed to form an Indian Council of Social Work under an act of the Parliament, to provide a system of accrediting and coordination. But as long as the professional organisations remain weak and do not have an effective say in its formation, there remains a danger of bureaucratic domination.

In the Philippines, fortunately, both the organisations of educators and practitioners were actively cooperating with each other and the government, promoting a system of accreditation of schools and licensing of practitioners. They brought a social legislation authorising the Bachelor of Science in Social Work (B.S.S.W.) as a first professional degree in 1967, and introduced a national programme of certification by examination as a requirement for permanent employment in public and voluntary social work position (Brigham, 1984). Both organisations continue to remain active and vigilant in the interest of the profession of social work.

Professional associations in other developing countries in the region have not documented their progress. As such no information can be presented on their development. It is, however, for consideration whether the limited spread of industrial culture in developing countries has affected the slowness in the emergence of professional societies like social work.

A reflection on the limited acceptance of the profession of social work and social work education by the Government of India as well as by the society is not examined here. It requires a separate deliberation.

**Reflection on Changing Perspective of Social Work**

The need to emphasise the adaptation of social work education and practice to suit the cultural and social requirements of people in developing countries, although real, is being circumscribed by the emergence of the changing perspective of social work practice in recent years. The dynamics of development are changing. New reflections are emerging. As Wolffe concludes "the removal of poverty is acquiring a major thrust of developmental programmes, giving rise to the integrated approach to development combining economic with social (Wolffe, 1981). In Gunnar Myrdal's perception, greater weightage should be given to the institutional factors of change, social values and removal of social inequality (Myrdal, 1968). Interestingly, Ramachandran analysing forty years of social work education in India, noted:

An inevitable conclusion that may be drawn from the critical review of the scenario was that the focus of social work in coming years would be on the liberation of the marginalised poor in tribal and rural areas and urban pockets of India. The methodology of social work will be "people centred" approach
involving their conscientisation and thereby ensuring their participation in the process of liberation" (Ramachandran, 1988).

As Marshal Wolffe talks of "elusive development" (Wolffe, 1987), Ramachandran echoes his reflection on "elusive professional development of social work":

Social workers will continue to lack training to deal with masses because the profession is still individual and small group treatment oriented and greater emphasis is laid on remedial measures. This will continue to be so not because of a lack of potential for latent dynamism, but due to certain politico-economic forces. The profession at present seems to reflect the sad state of society today — talking about change, and yet manipulating to keep people where they are (1988).

This reflection on professionalisation of social work was shared recently at the international deliberation by Inter-University Consortium on Social Development (IUCSD), International Congress of Schools of Social Work (ICSW), and International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) at their bi-annual conferences held in September 1992 at Washington DC. They all concluded in one form or another that the professional social work should no more confine exclusively to strengthening the coping mechanism of individuals and groups through counselling to adjust to the existing socio-economic and political system, becoming the confirming arm of administration, but participate actively in strengthening and promoting the process of development in all countries, especially the developing and the least developed. Removal of poverty and promotion of social change should be the main objectives and advocacy the main tool of social work while working with people (Nanavatty, 1992).

As Kofi Awoonor concluded at the IASSW session,

In the final analysis, it is social and economic issues that will determine the nature of the global polity in which we all live; and in search of that polity we must seek answers to fundamental issues, such as equity, fairness, justice, equality and humanity. These, as abstract as they may sound, are reducible to such bare facts as food, shelter, health, education... Any democracy that cannot feed, clothe and keep all its people in health, is a terribly flawed democracy (1992).

It is for the profession of social work world-over to reflect whether it is equipped to play this role of "advocacy for social change"! Is the profession even ready to acquire a slant of Social Development to its objective and contents? Whether it is ready to re-adjust social work education to the requirements of change? Whether it is congruous to take over the new role of advocacy by practising social workers? These questions require more serious deliberation than examining the inadequacy of "indigenisation" of social work education in the culture of respective countries in the region after adopting it for more than six decades. The world is rapidly becoming a "global village" in which social work education and practice need to be re-adjusted.

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