Addressing the Future of Professional Social Work in India

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The article looks into the past of the profession and probes into the present to foresee the future. It chronicles the weak spots of social work education in India; debates on the persistent burden of Americanism; refers to the obsolescence of teaching methods, practicum, reading material and course curricula; probes into the proliferation of schools/departments of social works; reflects upon the large number of indifferently trained graduate students; highlights the marginalised status of the profession; examines the loss of profession's traditional battle grounds; describes the fierce competition that social work graduates face in the job-market; brings into fore the weak and ineffectual performance of professional bodies; and comments on the lessening of people's faith in the competence of professional social workers. In sum, the article takes a broad look at the scenario and ventures to make some suggestions at revamping and reorganising the profession's frontiers to get rid of stagnation and staleness.

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Six decades of professional social work in India, marked by few triumphs and too many travails, warrants a serious discussion on what the future holds for a 'profession' beleaguered by several internal and external constraints and considerations. While the pace of progress has been generally considered satisfactory, a large number of veteran social work educators (Gore 1965; Nagpaul, 1972; Nair, 1981; Nanavatty, 1985; Oommen, 1987; Ranade 1975, 1994; Thomas, 1967), however feel uneasy on a number of counts. The dissatisfaction with the state of affairs has been also voiced in large number of other profession-specific writings, especially in the last two decades. If all these writings are any guide, there is little reason to cheer, celebrate or be complacent about the uncertainties that surround the profession.

Many experienced social work educators, including the author (Srivastava 1973, 1995, 1997), have, in the past, raised several critical issues, diagnosed many malaises and offered plentiful of suggestions to steer clear the profession out of its present precarious situation. The host of gala functions (seminars and conferences) held when the profession achieved its youth (25 years) and, later, when, it achieved its adulthood (50 years) have also done serious introspection on the in-house problems of social work education in the country. Now the consensus seems to centre around making social work education and practice 'reverent' in the contemporary context. It is, however, regrettable that precious little change in visible and the inertia and inaction merrily allows the decadence to continue.

The issue today is not only to recount the old predilections of the profession on conventional lines but to think of the perils and the pressing problems of the profession, which, if allowed to go unattended, will herald the decay and even the eventual demise of the profession. The culture of silence for reasons of indifference or expediency (or whatever) would cause further degeneration and may well prove to be fatal. The most pressing issue today is to seriously consider how the wrongs can be righted?

This paper proposes to journey through the past of the profession and probe into the present to foresee the future. In addressing the predicaments of the profession, it seeks to chronicle the weak spots of social work education in India; the irrelevance of teaching, field work, reading material and course curricula; the mushrooming of substandard Schools/Departments of social work; the churning out of a crowd of indifferently trained social work graduates; the marginalised status of the profession; the diminuition of the profession's traditional battlegrounds in the wake of the state's retreat from its developmental concerns and commitments; the fierce competition that trained social work graduates face in the job-market; the weak and ineffectual performance of professional bodies, that is, the Indian Association of Trained Social Workers (IATSW) (now defunct) and the Association of the Schools of Social Work in India (ASSWI); and the loss of people's faith in the competence and commitment of trained (professional) social workers.

The discussion is not meant to be all-inclusive; it is simply to explore the problematic areas concerning the future of the profession. The full-length discussion on each issue is outside the scope of this essay, given the constraint of space. However, an attempt has been

made to take a broad look at the retrospect of social work education in India since 1936 and to reflect upon conspectus of emerging social concerns and issues. Western references (despite the author's knowledge about recent critical writings on social work education in the West) are being deliberately avoided to provide legitimacy to the discussion. The underlying idea is that indigenous (cultural-specific) problems of the profession need local solutions at the expense of global prescriptions.

Reflecting upon the Retrospect

While reflecting upon the retrospect of social work education in India one ought to reason out the rationale as to why professional education of social work began and with what purpose? The understanding of the backdrop is necessary to anticipate the future. Those serving the profession must necessarily take into notice of what has happened in 62 years and what is likely to happen in the next millennium when the perceptions about the profession are likely to change drastically.

In India, social work as a 'service' has had a long tradition wrapped and rooted in the country's religio-social ethos. Its limitations notwithstanding, not many people thought about making social work as an occupation, let alone a profession. In 1936 a dramatic development took place and the first school of social work (the Sir Dorabji Tata School of Social Work, now known as the Tata Institute of Social Sciences) was established by an American missionary, Dr. Clifford Manshardt with the help of Dr. J.M. Kumarappa. The purpose of starting the school was to promote professional education in social work with a view to equipping social service workers with the knowledge-base and the methods and techniques of doing 'social work' in a professional manner. The advent of a professional school in social work undermined the idea of an unremunerated altruistic work in a country where most people were proud of a long tradition of selfless social service to the disabled and disadvantaged sections of society. Now when we look back at the development of professional social work education in the country, many of us question the rhetoric of scienticism in social work which the founders of the first school preached and perpetuated. However, this so-called scientific approach to social work turned out to be the cause and consequence of later expansion of social work education in the country (Gore and Khandekar, 1975).

The dawn of Independence in 1947 provided a new fillip to professional education in social work. As increased provisions for social welfare were made under the Five Year Plans, a number of areas opened up and the need for professional training in social work was felt by many. Consequently, the establishment of new schools of social work has been fairly rapid. By now we have about seventy Schools/Departments which are offering undergraduate and post-graduate level professional training in social work.

The growth and development of these institutions has been a haphazard phenomenon without much planning for required resources and adequate infrastructure. As a result, many such Schools/Departments of social work are said to be of poor quality. Leaving aside a handful of Schools/Departments in bigger cities and better run universities, most other schools look more like teaching shops than genuine institutions of social work instruction and training. These Schools/Departments have little regard for maintenance of standards in terms of:

- classroom teaching;
- academic background and professional experience of teachers;
- opportunities available for field work; and
- social welfare needs of the constituencies/regions serviced by a given Schools/Departments of social work (Saxena, 1994:110).

Many of these School/Department have been ushered into existence without any compelling professional purpose, but for feeding of local patriotism, or personal prestige, or as a result of mistaken notions about the scope and prospects of professional social work. In many instances, the promoters of these schools imagined that they were acting in pursuance of what is called a 'felt need' (Thomas, 1967:54). Commenting upon the proliferation of social work training institutions, John Barnabas made an observation (1967:75) which is valid till today: 'There is a mushroom growth of training institutions which do not meet required professional standards. Yet they produce social workers who have the stamp of being trained but, who, in practice, are not able to deliver goods and do more harm to the development of social work in the country'.

The proliferation of sub-standard schools of social work is a major point of worry for the profession. The growth of these institutions has gone without control from any apex level accreditation body like that of the USA. The ASSWI (established in 1959) could exercise very little authority, as it consists of voluntary membership of institutions. The Second UGC Review Committee on Social Work Education

(1980), however, took note of the issue and suggested for the establishment of statutory accreditation body called National Council for Social Work Education. The much talked about Council is nowhere in sight, thanks to the indifference of the distinguished social work educators themselves. Now we are told that the Draft Bill for the setting up of the Council is ready for its introduction in the Parliament. When will that be done, no body has any idea?

The disconcerting state of affairs in the lesser-known schools of social work does not, however, mean that all is well with better known (reasonably good and established) Schools/Departments of Social Work. The teaching/training, curricula, field work, staff and other infrastructural facilities available in some of these institutions have many marked weaknesses.

Burden of Americanism

Professional social work came to India via the West — USA and UK (mainly USA). The complaint is not so much about its alien character but about its unindigenised nurturing. While gloating about the 'gift' at that time, we did not realise that social work education in the West had emerged as a response to the needs of the western urban industrial and capitalist societies which were undergoing rapid institutional breakdowns with all their old-order values and norms thrown out of gear. There it emerged as an instrument to absorb the social and cultural shocks of a society in crisis. Understandably, rehabilitating the individuals and groups who got disengaged from the traditional institutions was its primary goal. There, social work was filling in a new space, an institutional vacuum, created by the emerging industrial society, and hence was institutionally welcomed (Oommen, 1987:15). In India, we welcomed it without having considered its western bias. While nothing was wrong with the new idea, with this new profession and an altogether new orientation to our tradition of social service, what was wrong was its uncritical and whole-hog acceptance — a kind of belief that it was a panacea for peculiar problems of our individual and collective distress. Euphoric, as we were then, we continued to build our bases on it without little or no 'nativisation' or indigenisation. We failed to contexualise it in terms of Indian social millieu and failed to make it adequately relevant and rooted (Oommen, 1987:15).

Now we bemoan of its western heritage without thinking as to who stopped us from undertaking the task which everybody though was central to making the discipline relevant. The irony of the situation, as

Singh (1994:195) says, is that even today social work education in India evidences the profound influence of American ideas. Our curricula, as all of us know, are largely structured on the American pattern of education, as it initially began there. The American hangover still continues to dominate our thinking and colour our vision. As a consequence, our social work education, by and large, continues to remain out of context with our social realities, and the proliferation of social work institutions has made no substantial difference to the situation (Singh, 1994:194). We hardly have any evidence to suggest that professional social work has responded or responds to any of the critical social problems in a visible manner. The profession has rarely faced the challenges or attended to its ailments, and, the *status quo* continues (Oommen, 1987:23). The obsessive attachment to the American paradigm of social work education is, to a large extent, responsible for the stunted growth of the profession in the country (Gangrade, 1976). The indigenisation of teaching and training material and methodology is still being debated on most occasions in the available professional fora without much worthwhile action. The culturebound pattern of social work education and practice is yet to emerge as we shall soon see in the discussion that follows.

The Professionalisation Pride (?)

Our professionalisation pride, most people aver, is intimately linked with the American influence on social work education in the country. Our trained social workers routinely press the claim of being professional in order to establish their superiority over an army of conventional (non-trained) social workers. This is being done in full knowledge of the fact that there is little recognition of social work as a full-blown profession in the country. Social work has not been able to establish its identity in India amongst the generally acknowledged professions (Desai and Narayan, 1998:532; Thomas, 1967:52). As such, the notion of social work being a profession hardly has many takers in India.

The professionalisation question has attracted much attention of India's social work educators. The available writings (Nanavatty, 1985; Pathak, 1975; Ranade, 1975) suggest that while social work as an occupation is known, social work as a profession sounds incredible to many people in the country. Pathak (1975:192) holds the view that the claim of social work being a profession is naive and simplistic. It has not become a profession in India and will hardly become one.

Several other social work educators (Nanavatty, 1985; Ranade 1975, for example), have also reached to the conclusion that social work in India is far from being a profession when viewed in terms of the approved sociological criteria. They held the view that social work is a discipline and an approach, but not a profession. However, since the label of a profession adds to the prestige of trained social workers, most of them press the claim of being professionals. They use the term 'professional' in a very narrow and a loose sense to distinguish the trained social workers from other type of social workers who have had no formal education in any School/Department of Social Work and do not hold a degree or diploma.

The recent American debate on deprofessionalisation of social work has now made several social educators in India little less concerned about the professional status of their calling. However, there are still some who think that the future of the profession of social work will be jeopardised if it abandons its continuing pursuit to attaining the attributes of a profession. Some of them link the pursuit to the future of social work in India and.call for:

- building a systematic and indigenised knowledge-base;
- achieving professional competence comparable to other professions;
- obtaining community sanction and wider social approval;
- formulating a regulative code of conduct; and
- establishing of a strong apex level professional organisation like the Medical Council of India.

The ground realities, however, do not permit any wishful thinking on the question.

The Unindegenised Knowledge-Base

The major shortcoming of social work education in India is its inability to sufficiently indigenise its knowledge-base. The basic teaching material with respect to interventionist methods (the holy trinity of social case work, social group work and community organisation) is still primarily American. The challenge, as mentioned before, has not been met and there is often a lingering doubt in the mind of many social work educators and trained social workers whether social work in India can afford to be only concerned with specific individuals, groups and communities when the problems are really the problems of large masses of people (Gore, 1985:151). Many of the problems that are identified as problems of the socially oppressed and economicaly

deprived sections cannot be called adjustmental problems (to use the American phraseology). The social and cultural context of these problems is well beyond the reach of moral-ethical and/or psycho-social paradigm of intervention.

The unfortunate part is that while everyone agrees on the irrelevance and potentially dysfunctional nature of American heritage, especially on methods' courses, little has been done to reverse this legacy. For lack of indigenous teaching material, India's social work educators have only to blame themselves. They have not taken note of the plenty of indigenous material which could be effectively utilised for teaching purposes (Mazumdar 1994: 127-138). Had they been serious about the issue they could have indigenised western concepts by supplementing their knowledge-base with relevant illustrations from their field experiences. As they could not do this, their dependence on American texts continues. Desai's (1987:218) comment is worth reproducing: 'Indigenisation of literature can only follow indigenisation of our practice. As long as our approaches remain western in their orientation, we cannot hope to indigenise our knowledge, skills or even values'. In the same connection, Ranade (1975:199) bemoans of another problem when he says that social work education in India has not developed any intellectual tradition of its own. Most of us agree and often feel that many of us in the schools and departments of social work have not kept abreast with the work done by fellow social scientists in the Indian Universities. The result is that the educational apparatus of social work training in India does not have a strong group of core thinkers who can guide its future course of action and shape up its destiny.

Public Recognisation of Professional Social Work

Lack of public recognition of social work as a profession is another critical shortcoming that has a lot to do with its future prospects in India. The notion of professional social work in the people's mind is in contradiction to an idealised image of a conventional social service worker who possess the sterling qualities of heart rather than of mind. The idea of a paid professional worker is still an anathema to most people in India who even now cling to the notion that doing social work is quintessentially a voluntary activity of a selfless kind. Under Indian conditions 'service' and 'sacrifice', which is selfless and without any remuneration, is looked upon as higher. A paid social worker, however good, efficient and capable, is more likely to be looked down upon by

the people whom he/she serves as a professional. With no self-sacrifice to his/her credit, many persons should not regard the professional social worker as a social worker at all. They would regard him/her as an 'officer', a 'para-professional' or a 'mercenary'.

The state social welfare sector, which is the biggest employer of trained social workers, also shows ambivalence in granting statutory recognition to social work as a professional activity. At present, there are no well-defined categories of welfare personnel, except labour welfare officer, for which social work training is considered essential. In this regard too an interesting finding emerges from a study (Ramachandran and Padmanabha, 1969) which clearly indicates that a large majority of those who have entered the field of labour welfare via schools of social work do not feel that they perform any social work function.

The fact of the matter is that neither the state sector of social welfare nor the voluntary sector attaches any special importance to hiring trained social workers. Both sectors feel that there is not much difference between the so-called trained social workers and those without any specialised training. This blurs the distinction between trained social workers and non-trained social workers. Meanwhile the message has gone to the people that non-trained voluntary workers are generally doing a better job.

This marked lack of public recognition as a professional creates a feeling of insecurity in the minds of trained social work graduates. While they regard themselves as being scientific in their approach, the society denies them the status of a professional. For this state of affairs, the society and the government are not to be wholly blamed. Much of the loudly talked about scientiscism of professional social work training has no relevance in a country where more than one-third of the population is struggling to meet its survival needs. Trained social workers, the experience reveals, are too elitist in their approach and are, therefore, alienated from the masses. Due to their urban middle-class upbringing, they behave in a manner much different from the older generation social workers. It is also doubtful that the training these professional social workers receive really makes them capable of using scientific tools. It is undeniable, however, that the track record and the image built over the years places the trained social workers at a distinct disadvantage. A feeling also persists that trained social workers are neither able to fully identify themselves with the kind of help-seekers (clients) they come across, nor are they able to participate in the people's problem solving endeavours. This is largely due to the

aura of officious authority the trained social workers often bring with them.

Confusion about the Concept of Social Work

In six decades' time India's social work educators and trained social workers have not been able to clear the confusion about the concept of social work. In India many terms like 'social work', 'social service', 'public service' and 'community work' are used interchangeably. The public believes that anyone who helps the distressed individuals, groups or communities is a social worker. Barnabas (1967:74) makes an interesting comment: 'Lack of clarity in the meaning of social work is a peculiarity in India. Like God, each beholder has his own vision of it and like the scriptures each devotee interprets in his own way'.

The absence of an adequate definition of social work is the problem that confronts trained social workers in each of their encounters with people. Their clientele groups embrace the notion that the trained social workers are real do-gooders and can move heavens to help their clients. In practice this does not happen and, hence, there is widespread feeling of disillusionment among the traditional social service clientele groups. Writing about the damage control device, Desai (1975:206) observed that unless what is meant by social work is clarified to people in simple and understandable language, there is no basis to develop sound policy of social work education or the content of that education.

Inability of Reaching the Unreached

Trained social workers' inability to reach the unreached, that is the marginalised sections of society, has reinforced in people's mind their image of paid, middle class urban do-gooders to help a small number of people afflicted with problems of psycho-social adjustment. In a society like India, where nearly three-fourths people live in the countryside, the urban location of the schools of social work, and also of the city-based social work networks has little meaning. Trained social workers, unlike other voluntary social workers, are not inclined to move over to rural areas where the heat is and where people really need help. This raises a basic question, namely, to what extent the present pattern of social work education is suited to the needs of the country where large sections of needy people remain unreached by trained social workers?

The profession's disengagement with the impoverished, depressed and downtrodden sections of society is the bane of its low visibility

and poor credibility. In pursuit of excessive concern with their self-interest, the profession's trained angels have neglected the larger issues of mass welfare in India. Their reluctant engagement with the poor carries the legacy of the elitist urban middle-class western paradigm (Desai and Narayan, 1998:532). In the case of underprivileged groups, where large numbers and whole communities are involved, as in the case of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, they have failed to identify and gain acceptance for the specialised contribution of professional social work (Gore, 1985:59). Writing about the professional social worker's neglect of Dalit issues, Ramaiah (1998:152) adds that the issues relating to caste, in general, and the problems of Dalits, in particular, have hardly been the concern of professional social workers.

Obsolescence of Curricula

The obsolesence of curricula is another ailment of social work education in India. In recent years, there have been some efforts to cast a hard look on what we teach and how we teach in our classrooms. The two reports of the University Grants Commissions (1965 and 1980) have attempted to grapple with the issue. However, it is indeed dismaying that the system of social work education has not responded well to making effective curricular changes to respond to the problems and situations. The reluctance to change social work curricula could be because of many reasons, such as lack of commitment to social change by schools of social work; a strong middle-class bias of the majority of the faculty; and the lack of sensitivity towards the conditions of the poor and the oppressed. Saxena (1994) seems baffled and finds difficult to ascertain as to what the schools of social work in India are trying to achieve through their present curriculum. Much of the curriculum in the respective schools of social work is based on western models unrelated to the field situation and unsuitable to the social and cultural ethos of the country. Despite cosmetic changes the western legacy continues to have its hold.

In reference to curriculum, it is pertinent to refer to the skill development aspect of social work education. Ranade's (1975:175) comment is most revealing in this connection: 'The kind of social work education given in our schools of social work turns out misfits in the Indian situation, since they find that there is little scope for the practice of the techniques they have learnt'. The major reason for the comparative ineffectivity of social work training is that the field is vast and varied and facilities available at the disposal of the schools are grossly

inefficient. Notwithstanding the infrastructural limitations of schools of social work, there is little emphasis on building attitudes and skills suited to Indian conditions.

Specialisation Issue

Connected to the issue of training is the contentious question of specialised versus generic training. The controversy on this question has plagued the profession for long (Singh, 1994:194). While several social work educators favour the continuance of different specialisations, there are still quite many who are opposed to the practice and suggest for generic training in interventionist methods. The Mathai Committee (1953) proposed doing away with specialisation in social work training. This practice, the committee felt, ran counter to modern experience which laid stress on the essential unity of social work methods in whatever setting they were practiced. The First UGC Review Committee on Social Work Education in India (1965) favoured the specialisation pattern, but the Second Review Committee (UGC, 1980) changed its position. This created a situation where social work educators have got divided in two hostile camps. The 'great divide' continus with confusing assertions by pro- and anti-specialisation bodies in schools of social work with both sides sticking to their guns.

Those favouring the proposition of doing away with specialisation generally contend that specialised social work is too circumscribed and hence out of place in the Indian situation. Notwithstanding of the fact that there are unassailable arguments against specialisation, majority of the social work educators, however, favour the continuance of specialisation. The argument is that unlike the United States where social work education is method-oriented, social work in India is manifestly field-oriented. Regardless of the merit of the arguments against the proposition of doing away with specialisation, majority of social work educators feel that their shops would get closed if genericism triumphs over. The apprehension is understandable in view of the fact that large number of students join schools of social work to become labour welfare officers, personnel officers, probation officers, social welfare officers and medical and psychiatric social workers.

Those who fear that if the specialisations are done away with, few students would rush to schools of social work, know fully well that the job-market indeed demands a general purpose worker and the tasks that the trained social workers are asked to perform do not really call for any specialised training. Whatever be the justifications of the

arguments advanced by pro-and anti-specialisation bodies, the fact, as Singh (1994:194) says, remains that job-oriented educational programmes have converted the Schools/Departments of social work into vocational training institutions which lack social and critical orientation.

Unchanging Pattern of Field Work

The unchanging pattern of field work is another marked weakness of social work education in the country. Its pattern varies greatly from one institution to another and no school seems to have tried to explicitly develop its content in relation to the goals of social work education and practice in the country (Singh 1985:14). While the effectiveness of field work programmes in the schools of social work has not been examined, many social workers are skeptical about its relevance. Kulkarni described the actuality of field work as a mere ritual (1994:21). Singh (1994:20) sounds no less critical when he writes that the present pattern of field work has remained traditional and, in some cases, confined merely to sporadic visits. The Second UGC Review Committee on Social Work Education (1980) lamented the lack of linkage between the classroom theories and the realities of the field. As an educational process, it is inadequately planned, ad hoc and arbitrary. Rather than being an integral part of social work education, it has, by and large, remained only a peripheral activity (Singh, 1985:179). Many schools of social work have failed to develop field work programmes well. There is a general complaint that we have unconsciously created a great gulf between theory and field instruction and have failed to identify its objectives, contents and deficiencies in supervision and evaluation. Singh (1994:206) goes deeper into the malaise and calls for a field work of commitment rather than of convenience.

Inadequate Research Base

Social work education and practice in India do not have an adequate research base. The curricular input in research methods varies from level to level and from institution to institution (Khan, 1994:163). Rarely is any attempt made to impart skills in research methodology and use of statistics. Practical training in research methods leaves much to be desired. Furthermore, only few institutions have any regular system of orienting students to computer applications. On the whole, the research input has several limitations, the most prominent being its

direct bearing on teaching and training in professional preparation (Prasad, 1994:171). Unfortunately, almost all schools/departments of social work consider the course on social research as purely descriptive and theoretical without any immediate prospect for its practical application. It is,-therefore, no wonder that the course on social research seems to be an appendage; just an ancillary or fashionable activity. This downgrading of research is a regrettable part of social work education in the country.

The Declining Quality of Students

When social work education began in India as a response to the fast expanding sector of social welfare, better students sought for admission to schools/departments of social work in the country, obviously for assured employment prospects. The situation continued until the 1980s. In the 1990s, the new era of liberalisation under the International Monetary Fund and World Bank conditionalities sharply reduced the government spending in social welfare/social development sector. Consequently, a sharp reduction occurred in social sector jobs for which there had existed promising employment prospects. One potential area of employment, namely, labour welfare and personnel management for trained social work post-graduates, received serious threats because the employers preferred to hire graduates from management schools which had multiplied manifold in the last decade. No doubt the voluntary social welfare sector increased tremendously during this decade; it neither showed any marked preference for trained social work graduates, nor could it offer them comfortable, good-status jobs with better salaries and alluring promotion prospects as available in the state social welfare sector. All this affected the quality of students who knocked at the doors of Schools/Departments of social work. Now barring the prestigious Schools/Departments of professional social work education (which are few in number) most of them are not drawing upon the best brains. Many of the students are intellectually and motivationally ill-equipped for doing the kind of social work people Want. Looking at the quality of students, it appears that social work has become the last resort for boys and girls in despair of professional education, notably the management education.

Ineffectivity of Professional Organisations

The spectacle of professional social work organisations, namely, the IATSW and the ASSWI is both dismal and disillusioning. In over 60

years, these professional organisations have witnessed a complete chaos, characterising ineffectiveness, indifference, inaction, in-fighting and total mismanagement of whatever little resources and goodwill they had in the beginning. As a result, we do not have strong professional organisations to infuse health and vitality to the profession and salvage its sagging morale. The one that exists (ASSWI) is in a moribund condition, incapable and ineffective, and good enough only for the politics of organisational elections, holding seminars and conferences (if someone gives money), and occasionally publishing a. newsletter. How will things change, no one knows? But one thing is certain: the profession is going to be further marganalised, given the nature of social and economic changes the polity and people are destined to witness. The liberalised regimen of open economy will unleash forces that will convert society into a market and social relations into business transactions. Where will the profession of social work be then; whose interests would it champion; and whose wounds would it heal? This no-win situation is extremely scaring, often demoralising. In this scenario most of us wonder whether the lone professional organisation (the ASSWI), which has not been able to solve its own problems of organisational and functional inadequacy, may well come to the rescue of the profession.

The Challenge

Social work education in India faces the challenge of making the profession relevant to the contemporary situation. The challenge, wrote Ranade (1994:14), is that of revamping and reorganising the image of social work education. How relevant is this education is a question that social work educators in India must address. Kulkarni (1994:17) discerned the need for carrying out rigorous evaluation of the role and status of social work education in the light of the changed (and still fast changing) social landscape of national development. He sees clear signals of social work education becoming gradually obsolete, or, at least, less and less relevant. In view of the weak and ineffectual response to the challenges confronting the profession, Kulkarni (1994:22) hazards a guess: 'If schools of social work remain impervious to changing needs of the field, they would soon run the risk of becoming static and stagnant'. Ranade (1994:13) feels disillusioned and says: 'Social work educators have not evinced much interest in this direction'.

These observations of elderly social work educators make a compelling case for reorienting social work education so as to save it from further marginalisation. The vital issue, therefore, is to look afresh at the roots where the problems supposedly lie. The question that social work education and social work practice face in India is whether social work has a specific professional contribution to make in the solution of the social problems that people face in an inequalitarian society, where the constitutional pledge of providing justice — social, economic and political — rests in the realm of rhetoric regardless of the realities of oppression and exploitation of the millions of dispossessed and disadvantaged persons.

The Futuristic Perspective

Acting upon the need for a careful and informed debate, some of India's social work educators are trying to formulate a futuristic perspective to make social work education more relevant to Indian conditions. The futuristic agenda, *inter alia,* emphasises the need to understand both the historical and ideological framework from which social work grew, and more importantly, the need to evolve concepts, methods, policies and priorities which are more suited to Indian situations. The pursuit, feeble though, aims at evolving a more culture-bound theory of social work and to reorient the educational apparatus in the context of emerging needs of the country. In the same vein, it is also stressed that social work will have to redefine its role, demarcate its areas of work and improvise its tools and techniques of action. Social work has to cope up with the new reality, integrate its efforts with others, and develop a perspective that could knit a multiplicity of efforts into a large movement for changes in social welfare/social development situation. This underlines the need to understand the lessons of the last six decades of social work education in the country and the need to evolve an integrated perspective on methods and strategies which move from symptoms to causes, from diagnosis to reflexivity, and from treatment to structural transformation. More urgent is the need to take it away from its predominantly remedial and residual functions to the primary task of promoting social change and enhancing development. Social work concerns, therefore, must include the developmental and social change activities that result in social development (Desai, 1975:207). The need to conceptualise the professional function anew is called for (Gore, 1985:150).

Currently, there is a realisation that professional social workers and their educators should address themselves to developmental actions and work for the welfare of the depressed and downtrodden sections of society, not as individuals in distress but as collectivities in trouble. They are called upon to take up preventive and developmental functions rather than remaining solely engaged in clinical and curative functions. In terms of strategy, the first and foremost requirement is to sharpen the tools of social action to promote the process of social development. In the concerned circles of social work education, there is a feeling that if social workers are to become effective they will have to turn to systematic and well-planned social action endeavours to strike at the root causes of social problems and expedite the process of evolutionary social transformation, if not revolutionary change.

In the given Indian conditions there are few takers of the Marxist view of social work. The radical and revolutionary notion of social work stands rejected as irrelevant and out of question. The eminently acceptable option is social action, for it may create the necessary conditions and climate in which social work could be done more effectively (Kulkarni, 1967:112). Social action is regarded as an essential component of developmental social work practice, since the adjusting, therapeutic, ameliorative, clinical and social control functions of social work are increasingly found inadequate. The long history of social reform in India is replete with instances of successful social action to eradicate a variety of institutional evils in bringing about social change. Social work educators are now rediscovering the relevance of social action as a means for improving the oppressive social conditions, enhancing social welfare, solving mass problems, influencing social development policies and changing the sociocultural and politico-economic structure of society.

Interestingly most social work educators concede to the primacy of social action method and find it most relevant under Indian conditions. Accordingly, many of them have written a couple of reflective articles extolling the virtues of social action as a method to provide a new direction to social work education and practice in India. The ground reality, however, does not permit any sense of euphoria and there is little linkage between what is being talked about and what is being practiced? A review of the available writings on social action reveals that social action, as a method, has not received any significant attention either in the curriculum of the schools of social work or in

the large part of indigenous writings of social work educators (Siddiqui, 1984:26).'

While the social work educators generally recognise the need and significance of social action as the most effective method of professional social work practice, few are willing to engage themselves in social action measures, either individually or collectively. The concept of social action has only evoked lip sympathy (Gore, 1967:31). Scared of risks involved in being social actionists, professional social workers are not prepared to be the practitioners of what they preach. They wish to remain contented within the classroom confines, or to the protected welfare settings with limited or no commitment to social action. They rarely attempt to get across the bridge to join people's movements and community-based non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working in the remote rural areas.

Connected with the rediscovery of faith in social action, social work educators in India are now talking about the role of social work professionals as 'change agents'. When someone is talking about this paradigm shift in social work education, the proposition sounds simplistic, since there are hardly any rebels or revolutionaries amongst the social work educators. Despite all this tall-talk on the issue, social work educators and practitioners are themselves guilty of perpetuating the *status quo* by resisting change in the organisational set-up of social work education in the country. Frankly speaking, there are no martyrs in the social work profession who are willing to burn their boats for a good social cause. Given the situation, how do we expect social work educators to produce change agents when they themselves are not willing to move beyond the protected walls of their schools/departments? How many of the social work educators are willing to be the change agents is an open question? The dilemmas in the activist role are inbuilt in the kind of professional social work we preach and practice. The role of professional social workers as change agents is in contradiction to the norms of professionalism and riddance is possible only with the riddance of the notion of professional social work. Those of us who make fancy talks on the subject do not care to explain how a marginalised profession can produce effective change agents. However, the notion of professional social workers as change agents continues to captivate the minds of many social work educators who themselves are doing precious little at their own end in the schools/departments where they preach things they do not practice. As long as schools of social work keep producing students for the state-run

social welfare services, or be part of the state-aided NGO sector, there exists no possibility of preparing students to become change agents, since there is hardly any agency, governmental or non-governmental, which keeps revolutionaries on its pay roll.

The tendency to remain in the limelight of the fancy talkshow is too strong among social work educators who never get tired of talking impractical things by way of providing new direction to social work education in the country. The talk of bidding goodbye to apolitical stance and getting interested in the political process of development is another instance of being blind to the raw realities of Indian politics, and for that matter, to the politics of development. The suggestion, well-intended though, sounds like a sermon from the mount. The prevailing apolitical stance of social work educators, is a well-entrenched tradition embedded in the very ethos of social work profession. Its abandonment is not possible until social work professionals remain part of the social welfare bureaucracy. The call for direct involvement of social work professionals in the political process is a fanciful idea without any substance and without the possibility of being realised in the foreseeable future (or, better said never). Most of us in the schools of social work know fully well that getting involved in Indian politics, where even angels fear to tread, is beyond the comprehension of any honest person. Such a notion finds appeal in seminars and conferences where arm-chair intellectuals throw up ideas about which they themselves are not sure. Should social work education desert its politically neutral position is a question that has not been articulated properly, though there seems to be emerging some kind of consensus that the professional organisations of social work educators should start lobbying for structural changes which they see as necessary. Political awareness on the part of the social work educators is all right, but actual engagement in the political struggles and movements is beyond the ability of professional social workers, given the context and the constraints under which they work. Politics and professional social work cannot go together, especially when professional social work, in large measure, is part of the state apparatus.

The above discussion on the future directions for revamping professional social work education in the country suggest that the profession stands at a confusing road, not knowing where to go and how. The profession is still uncertain about formulating a coherent and comprehensive framework which could assist it in meeting the challenges that

lie ahead. However, certain issues need clear thinking and action, and these are:

- forging strong links with developmental NGOs and other types of constructive workers;
- developing strategies and approaches to suit to the new socio-economic reality;
- changing the teaching and practice-orientation from an individualised clinical and therapeutic perspective to an organisational developmental perspective;
- meeting the paucity of indigenous textbooks and teaching materials;
- developing a culture-bound theory of social work and a social work philosophy for India; and
- reorganising curriculum, field work system and methods of teaching and research.

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