

ADDRESS ON DEFINITION AND IDEAL OF SOCIAL WORK

DR. RADHAKAMAL MUKERJEE
(Chairman, Reception Committee)

Social work is as ancient as society itself with its tensions and sufferings calling for succour and amelioration that were bound to take some organised forms. As in so many fields, Indian civilization saw the systematic beginning of state social services in the forms of establishment of hospitals (arogyasala), houses for the disabled (danagriha), rest-places for travellers (punyasrama), and shelters for animals from the age of Emperor Asoka. The spread of Mahayana Buddhism from China and Japan to Further India and Indonesia from the 5th to the 9th century A.D. filled half of Asia with various kinds of social welfare agencies and activities under their presiding deity, the Great Compassionate One as the Bhaishajya Guru of the Buddhist pantheon. It was, however, from the middle of the 19th century that organised social services were encountered on a national scale in Western Europe and America largely to protect society from pauperism, crime, vagrancy and insanity coming in the wake of capitalistic industrialism.

The connotation of social work or social welfare has been different in different countries according to the stage of social or economic development. But the following definition may now be presumed to be acceptable in all countries and serve as a guide to social policy. Social work comprises the entire body of public and voluntary welfare activities that seek to assure every citizen a desirable minimum standard of living, freedom and security.

Such a conception of social work is implied in the Report of the Planning Commission in India. There is, however, a vast cleavage

in our country between present misery, pauperism and unemployment and the ideal of social security, dignity and opportunity for the common man that is upheld by the Constitution of the Indian Republic. The Five-Year Plan envisages that such a gap will be filled up through a new economic set-up and the development of various types of state and voluntary agencies of social work.

According to the directive principles of the Indian Constitution it is one of the obligations of the State to make effective provision for securing the right to work, to education and to public assistance in cases of unemployment, old age, sickness and disablement and other cases of undeserved want. There is, however, no gainsaying the fact that the State has not been able, due to lack of financial resources, to take suitable action for the economically dependent groups. Meanwhile the ideal of a social order in which justice, social, economic and political, shall permeate all human relations has come to be recognised as the modern social conscience of the country. Thus the present hiatus between the desirable standard of living and security and the distress and insecurity calls for the redistribution of income, the equalisation of economic and educational opportunities for all and the creation of social consumption goods and welfare services through austerity economy by the well-to-do classes.

Priorities of Social Work.—India has declared her allegiance to the socialistic policy and is on the way in building up a new social-service-state in place of the police-state of the past. The foundations of a

social welfare state in India can only be successfully laid by taxing money where it can be most easily spared and making use of the surplus; in the first place, to combat unemployment; in the second place, to equalise educational opportunities for all and, third, to provide for schemes of social security. India at present is far distant from employment security and from equality in respect of opportunities of education. Social work must fundamentally begin with these. Employment and income-security must obtain the highest priority in the country. In its absence health insurance benefits, old age pensions and other forms of assistance touch the fringe of the problem of social welfare.

Relief of unemployment.—The total volume of Indian unemployment, visible and invisible, is of the order of 22 millions. The additional employment created in some selected sectors by the First Five Year Plan is estimated at only about 10 millions. The Planning Commission has found that both in rural and urban areas unemployment has recently increased, except in the Punjab which has reported a slight easing in rural unemployment. No social security measure can obviously take the place of employment. Neither employment schemes nor social services against the major hazards of life, again, can succeed without the spread of education.

The basic social welfare scheme for preventing, mitigating and relieving unemployment in an agricultural country like ours is a plan for land redistribution so that about one-fifth of the total population, dependent on the land, who constitute the landless class may obtain the right to own land. Land redistribution can *come* through the procedure of imposing a ceiling of, say, 20 acres for an agricultural holding and the development of a new farm structure on co-operative or collectivistic lines so as to improve the yield both per acre and per unit of land

without which the problem of adjusting human numbers to food resources becomes exceedingly difficult of solution. It is much to be regretted that in spite of the directives of the Planning Commission most of the States have not done much in respect of the fixation of ceilings of holdings. Meanwhile Acharya Vinoba Bhave's movement of Bhudan and Sampattidan has spread, inspired by social goodwill and sharing that seek to forestall legislation. Fifty lakh acres of land have been poured into the capacious beggar-bowl of this modern Indian saint. But such small-scale voluntary redistribution of land cannot solve the acute problems of the vast and increasing landless class and its unemployment and misery. The social aim here is, no doubt, noble and grand and consonant with the Indian spiritual heritage that works through moral transformation rather than through State action. But the agrarian situation today is such that without legislation the problem of destitution of the large and multiplying landless class cannot be effectively tackled.

With such colossal illiteracy in our midst a higher standard of living and dignity of man are linked with the spread of education. More than formal education, a new type of education called Fundamental Education is stressed by the UNESCO. It is defined as "an emergency scheme for starting the interaction among the whole population of a given community, through providing the minimum knowledge and skill for dealing with practical problems in the environments, and thus seeking to develop both individual and social life". In our country we call it Social Education although its contents are not so liberally conceived as in Mexico and Egypt, where centres for the training of local Fundamental teachers have been set up.

It is obvious that in India as long as we cannot solve successfully the vast volume of unemployment, both visible and invisible,

social work remains as mere palliative or charitable activity and can neither give lasting relief nor effectively overcome individual social and economic maladjustment which is the main task of social work in the more advanced countries.

Difference between Social Work in India and the West.—Herein lies the chief difference between social work in an undeveloped economy like India and that in the West. Where the considerable majority of individuals do not find opportunities for the fulfilment of basic human needs and live at the raw edge of hunger, they can be moved closer to the centre of security only through the improvement of national output, especially food resources, and a better distribution of the means of subsistence. With an income per capita of \$57 in India as compared with \$600—\$800 in Western Europe, and \$1,269 in United States, with a literacy rate of 14% in India as compared with Japan's literacy rate of 98.5% and with a life expectancy in India at 32 years as compared with 65-68 years in Western Europe and North America, there must be a clear sense of the priorities of security, whether on a federal or local basis. Social security in the Western sense becomes a mockery to one who chronically starves and has woefully inadequate clothing and shelter.

Social work has largely been approached in this country from the viewpoint of urban population, especially of the industrial workers who are exposed to greater hazards than rural workers in their work and living and are at the same time politically aroused and vocal.

Treatment and prevention of professional beggary.—The continuous stream of migration of idle and semi-idle labour from the villages to the cities and towns is responsible for the institution of professional beggary, which is encouraged by indiscriminate alms-

giving sanctioned by religion and custom. In the under-world of all big cities and towns there is a vast shadowy capitalistic organisation of commercialised beggary. It is from here that are recruited all types of juvenile waifs and strays and delinquents connected with some street gang or other. We are among the first to tackle the problem of street begging systematically in the city of Lucknow. Some fifteen years back the University Department of Economics and Sociology found about 2,000 beggars in Lucknow city, of whom 50% were able-bodied. Our Social Service League aroused public opinion against professional beggary, got the U. P. Municipality Act Amended and started a Home with vocational training of all kinds. This Home was later on transferred by the Social Service League to the Lucknow Municipality. Many of its inmates have shown marked improvement in general intelligence, reliability and skill in arts and crafts. Thus they have been entrusted with work and finally sent back to society, rehabilitated and economically independent.

Incidentally our attempt to deal with professional beggary in the city illustrates the necessity of a triple attack on every type of serious social deviance: first, social research and diagnosis of the problem at the University level; second, the arousal of the social conscience of the people for voluntary social action, and third social legislation as well as welfare work by governmental or municipal agency for which the ground and attitude are already prepared by voluntary agency. In this case the Children's Act, though already on the statute book, has not yet been operative. The Borstal Act, passed about a decade and a half back, is also not being implemented. There is also no Vagrant Act to deal with the swelling numbers of foot-loose paupers and vagrants.

Tramps, loafers, and street-dwellers are on the increase in every Indian town. Thus we need a variety of welfare institutions such as Detention Colonies, Leper Homes, Curative Workshops and Schools for the Deaf-mutes and the Blind, which all require social workers who have specialised in different fields. But scientific social work is also a preventive activity directed towards the elimination of those factors of economic insecurity in the villages which leads many villagers to take the road to the city with great expectations, and lands them into permanent vagrancy and pauperism. If unemployment in the sector of industry now and then swells the rank of urban pavement-dwellers—and there are about fifty thousand persons who may be counted as street-dwellers in the city of Kanpur—it is the chronic raw hunger, unemployment and the exploitations and brutalities of everyday life in the village that continuously drive a huge class of destitute men and women into the towns.

For a long time to come social work, though emerging as a professional service, will remain largely a counter-measure against poverty and dependency in this country. Thus the trained social worker working with individual families and groups should have full and constant awareness of the interplay of economic and psychological forces for the causation of poverty, insecurity and dependency.

Social group work in different fields.—We should appreciate the striking disparity of urban and rural standards of living in the country and apply our new social intelligence and conscience first to those social areas, where "security" and "freedom" hardly exist for the Indian population. This is the chief reason why the current community programmes in rural areas offer excellent

opportunities for the trained social worker to raise and enrich the level of living. There is considerable scope for the process called social group work such as games, folk music, drama and pageantry for the renovation of social relationships. Group work directed by a skilled social worker can develop community co-operation and responsibility in respect of urgent social needs and develop a sense of unity and comradeship instead of factionalism and casteism in the village. Group work is indeed an efficacious method for the improvement of the morale of neglected individuals and backward caste groups. Through games, dramatic performances, adult classes, youth clubs and intercaste festivals and gatherings, the social worker's skill and sensibility to the interest of the group can successfully operate the group work process for the social adjustment of individuals and groups.

It is essential to remind ourselves that due to the limited financial resources of Government and the standardized impersonal methods of Government welfare services, intensive social group work under trained leadership holds high promise in this country in both rural and urban areas. Industrialisation and urbanisation tend to disintegrate primary groups and leave the individual to grapple helplessly and alone with his misfits and the distresses and sufferings these imply. Social group work in the slums has already shown its usefulness through the restoration of community life and action. *Bhajan* parties, play groups and dramatic teams have fostered the feeling that the welfare of slum-dwellers can be achieved best through community and panchayat effort. Once this feeling is aroused, its application for different objectives of social work will be authentic and effective.

It is not adequately realised that the residential segregation of the lower castes,

especially the Harijan ones, in separate blocks in the hutments or ahatas of our cities is the largest single factor that contributes to perpetuate their social and economic degradation. A UNESCO survey in Kanpur city directed by me has shown that more than 70% of the Parsis, Chamars, Kories, Raidasas and Jaiswaras as well as the Muslims live in segregated blocks in the ahatas of Kanpur. It must be recognised that the establishment of new workers' settlements with the different castes living not in segregation but in close proximity with one another and with facilities for common schooling, worship and recreation is the first decisive step towards the improvement of social status and dignity of the under-privileged castes. Social group work in social, recreational and educational agency settings with the professional social worker as the helping person can most fruitfully aid the development and social reorientation of the backward and untouchable castes in our towns.

The Group as lever of social uplift in India.

—Our immediate aims in social work should be threefold: the introduction of social group work in every field of inadequacy, dependency and maladjustment; the development of a cadre of trained voluntary social workers, each taking charge of a group of 6 to 10 dependents and handicapped, as in Japan; and the co-ordination of the present inefficient social welfare agencies through the establishment of a community chest and expert supervisory authority. It is noteworthy that in Uttar Pradesh social group work has been recently effectively utilised for the reformation of adult delinquents. In the Open Prisoners' Camp in Banaras where they have taken part in the building of an irrigation dam, India has launched a new experiment where correction rests on the improvement of individual morale through

emulation in both constructive group enterprise and recreation.

About 1/5th of India's total population comprises the backward and Harijan groups with severe disabilities and handicaps imposed by the economically and culturally dominant castes. It is the practice of democratic values and behaviour in social and recreational life which can be initiated only by organised social group work that can foster egalitarian attitudes and processes in the community. Without this the law recently enacted for the removal of untouchability will remain a dead letter. In India and, generally speaking in the East the group or institution like the family, the caste and the village community is the lever of social action. Thus the social worker's task is to use the properly selected group for combating anti-social behaviour and securing economic betterment and cultural uplift through group effort. In the West the lever of social progress is the individual rather than the group, and social work largely addresses itself to the individual's misfits and idiosyncracies and the promotion of a suitable environment for the handicapped or maladjusted person.

An Indian Philosophy of Social Work.—

The above contrast in the institutional background of social work in India and the West underlies the necessity of an appropriate philosophy of social work in India. For without a philosophy of social work, welfare policies and programmes cannot take deep roots in the Indian soil. According to the Prime Minister, India today is wedded to the socialistic ideal and policy. In social ethics, superior to social equity and justice are the principles of sharing and solidarity. Love, sharing and solidarity imply the qualitative improvement of social relations. Social work is at its best when it is concerned not with a world of rights and duties, claims and counter—claims but with an ideal of altruistic

service and counter-service. In India altruism is prized not only as the highest virtue but as a metaphysical value grounded in an intuitive perception of the oneness of life and related to the structure of reality. Such altruism that remains today moral and religious has now to be linked with the philosophy of democratic socialism. Epistemology, metaphysics and myth in India establish a chain of altruistic duties and services that binds together all creatures in the cosmos. According to the philosophical myth, man is born with five debts—debts to gods, to ancestors, to spiritual teachers, to fellowmen and to animals with all of whom he has to live in symbiosis. These five-fold debts can be discharged only by sacraments, by the advancement of learning, by parenthood, by altruistic service to fellowmen and by tender care for all sentient creatures. In Indian philosophy sacrament is used in a generic sense as knowledge, action, social work and *elan vital* that maintain the continuity of life in the universe. "Good men who take the portion of food left after the performance of the five-fold sacraments become free from all sin. Those men who subsist for themselves and do not undertake the sacraments in their selfish pursuit of the goals of life, really eat sin," says the Bhagavad Gita. Social work here comes from an integrated personality and becomes entirely denuded of self-reference when it becomes a sphere of ritual. The recognition of the imperative necessity of non-attachment in social work is basic in Indian thought which identifies complete detachment and perfection of self with the infinite extension

of its boundaries. In the modern literature on social work there is a growing recognition that those social workers who are themselves egoistic, repressed or aggressive personalities are unfit to solve problems of social maladjustment of others, and signally fail to elicit improved patterns of social relationship. In non-theistic philosophical systems in India it is a mystical identity of self and not-self which serves as the ground of compassion and sharing. In theistic systems God is envisaged as dwelling in finite men. "Bow to all creatures with great reverence in mind with the knowledge that Isvara enters as a fragment in each", says the Bhagavata. Thus compassion becomes prayer, and service to fellowmen becomes worship.

"I do not seek a kingdom nor do I want happiness, nor cessation of rebirths. What I crave is the alleviation of distress of creatures of the earth afflicted with misery". In India the orientation of metaphysics and philosophy is humanistic and ethical rather than theological and religious. The philosophy of social work in the country can only obtain a permanent footing as it seeks its nourishment from the metaphysical unity of everything and everybody in the Cosmic Mind or Deity. The marriage of India's traditional metaphysical notions of the divinity of man and the humanity of God with modern techniques and methods of social work can alone realise the ancient social aims of welfare and happiness of the entire people;

"May all become happy. May all be freed from disease. May all realise their well-being. May none be subject to distress."