

AMERICAN TRAINING FOR INDIAN SOCIAL WORKER:
CURE OR CURSE?

DR. BEN SCHLESINGER

". . . I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any. . ."

Mahatma Gandhi

In the following pages, the author examines why and how the Indian students go abroad for higher studies. He regrets that scholarships are frittered away without inquiring into the personality, merits and motivations of the students. He cites the story of Vimla which had a happy ending: She married a nice man and is *now* a good housewife. . . ." In this context, the author feels that there should be a South-East Asia School of Social Work, a kind of school which might bring about less frustrations and difficulties than felt by American trained workers.

Dr. Ben Schlesinger holds a Masters degree in Social Work of the University of Toronto, Canada and a Doctorate in Child Development and Family Relationships of Cornell University, U.S.A. He was associated with Aloka Centre for Advanced Study and Training, Yewlwal, Mysore. He is now on the staff of the School of Social Work, University of Toronto, Canada.

Presently there is great status attached to going abroad for training. The large amount of scholarships, fellowships, and grants, which are available for Indian students, enable about 3000 to study in the United States, and another few thousand to study in European or other Asian countries. The visiting card handed out by a graduate to a visitor, reads proudly: Mr. B. . . . B.A. (Madras), M.A. (Oxford)". There still appears to be more value in a British degree, than in American training, since anything American has the added thought behind it that "it was easy to get", and that American degrees are "mass produced". I have the feeling that this need to travel out of India has many reasons, among which is the feeling that students cannot get the type of training they want here at home, and the second is the need "to get away". We do not have research studies which give us the real motivations for Indian students desiring to go overseas, and some of my findings are only from personal contact in India, and in America, and thus are not systematically organised.

We should not blame the Indian student alone, for his desire to go overseas. The rate at which many foundations and organizations offer financial help at times is astounding. It is true that some foundations have a sort of screening and orientation, but others, just "give the money away", without inquiring into the personality, merits and motivations of the student. One of the things which is not done usually, is to ask the student what he or she wants to do with the training they are getting overseas. This leads at times to situations in which students remain in America for five years or more, and then have a very difficult and frustrating time upon their return to India, if they return at all.

We must remember however that in certain specialities students have to study outside India since training is not available here. I will limit my discussion to students who have gone to America (Canada and the United States), for training in social welfare, and some of the dangers, and pitfalls, in which they have found themselves upon their return to India. I will also try and discuss

the type of training which these students are getting in America and how this adds to their frustration. The case of Vimla, an Indian student who came to America to do social work training at an Eastern university might illustrate some of the difficulties faced by many students.

The Case of Vimla.—Vimla was a 22-year old girl, who came from an "upper class" family in Bengal. She was single and had taken her undergraduate work at an Indian University. Most of her life she had lived in an urban setting in India, and had not lived away from home. One day, she had read a notice in her university, that fellowships were available for those who want to study social services in America. Vimla, who did not have previous work experience in social work, aside her few visits to the "poor" districts of Calcutta, applied. To her surprise she was accepted, and arrangements were made for her to proceed to one of the universities in America. No one had told her that what she should expect in America, a distant relative told her that America was "wild", and that she had to protect herself constantly. The cultural and social habits of Americans were unknown to her, and no one volunteered to help her understand them. Her views were based on the movies imported to India, which give the wrong picture of life in America.

So Vimla left for the U.S.A. A 22-year old, native girl who had been sheltered most of her life, who had not had any experience in social work came from an upper class family. With a warning "to be careful" she was seen off at the airport in Calcutta. I will skip the difficulties of adjustment to American life since these have been portrayed many times in Indian periodicals by students who have faced the tremendous transition from East to West.

Vimla arrived at the school of social work, and was warmly greeted by the staff and

students. Her colourful sari attracted the student body and she was besieged by eager young men and women, who questioned her about life in India. The time-table for lectures and held work was given out. We must remember that most of the American schools of social work are on post-graduate institutions, and the schedule is a heavy one. Vimla glanced at her sheet and found that she would have to do held work twice a week, and three days of lectures. About eight hours, at least are devoted to library work. What a change from her student days in India. During her first lecture period, she found that no lecture was given, but rather a seminar, in which the students were asked to discuss social work. She was called on to talk about Indian social work and Vimla was nervous, frightened, she stumbled a little, after all, she did not know much about social work in India and she was not prepared. This "new system" of education was getting her down. The next day she was told to report to a welfare agency for field work. Wearing one of her less colourful saris, Vimla presented herself to the new supervisor at the Department of Public Welfare of the large American city. The supervisor greeted Vimla and then said: "Miss Vimla, I am wondering if you have anything to wear besides that sari. Our clients, who live in the slums here, would not understand, and may be it would be best for you to have some western clothes when you visit them. ..." That evening Vimla cried and confided to a few of her newly made friends that she did not have "western" clothing and she felt insulted in the morning. She felt like going home. Her friends consoled her and lent her some "western" clothing.

Field Work Visit.—At the next field work visit, Vimla had to visit slums. Even in America these districts can be a terrible experience. Needless to say, Vimla had quite a difficult time. Through trial and error, and through patient guidance of an understanding

faculty and supervisors she managed to continue her work.

Now back to school. The formal lectures and seminars concentrated on Psychodynamics, theories of social work, child welfare, medical and legal aspects of social work in America, human growth and behaviour and weekly lectures by a psychiatrist on mental illness. Most of this was new to Vimla and the volume of readings which were assigned to her, plus the assignments kept Vimla busy for most of her days.

Most of the courses were geared to the American scene. The social work problems of the American public were examined, the community organization methods in American cities and towns were discussed, and the laws dealing with public and private social work in America were diagnosed by a lawyer. Vimla listened attentively and made copious notes, and read many books, and memorized many theories of personality. She dealt with the "emotional" problems of her clients, using the case record method to write down all her work with them. She began to analyse the problems of her clients, by using Freud's interpretation of the emotional growth of people and began to have some knowledge of the Psychodynamics of behaviour. For two years of careful work, Vimla worked very hard, she had accumulated a store house of knowledge and had some appreciation of case work. Her contact with her clients seemed to improve during the second year of study and she became quite good at "diagnosing" the problems which her clients represented, and which ranged from alcoholism to unmarried mother problems. She wrote a thesis on "The Unmarried Mother and her Rejection of Children" and in a colourful ceremony she received her Masters degree in Social Work. One day, prior to her departure on a tour of America, she received a letter from an agency in India, which offered her a job.

Vimla accepted the offer. Two months after her graduation she landed in Calcutta, and began to assume her newly acquired position.

Her work was supposed to be with refugees from Pakistan. She tried to do case-work but found that there were "masses" to serve. Basic needs such as food, sanitation, housing, and work had to be obtained for them. Daily Vimla was faced by thousands of outstretched hands, by hungry children, by angry parents, demanding the basic necessities. She had never faced people like this, she had been used to dealing on a face to face relationship or one to one basis with her clients. Vimla came home at nights, and began to have headaches, sleepless nights, and finally had to leave the agency. Her training had not equipped her for such work, all her knowledge was of no use. She had forgotten in her two years that Indian conditions and problems were quite different from those prevalent in America. The story has a happy ending. Vimla married a nice young man and is now a good housewife

Many of you will say that the case of Vimla is exaggerated, that is only one case, and you can cite many cases which will show that the training overseas is beneficial. It is my feeling that the case of Vimla is a mirror of many students who take overseas social work training and could be applied to other professional training obtained in America by Indian students.

Two Cultures and the Problem.— We have to examine first the two Cultures, and the problems which each of the Continents face, in order to understand the wide gap in the training in America and the needs of India. About 80 per cent of India's population lives in rural areas, and the social work has to be centred in these areas if we are to benefit the millions of villagers and the new-born generation of India. The students who go for training have usually no knowledge of

the problems of the villages and many of them have never visited a village. These students are usually "sophisticated" urbanites who have grown up in the "marginal" stage of being-caught between the "old" and the "new" of India. They come from wealthy families. The latter is not a bad thing but it does have its drawback in the context of India's society, in that it is difficult for that group to understand the villager who is usually "illiterate". Albert Mayer, in his excellent book, *Pilot Project India*, points out the need for village social workers, when he states: "A village participation worker requires not only what we may call the theoretic and psychological understanding that several of our principal trainers do have, but a feeling for the village, and understanding of the "swing" of the village, its music, its humour, its habits, its lore... ."

It is my feeling that we are working in different directions. If America plans to continue to train social workers for India, then some of the approaches will have to be changed. In the area of field work especially, great thought will have to be given to the type of placement offered to Indian (or Asian) students. Work with the American Indians, on their reservations, or with Canadian Eskimos, or with other minority groups in America, which face some similar conditions and problems to the Indian scene, would be helpful. In the theoretical aspect much more emphasis will have to be placed on the Psycho-cultural approach. Some of this has been done with displaced persons, the negro client in America, the Japanese-American and other minority groups in America. The Psycho-cultural approach can be defined as, "the approach emphasizes the impact of the process whereby the individual starting through the parent child relationship, is 'culturalized' along the lines of the persistent traditional patterns of the group. . .". In this context it may be necessary for Schools of

Social Work, in America, who teach Asian students, to pay attention to the influence of culture, case, religion and tradition in the context of preparing social workers for their task at home. More emphasis will also be needed to assure that most Indian students have some rural experience, so that they can get a "feel of the land".

On the other hand, why look overseas for remedies? Can we not satisfy the need for proper training right here in India? The answer is that in our eagerness to begin to "assimilate" all new methods and theories, we forget that right in our own backyards we may have the "remedies". The existing schools of social work in India, will have to be strengthened to meet our needs in India so that they can train their workers in India using the field situations which are real to the country, and allowing the student to see and feel for himself the immense problems which are facing the villages and cities of India.

Need for a South-East Asia School.— My suggestion also would include the set up of a "South-East Asia" School of Social Work, preferably in India, and to staff it with Asian faculty members. This faculty should have had experience in the field, and should be aware of the problems facing Asian countries. I am sure that many of the foundations which are helping Asia might offer financial aid for such a project.

United Nations help can be requested, so that consultants from other countries can be attached to the school. A word about "consultants from countries" which have recently undergone changes, and which have similar problems like India. The selection of students for this School should not be based on "educational" classifications. We have seen too many B.A.s and M.A.s in Honours English or Literature, failing in Community Development work. The criteria for admission should be graduation from high school, with

at least three years experience in working with people in his or her own country. A great emphasis should be placed on field work in the villages, since these are the proving grounds of social work. I also have a suggestion for a uniform for this school. My idea is not original since it came from Mahatma Gandhi who said, "One of the requisite qualifications for village worker is that he must be a habitual *khadi* wearer. . . ." I would interpret Gandhiji's statement in the light of my experience in India and say that what we need is less white shirts and ties, when the workers enter villages, and more *dhotis*. I should set up the school on a co-operative basis in that the students carry out their own day to day living, such as preparation of food, scheduling, etc. In India and other parts of India, many of the so-called social workers have forgotten what it means to work "with your hands" and I would include manual labour as part of the course of study. Gandhiji pointed this out when he said, "no labour is too mean for one who wants to earn an honest penny. The only

thing is the readiness to use the hands and feet that God has given us. . ."

A school of that kind might bring about less frustrations and difficulties than felt by our American trained workers. Let me conclude by stating that there is some value in training in America, but this value can only be appreciated by Indian social workers who have much experience, and who are going to America to do some comparative studies and who are senior people in the field of social welfare in India.

The world has shrunk considerably in our contact with Continents. We cannot assimilate other methods, before we have understood our own local problems, and have tried to deal with them using local experience and our own existing facilities. It is very nice to go on a trip and visit other countries, but what we need in India at the moment are workers who are trained to go into villages, and the cities and to work with the mass of people who will need some form of help in their day to day life.