A Historical Perspective of the Social Work Profession

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The author traces the beginning of social work profession to the rise of the middle class in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Social work, as a profession, worked on behalf of the society or the establishment. It adopted social action as a programme in the sixties. When professional social work was set up in India by an American missionary, its interests followed the launching of programmes by the government. Dialogue between the Gandhian workers and graduates of professional schools were held but did not lead to any new initiatives for common action. The article concludes with trends in and limitations of social action as a new area of work.

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The Western Experience

Modern social work had its early beginnings in Britain during the period of transition between the breakdown of the feudal order and the rise of the middle class in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. A society characterised by an agricultural economy and the institutions of the family, the church and the village were giving place to another based on industrial manufacture and commerce and an urban habitat in which the working class individual found relative freedom from the constraints imposed by the pastor, the squire and the village community. At the same time, a new insecurity about finding a stable means of earning a livelihood and locating a shelter was experienced. Workers who were displaced from the village farms or those who had voluntarily migrated to the city, the new mine sites or commercial port towns faced the problems of all displaced peoples.

Modern social work was first an effort to help meet the problems of these displaced people. It had to address itself to the problems of lone individuals, of waifs and strays, of unattached women, of the abject poverty of low paid workers and the unemployed. Those were
days of early industrialisation, when neither the employer nor the state accepted any responsibility for the workers' job security, safety or well-being. Such services, if available at all, were those initiated through the charity of wealthy individuals, the church or the newly formed voluntary welfare agencies. The guiding philosophy was of Christian religion, motivated charity or enlightened secular philanthropy. Initially, the object of these services was limited to providing temporary shelter and food so as to protect the individual against hunger and cold. Other needs were not perceived and there was a fear that any greater charity would breed idleness among the poor. Change came gradually and while the ruling philosophy remained that of the more fortunate doing their duty by helping the poor, a new idea arose: help given should aim not only to give immediate relief, but long-term rehabilitation through making the individual self-reliant and independent of charitable assistance. This was a new idea and was to change the mode and goal of charitable giving. It also implied a new attitude to the recipient of help. The recipient, was not seen as being unable to help himself/herself or a dregs, or a reject; he/she was a human being in temporary difficulty who needed assistance to be able to stand on his/her own feet. This new awareness/orientation to giving an implied acceptance of the dignity of the receiver of help was to be the foundation of modern social work philosophy. Yet, at this stage, the giver of money or service was moved by religious injunction or by a sense of compassion. The receiver had no claim on the individual agency or on the society in general. The concept of the right of the individual to support from society was absent.

Society's obligation to support needy individuals came later and there were several factors responsible for it. It was partly a result of the war which brought the industrial worker a consciousness of his/her own importance in keeping production going, partly due to the spread of Marxist and Fabian thought which led to the emergence of a labour movement. This, in turn, led to an understanding that unemployment could be the result of social forces and was not necessarily indicative of the laziness of the individual. The concept that the individual citizen had a claim on the society began to crystallise between the first and the second world wars. This culminated in the form of the various rights to freedom and security as finally outlined in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. Even before the United Nations Declaration, many of the western industrialised nations had responded to the problems of post-war rehabilitation with many programmes of social
security and social insurance, by putting on the statute book legislation aimed at protecting the individual against various types of social and economic risks and at promoting his/her well-being.

Social work, as a profession, emerged in this context where laypersons worked either as volunteers or as full-time paid workers to attend to the problems of the urban poor. They worked on behalf of an agency — state or voluntary — to render help to the urban poor. The need to introduce some method and procedures into the work of these functionaries was recognised gradually and arose out of a new awareness of these workers themselves. A set of guiding principles evolved and procedures came to be developed. Gradually, the methods of work developed and later came to be differentiated into methods of working with individuals, groups and communities.

In all these developments there was an unstated premise that the social worker was working on behalf of the society; today, we would call it the establishment. But there were changes taking place. On the one hand there was a recognition of the dignity of the individual who was given assistance and on the other there was the expectation that the social worker would be able to influence the individual to conform to the norms of the larger society. Even the belief that the individual client would become self-reliant and would not wish to continue to be dependent on social assistance was a part of this expectation. But the attitude of the recipient of help was itself undergoing change. As the idea of the responsibility of society toward the individual gained acceptance, the recipient of service became increasingly freed from a sense of being beholden to an individual or agency or even to the state. This had important consequences.

The recognition of the dignity of the individual led to the acknowledgement of the principle of self-determination and the abnegation by the social worker of the use of authority vis-a-vis the client. But the underlying hope was that the client would become a responsible (conforming?) member of society. This was not an unreasonable assumption as long as there was a general consensus and legitimacy attached to the norms enunciated by the establishment. But the twentieth century was increasingly characterised by a rising consciousness of a differentiation of class interests and a consequent weakening of social consensus. The social work profession came to be increasingly seen as identified with the establishment and faced the charge that what it had to offer were mere palliative services and not of any help in the empowerment of the client group. In this criticism there was a mistaken
notion that all client groups are differentiated from the establishment by their class interests. It should not have taken much imagination to realise that whichever class came to power there would always be individuals and groups that would remain in need of assistance. But the image of social work as identified with the elite in society stuck.

The fact is that social work in the west had allowed the major movements for empowerment in the first quarter of the twentieth century, like the labour movement, the blacks' movement for equal rights, and the women's suffrage movement to pass by without contributing much to these movements. It could probably be said that, conceived as a profession which rendered assistance to socially handicapped individuals, social work was not really equipped to promote the interests of whole groups or classes of economically or socially deprived sections of society. But if this position were put forth social work would have had to accept its irrelevance in the struggles of such groups for equal opportunity.

It was in this context that social work adopted social action as a programme and an agenda for professional activity in the sixties. But there were basic limitations to a service profession adopting social action and social change as its programmes. Leadership of movements for change is not an institutionalised activity and is undertaken by individuals who see their mission as lying beyond the existing social modes and legal framework even if it is within the value framework of a democratic society.

Since a professional activity has to be socially supported in terms of funds and sustenance, the type of social action social work can undertake is normally unlikely to be one that challenges an existing social order. Of course, there will always be individual social workers, who will see their life's mission in such a task. Social action involves a subtle shift in the paradigm that has historically guided social work. Instead of acting as the agent delivering a service on behalf of the larger society, the social worker is now required to act on behalf of his/her client group and play either an advocacy role or, on occasion, even a confrontationist or conflict role vis-a-vis the establishment in society.

It may be argued that even an advocacy role can be institutionalised in the way that it has been institutionalised in the practice of law. But then the lawyer is functioning within and in enforcement of existing statutes. The advocacy role of a social worker, who would function as an activist, may require pressing for a change of law, even for a breach of law and for a realignment of interests in society. This new role calls
for skills of mobilisation of the affected group to register a protest and of mobilisation of popular opinion to bring about a change in the value basis of law. These latter skills are generally not regarded as part of a professional social worker's function and would require to be incorporated into it if the shift in paradigm is to be institutionalised.

The Indian Experience

The development of social work in India has been similar in some respects to the west, but different in others. Prior to the emergence of professional social work, services to the handicapped and indigent groups were provided in so far as they were recognised by the extended family and to a much lesser degree by the village. There was nothing comparable to the poor laws and the related institutions. Even religious charity was not organised at the local level as in the case of the parish. Religious charity was in evidence at places of pilgrimage or in important maths and temples. Community mutual support was often family based and caste based, but not religion or village based.

Institutional facilities of the type of orphanages, poor houses and women's homes were limited. The facilities that were available were largely a result of Christian mission activities or others imitative of them and organised on a religious or caste basis. Until the middle of the twentieth century, the pattern was for these institutions to be established in provincial capitals, in district towns and in places of religious significance where the poor congregated. Specialised institutions for the physically handicapped came to be established only in the 1920s. Most of the residential institutions for any category sought to attend to the basic needs of food and shelter. Education, vocational training and other rehabilitative activities came to be added later.

The emergence of social work as a profession in India was a 'borrowing' from the west. It is no accident that the first two schools of social work were established by individuals who came from outside India. They were sensitive to emerging needs and problems and, based on their country's experience, saw a solution in the training of individuals as professionals for new services that would be required in a fast urbanising India. The idea of a profession of social work did not have an easy acceptance. That social workers can benefit by training and that they could accept payment and yet be considered social workers were both new. Till that period, social work, as a rule, was undertaken by volunteers and their major attribute was selflessness and dedication. The paid functionaries of social work agencies were not
regarded as social workers. They were clerks, cooks, watchmen, teachers or instructors, but not social workers. The fact is that social work was not a common term used to refer to altruistic activity. The term used was social service. The whole range of concepts associated with professional social work was new and met with resistance from those who referred to their activity as social service or, after the 1930s, as constructive work among those following Gandhiji. It is no wonder that the idea of professional social work was initially considered a foreign import and an unwelcome one at that. The professional social worker was likely to be looked upon as motivated not by the desire to serve, but only by the need to earn a salary.

The Indian Conference of Social Work, which met in 1947, provided the first opportunity at the national level for the voluntary and professional social workers to meet and discuss their ideas. An Organising Committee under the chairmanship of Dr. J.M. Kumarappa, Director of the first school of social work in the country, prepared an agenda in which, among the substantive areas of discussion, were also topics relating to the need for a scientific approach to social problems and their solution. The term scientific had acceptance and no one mentioned the term professional. The relative roles of volunteer and paid functionaries in social work (service) were discussed in more than one section and in more than one conference between 1947 and 1950. There had to be much give and take through the root of a dialogue on the need for a scientific analysis of problems and a search for scientific solutions to them.

These annual conferences were being widely attended and were organised in different parts of the country. 'Trained' social workers and volunteer (non-trained?) social workers, government administrators and public figures interested in social problems, all attended them at least for the first ten years or so. The discussions at these conferences achieved a great deal to bring about greater acceptance to the idea of a new kind of social work. After the first Conference, the formal leadership of the Conference was largely in the hands of established voluntary social workers, but young professional social workers played an important part in drafting the agenda and structuring the discussions. They invariably contributed papers and took part in the discussions without in any way dominating them. At the end of a decade of more of such meetings and discussions, there was much clearing of apprehensions on both sides and a clarification of concepts relating to social work, of the relative roles of volunteers and paid
functionaries in social work, to allow the idea of professional social work to gain acceptance — at least among the voluntary agencies and volunteer leaders who worked in the urban areas. But the category remained largely uncontacted and relatively unimpressed. This was so despite the fact that one of the first few schools of social work, established in the forties, was in the Kashi Vidyapeeth — an institution established under Mahatma Gandhi's inspiration during the struggle for independence.

Areas of Professional Work

The training programmes of the schools of social work in India remained largely focused on urban problems following the tradition of the schools in western countries though their syllabi and the particular areas of work in which they developed courses. The Indian schools did not have courses on social casework and group work well into the late forties. Although there were courses on community work at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in the early forties they remained largely focused on programmes and activities and not much on theory. The agency settings in which Indian social workers typically got employment during the first decade or two were juvenile delinquency and labour welfare — neither of which was an area emphasised as part of professional social work in the west. Medical social work and family social work were added only in the fifties and rural work and tribal welfare were added much later.

The development of social work specialisations was related in some ways to the growth of governmental services though, in each of the fields mentioned above, the schools of social work did play a critical role in the crystallisation of the services. Specifically in the development of labour welfare services and in the legislation relating to correctional services for juvenile delinquents and later in the area of jail reforms in the Bombay Presidency, the faculty and the first graduates of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (then the Sir Dorabji Tata Graduate School of Social Work) played an important role behind the scenes. A similar influence was exerted in Chennai by the Madras School of Social Work in the fifties. The contribution of the Delhi School of Social Work, was also considerable. Due to its location in Delhi it helped to gain visibility for professional social work. The work that the faculty and the students of the first batch of this school did among the refugees from Punjab in 1947, was greatly appreciated by the government and by other agencies working among the refugees.
The services of one of the faculty of the school were asked for on deputation to the newly established Department of Social Welfare to look after unattached women refugees and children who had been separated from their parents. Also, consequent upon the participation of professional social workers in the refugee rehabilitation camps and of some of the faculty at the administrative level, a couple of social workers got appointed as research personnel in the newly established Planning Commission and, later, in the Central Social Welfare Board. Each of the schools played a role in gaining acceptance for a new approach to the problems of social welfare in the areas in which they were located. Of course, the creation of the schools in different states was itself often a result of the appreciation of the need for a new approach to social welfare on the part of volunteer leaders and government administrators of these states.

*Expectation of Lead from Government*

Professional social work in India developed on the eve of and largely after Independence in 1947, though the first school of social work had been founded in 1936. There was an expectation that the government would give a lead to the development of social services including those for the socially handicapped and otherwise vulnerable sections of society. There was a demand for the establishment of separate government departments of social welfare and the manning of such departments by qualified social work personnel. Volunteer leaders and professional social workers alike expected a great deal from this by way of advancement of social welfare services in the country. The demand had been voiced in successive sessions of the Indian Conference (Council) of Social Work (Welfare) for over a decade. In course of time, these departments came to be established. Not unexpectedly, social work professionals initially found a place in these departments only at the field level and not at the level of administration or policy making which came later.

The interest of schools of social work in the areas of rural welfare and, later, in family planning followed, and did not precede, the launching of special programmes of rural community development and of family planning by the government. This was generally to be expected since the schools expected their graduates to be employed in the ongoing programmes where their skills could be utilised. At the same time it is also true that the schools participated along with the government in exploring new areas of service for their faculty and
graduates as in the case of the National Service Scheme programme and occasionally continued to pioneer on their own as in the development of school social work and family case work in attachment with the family courts.

Labour Welfare
What began as 'labour welfare' has grown and changed in successive stages into industrial relations, personnel management, and, more recently, into human resource management or human resource development in the industry. The scope has widened and disciplines and approaches other than those of social work have entered into it. Management sciences, labour law, personnel psychology, plant sociology and industrial sociology are among the subjects that have had to be accommodated in the syllabi for this field. All these disciplines have had a contribution to make in the development of what began as 'labour welfare'. One of the major differences in the industrial relations field between 1948 and now is that employers themselves have come to see the importance of a good working environment for industrial labour within and outside the plant for maintaining industrial peace and in raising productivity. The approach typified by the Factories Act, which looked upon the labour welfare officer as working for the welfare of workers almost against the wish of the employer and in enforcement of governmental provisions, is no longer valid today. Naturally questions have arisen as to the field has remained within the framework of social work and whether the introduction of these subjects and approaches to the field has remained within the framework of social work and whether social work schools can really do justice to all these subjects. The present position seems to be that while labour welfare, industrial relations and personnel management has remained a broad and bunched area of practice, entry to it is through several and diverse academic channels — social work, industrial psychology, industrial sociology and management.

Rural Social Work
In some respects, a development similar to the one in labour welfare marked the growth of services in the rural sector except for one major difference. Whereas the first school of social work had taken a lead in the development of the field of labour welfare and had provided a measure of leadership, they were in no position to do this in respect of rural services. From the social work perspective, rural work began as
a voluntary activity and later got integrated into governmental development activity. Its path of development had been rural uplift or village uplift work, rural reconstruction, rural community development, and national extension services. At none of these stages had professional social work contributed much to its growth. Rural social work had its roots in rural Christian mission activity in Kerala (Dr. Spence Hatch) and in Uttar Pradesh (Dr. and Mrs. William Wiser); in the Gandhian constructive programme which crystallised in the 1930s as a part of the nationalist movement; in the Ford Foundation supported Community Projects idea as it evolved initially in western Uttar Pradesh in the 1950s and; in the government sponsored programme of community development and national extension. Professional social work was a late entrant which began to evince interest in rural work when the adoption of community development as a major service activity by the government created new employment opportunities in the mid-1950s.

Schools of social work tried to identify a specific role and function for their graduates in rural areas. They would have liked to target the position of the block development officer (BDO) as the one to which their graduates would be recruited after graduation. This was not possible as there were too many claimants to this position from within the government revenue administration cadre. Besides, rural work is a multidisciplinary area with personnel being drawn from as diverse a set of disciplines such as agriculture, animal husbandry, irrigation, education, and health and village administration. In the 1960s, many social work graduates came to be employed as social education organisers within the block development team and as instructors in most of the training programmes for community development workers from the BDO to the Village Level Worker. But unlike labour welfare, rural work has not grown into a major or attractive area of social work practice. It seems to have gained some prominence only recently with the entry of industrial houses, nationalised banks and international development agencies in this field. The critical factor in the adoption of rural work as an area of social work practice seems to be whether employment opportunities exist in a field for persons who have university level education. This might be considered a very materialistic, if not mercenary, view of motivation for a profession but it is not an unrealistic one.

**Family Planning and Family Welfare**

The area of family planning, and now family welfare, has had a similar history. Here the dominant professional discipline was medicine. A
doctor usually headed a family planning service unit in the field. In the sphere of evaluation of family planning programmes, demography was considered the major discipline. Social workers found a place as trainers, assisting research personnel, educators, and so on, but they were not the key persons in the programme as visualised by the government. Initially, the programme focused almost wholly on population control and only later broadened to locate family planning within the broader area of family welfare. Social workers could meaningfully relate themselves to the programme only at this stage but by then other professions had developed greater familiarity with the problems of this field. The Welfare Extension Projects of the Central Social Welfare Board emphasised more specifically the welfare of women and children in rural areas. But except at the level of Mukhya Sevikas, professional social workers could not relate to it except in an advisory or voluntary capacity.

In family planning, as in many other areas of social service activity, social workers have to play the role of a member of a multidisciplinary team. They do not have either an exclusive or a dominant role. They have the responsibility of establishing what their specific and distinct contribution would be. This has not always been easy and often seems to deter the emergence of a clear professional role. This is an area which may need greater thought on the part of social work educators.

The contribution of the social work profession to family welfare has been mostly through work in the urban voluntary agencies and through counselling services. Their services have been more specifically appreciated in the area of child welfare — institution based as well as family based. They had much to contribute to the establishment and expansion of sponsorship and adoption services in metropolitan areas. They have also been able to serve in voluntary agencies working for slum children and homeless children. More recently the establishment of family court related counselling services have provided a greater opportunity for social work professionals to make their special contribution.

Dialogue with the Gandhian Tradition

In India, social activism in favour of the underprivileged was rooted more in the Gandhian tradition than in professional social work. Apart from his work in the political sphere, Gandhiji gave considerable importance to bringing about social reform and social change. His efforts to bring about change were not based on legal enactment but on an appeal to the better sentiments in human beings. In this sense it
was closer to the religion based approach. But in Gandhiji's case, he would not hesitate to back up his appeal to the nobler sentiments by a resort to non-violent action to seek redress of a grievance. He had successfully taken up the cause of the textile workers of Ahmedabad for better wages and better conditions of work much before legislation on the subject had been put on the statute book. His fast for getting entry to Hindu temples for untouchables and his successful efforts to get a better deal for the indigo workers of Champaran were instances of social action. In each case the approach consisted of a moral appeal followed by non-violent protest action when no redress was available.

For a long time there was not much communication or dialogue between the Gandhian workers and graduates of professional schools. A beginning in this direction was made following the efforts of the late Sugata Dasgupta and the Institute of Gandhian Studies. Five or six meetings were held under the chairpersonship of Mr. Jayaprakash Narain in which some of the senior intellectuals of the Gandhian tradition and some heads of the schools of social work participated. The meetings were helpful in clearing misconceptions and in developing greater appreciation of the strengths of the two approaches. But the meetings did not lead to any new initiatives for common action. The interaction still continues, but largely at the individual level.

Not all Gandhian workers are social activists in the militant sense but for some reason, whenever a comparison between the Gandhian and the professional approach to social work is made, it is the salaried employee of an urban work agency that is compared with a high profile social activist of the Gandhian tradition. There is probably a need for identifying areas of agreement and common endeavour. The efforts of the Gujarat Vidyapeeth at Ahmedabad, the Department of Social Work in Vishwabharati and the Gandhigram Institute in Madurai, at developing a social work curriculum for rural work within the Gandhian tradition need to be examined. To what extent have they succeeded in evolving a programme which harmonises the Gandhian and the professional approach to social work also needs to be examined. However, before this can be done successfully, a lot of theories about the selflessness of the Gandhian worker and the claims to science of the professional social worker will have to be shed.

Social Action

While social action has always appealed to students as a possible area of work, the number of faculty or students who have given their time
or career to it is still small. The factors that were mentioned earlier while discussing the developments in western countries hold true for India as well, though by its very nature India, as a developing country, offers more challenges for those who would wish to dedicate themselves to social causes by adopting the social action approach. There are a few individuals who have picked up this challenge as, for instance, in the case of those who have involved themselves in the problems of families displaced by river valley projects, or those who have taken up the problems of small fisherfolk affected by large scale commercial fishing by national and international industrial corporations or, again, those who have identified themselves with the problems of tribals affected by the government's development policies. Admittedly these individuals are exceptions and not the rule.

The general image of social action, as a way of helping people, has been associated with a confrontationist approach. This has particularly been the case where social activism has a direct political end. But this need not always be the case. Particularly in the areas of social services, confrontation need not be either the goal or the only method of a social activist. The core objective of social action is the empowerment of the client community through a process of education, sensitization and mobilisation for corrective action. The mobilisation need not always be against an out group. One sensitises people to their own rights and responsibilities and also to their own potential for self-help. In this process, confrontation might become necessary, but it need not be the end of social action programmes. Social work, as social action, can help the deprived seek and obtain justice within the existing law and in enforcement of a government's own declared policy. It can even question a government's policy or practice and stay within the law. Injustice to the weaker sections could be the consequence of governmental action rather than government's declared policy because a particular government has affiliations with the oppressing group rather than with the afflicted or it may be the consequence of corruption and inefficiency at the ground level of administration. The degree of confrontation involved in social action would vary in each case.

A politically oriented programme of social action can often be exploitative in that it tends to make people dependent on the outside leader. This has happened in the past as in the case of some of the trade union activists and in the case of some of the fundamentalist movements where the people, who are ostensibly being served, at times become hostages to the whims of the activist movements. This possibility of the
activist being seduced into self-empowerment or self-enrichment is always there and has to be guarded against. In any case this runs against the very objective of social work. There is a need and scope for 'social action' in the sphere of education, health, housing and social welfare.

Some individuals drawn from various disciplines of education, medicine, agriculture, and social work have, in recent years, felt attracted to undertake activist programmes of service in favour of the rural or tribal communities. It is obvious that these individuals, in spite of their urban professional roots, have felt the urge to strike out in new directions and to find creativity in something different from pursuing a traditional career in their respective processes. They have been willing to subordinate the considerations of financial security and limit their income aspirations to the satisfaction of being pioneers and being able to use their knowledge and skills to serve needy groups who would not normally afford their services. To some extent this has become possible because a few Indian and foreign funding agencies are willing to provide adequate financial support for such developmental activities so long as they do not get embroiled in political partisanship. Schools of social work would need to think specifically of the client groups that their graduates could serve and the kind of activities in which their special skills would be useful should any of them wish to consider an unstructured new field as their area of activity.

**Conclusion**

I have tried to cover as many of the aspects of social work education that seemed important to me. In doing so I have also tried to provide the context of social change and change in social work practice. I have naturally not been able to cover many aspects of social work education that might seem important to another observer of the scene. I think that is inevitable. What I have done is to cover those aspects that appeared to me to be important or salient in the context of the discussions that used to take place when I was still directly involved with social work education. May be the issues have changed today. I do hope however that what I have said is still relevant.