

Social Welfare in India

In the evolution of social welfare in India, like in many countries, two broad trends can be noticed: reform of the society and the provision of specific services to the handicapped and disadvantaged individuals and groups. Much before the beginning of social reform during the nineteenth century, there were several religious reform movements by the saints. They were revolting against the religious inequality and in some cases against social inequality as well. They fought against the prevalent practice of excluding the lower groups in society from opportunities to worship God, and their access to religious knowledge. Some of them attempted to remove the social discrimination by preaching that all human beings were equal before God.

The social reformers from Ram Mohun Roy to Gandhi also aimed at reforming the Hindu society. They focussed their attention on the abolition of some religious or social practices which were detrimental to the welfare of certain segments of the Hindu society, such as sati, prohibition of widow remarriage, child marriage, idol-worship and some features of the caste system. They approached their task of reform, which concerned mostly women and children, from a rational and critical analysis of the social system of the day. To achieve their goal, they relied heavily on state intervention and the instrument of social legislation. The reform activities which began in Bengal spread to several parts of the country. It was an elitist reform movement confined mainly to the western educated, urban middle class. It did not become a mass movement until the entry of Gandhi on the social reform arena. The point to note here is the fact that many of these social reformers who began their work with a broad orientation to social problems and the need to change society in certain respects, very soon found it necessary to provide specific services to individuals affected by the harsh features of the society. Thus institutions were established to provide shelter and education for widows, orphans, and destitutes.

With the entry of Gandhi on the political and social scene of India, we see the beginning of a new phase in social reform. For Gandhi, the struggle against social inequality could not be separated from the fight for political freedom. At the same time, he felt that the fight for freedom and political equality has no meaning without fighting for social equality. Gandhi was not content with his efforts to change the society. He also established organizations to provide services and to work for the welfare of the weaker sections of the society. Unlike the social reformers before him, Gandhi's field of action was not limited to urban areas. His analysis of rural poverty led him to initiate measures for rural development through self-sufficiency of the villages. While not agreeing with all the Gandhian ideas and programmes, it must be pointed out that there was none before him (and none after him so far) who had his breadth of vision, the integral view of society (social and political, rural and urban) and who had realised the value of people's participation in the struggle for social and political

reform. For the first time, social reform became a mass movement drawing in its fold large number of men and women from all strata of society.

I. Evolution of the Role of Government in Social Welfare

Before India came under the British rule, social welfare activities such as care of the handicapped and the destitutes, were the responsibilities of the joint-family, caste and religious institutions. The government or the rulers assumed only limited responsibility for social welfare. During the period of British rule, with the gradual changes in Indian society like urbanization and industrialization, organized social welfare came into existence. These were mostly in urban areas. The government, which subscribed to the laissez-faire theory of state, followed a policy of least intervention in social reform and assumption of minimum responsibility for social welfare. Most of the social welfare work was done by voluntary organizations through volunteer service. These organizations were mostly run on communal lines and their service was limited to a particular caste or religious group. The state passed some social legislation on its own initiative, mainly for the control of vagrancy and crime. Other social legislation were introduced reluctantly by the government under pressure from the social reformers like Rammohun Roy and others who followed him. Institutional services were provided by the government in provincial capitals or in big industrial towns under the legislative measures introduced for the control of delinquency and crime. Thus, during the British period, the government played a very minor role in social welfare. One area where the government was more active was the welfare of industrial workers, mainly under pressure from textile mills in England, and later also due to the work of the philanthropists and early trade union leaders like N.M. Lokhande, S.S. Bengali and N.M. Joshi. Several provincial governments passed a series of labour legislation to regulate the working hours in the factory, and to provide minimum safety and health measures for the prevention of exploitation of workers. The introduction of these measures were particularly pronounced during the period of popular rule in the late 1930's when Congress party came into power in the majority of provinces of British India. All these resulted in better working conditions in factories and, provision of housing and recreational measures for industrial labour.¹

After the Independence, one of the major problems facing the government was to provide shelter and food to the refugees who were pouring into the country in large numbers. This was a problem of unprecedented magnitude, and the government had to organize relief and later rehabilitation measures on a massive scale. The task was handled by the government by utilizing its administrative machinery and personnel in association with some voluntary social workers and organizations. A few professional social workers also participated in this tremendous humanitarian work. The problem is still there, though not on the same scale, as expatriate refugees continue to come from other countries.

Increasing Role of the State

The year 1950 marks a new phase in the role of the state in social welfare. It was the year during which the Constitution came into force and the Planning Commission was established to begin work on the planned development of the country. The Directive Principles of State Policy emphasized the achievement of justice-social, economic and political. This was further elaborated in the various articles of the Constitution. Article 38, directs the state "to secure and protect a social order which stands for the welfare of the people". Various articles of the Constitution deal with specific activities to be undertaken by the state in this direction. Some of the major references to the state activity to achieve the welfare of the people are: securing adequate means of livelihood to all citizens; the protection of the strength and health of the workers and avoiding circumstances which force citizens to enter avocations unsuited to their age or strength; protection of childhood and youth against exploitation or moral and material abandonment; to secure the right to work, education and public assistance in cases of underserved want such as unemployment, old age, sickness etc.; to secure just and human conditions of work, a living wage, a decent standard of life, leisure and, socio-cultural opportunities for people; to promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people, especially the scheduled castes and tribes.

The goal for the country was stated originally, as the creation of a welfare state and later, as the achievement of a socialistic pattern of society. This required that the state should play an increasingly major role in the field of general and social welfare of the people of this country. The necessity for the state to assume a more dominant role in the field of social welfare was recognized in the First Five-Year Plan which stated that "As the social structure becomes more complex, the state is called upon to play an increasing role in providing service for the welfare of the people".

II. The Goal, Nature and Functions of Social Welfare in India

It is necessary to define the goal, nature and functions of social welfare. Such an attempt is beset with many formidable difficulties. The nature of social welfare and its area of operation do not lend themselves to a clear and precise statement as in the case of other professions like medicine, law etc. What is more, such a definition cannot have universal applicability. In the past, several attempts have been made to define the nature and scope of social welfare. The following quotation is taken from a U.N. document:

Social welfare is an organized function and is regarded as a body of activities designed to enable individuals, families, groups and communities to cope with the social problems of changing conditions. But, in addition to and extending beyond the range of its responsibilities for specific services, social welfare has a further function within the broad area of a country's social development. In this larger sense, social welfare should play a major part in ensuring that the human and material resources of the country are effectively mobilized and deployed to deal successfully with the social requirements of change and thus contribute to nation building. Social welfare tasks are those which involve the improvement of social functioning and social relationship in meeting social needs at individual, group or community levels. Such tasks may consist of providing services as a response to social needs or problems;

predicting the emergence of such situations and taking preventive measures against their occurrence; or helping to create conditions conducive to social development.

In India very few attempts have been made to define the goal, nature and functions of social welfare. For a long time since the beginning of social work education, the schools of social work not only used a borrowed model of social work education, but also the model of social welfare as developed in U.S.A. Social work model in the late 1930's in U.S.A. had mostly focussed on the provision of curative services to mainly individuals and groups. It was also based mostly on the practice of social work in private agencies. There has been, however, some questioning about the usefulness of this model to the needs of our country and, during the last seven decades a few attempts have been made to adapt this model to the culture and conditions of our country.

Gore is one of the very few persons who have attempted an analysis of the role and functions of social workers in India. But his attempts at analysis and conceptual clarification have been made in a piece-meal fashion in various papers he contributed over a period of time. As a result, his views at times are contradictory and confusing. In discussing the nature and relationship of social work and social reform, Gore states:

Social reform aims essentially at change - a change some times involving the basic values of a society whereas social work primarily relates to welfare activities undertaken within the limits set by the existing values. Social reform is addressed to the change of social institutions and social work to relieving the suffering resulting from the failure of individuals and groups to function effectively within an institutional set-up. In the same paper, he says that the demarcation between these two fields is not easy and in India the distinction between social reform and social work is particularly blurred.

Gore runs into difficulties in his analysis of social work and social reform, because he fails to see that these are two facets of the whole field of social welfare and in terms of functions, these are two levels of social workers' functions. What he refers to as 'social work' is the traditional concern of social work to provide curative and rehabilitative services, which is only a part and not the whole of social work. In another paper Gore rightly states:

The social worker's job in India primarily calls for the fostering of attitudes, institutions and processes in the community that would lead to greater production and a more equitable distribution of the means of life and subsistence. But at a later point in the same paper he poses this dilemma:

The social worker finds that he is working in an atmosphere of great intellectual turmoil where he cannot expect to have a ready frame of reference..... what kind of attitudes, therefore, can he foster in the individuals he is working (sic)? Should he ask the members of his play-group to learn to follow the leader, or should he ask them to develop democratic attitudes and practices?

Once he defined the role of a social worker in India as essentially that of an agent of change, I fail to see the dilemma as to what attitudes a social worker should foster in his work with individuals and groups. The answer to the questions seemed obvious.

Later another attempt was made to define the goal of social welfare and the functions of a social worker in India at the Seminar on "Social Responsibility of Social Work in Social Reconstruction".¹⁰ Various papers that dealt with the theme of the Seminar seemed to reiterate the position unambiguously and categorically that the goal of social welfare in India is social change and social reconstruction, and the role of social worker was to function as an agent of change.

To influence the direction of social change, social worker's concern with social reconstruction should be made evident. That social change is our main concern and social reconstruction the main emphasis of social work should, therefore, be expressly stated It (social reconstruction) is concerned with the stimulation of change not only in the society as a whole and in its many institutions, but also in achieving the same through self-determination of communities, special groups and individuals.

In fact, in a developing country where there are national policies and programmes for planned development, the social work profession would not be true to its commitment if it did not throw its full weight in favour of balanced and integrated national development. In other words, while the individual social work practitioner need not abdicate the duty germane to the particular station in the profession which he holds, it is certainly essential that the profession must act as a powerful force in favour of democracy, social justice and social development.

It is significant to note that the First Five Year Plan defined the objective of social welfare broadly in a developmental perspective as "the attainment of social health which implies the realization of such objectives as adequate living standards, the assurance of social justice, opportunities for cultural development through individual and group self-expression, and readjustment of human relations leading to social harmony".¹³ It also recognized the importance of social welfare in achieving the objective of planned socio-economic development of the country.

To sum up the discussion so far, we can say that historically social welfare in India was mainly concerned with bringing about changes in the social system for the welfare of the members of the society. At the same time, it did not ignore the need to provide specific services to the individuals and sections of population, who were either adversely affected by certain harsh features of the social system or by circumstances beyond their control. The country is now committed to the goal of socialistic pattern of society and has adopted the instrument of planned socio-economic development to raise the standard of living of the people. This involves inducing changes in the social system. Social welfare in India has to adopt the goal of planned social change and development which should be its major concern. On the other hand, it is also concerned, though to a lesser extent, to provide effective

curative, rehabilitative and preventive services to the deprived and handicapped individuals, groups and communities who need such services. The role of a social worker in India is mainly that of an agent of social change. In some positions he may be functioning wholly or primarily as an agent of social change; in some others, he may administer social resources and/or provide direct service of a professional or sub-professional character, and his role as an agent of social change may be secondary.

III. Social Work Practice: Present Status and Emerging Trends

A study of the professional social workers in India conducted by the Indian Council of Social Welfare (ICSW) enlightens us to some extent about the level of professional practice and the deployment of professional social workers in the field. According to this study nearly 75 per cent of professional social workers worked at the direct service level in 1968. A large number of them worked in industry as labour or labour welfare officers, personnel and industrial relations officers, and a sizeable number as medical and psychiatric social workers. Rest of them worked in the field of family planning, family and child welfare, probation, and urban community development.¹⁴ Most of these have mentioned as one of their functions, administrative responsibilities, like official correspondence and maintenance of accounts and records, or administration of social resources and translation of social welfare policies through the instrument of administration. A fair guess would be that both these types of administrative responsibilities are involved in the functions of professional social workers at the direct service level. Studies of the functions of labour welfare/personnel officers suggest that these personnel performed predominantly industrial relations functions and next to it, personnel management functions. Labour welfare functions occupied a very low status among the functions performed by them. They involved mostly administrative, managerial and organizer roles in the areas of enforcement of the health and safety provisions of the Factory Act, promoting workers' association in certain aspects of management such as canteen administration, works committees etc., and organizing recreational programmers.¹⁵ In the family planning field, which is reorganized with more emphasis on non-clinical, community education approach, trained social workers worked mostly as district/block extension educators, instructors in training centres, and research workers. Their functions included mainly community education and motivational work, supervision and guidance of the non-medical extension and auxiliary personnel, teaching and survey. Those social workers who work in the clinical areas performed mainly direct service to clients like supply of contraceptives, counselling for adoption of family planning practice by accepting a safe method, and follow-up.¹⁶ The functions of medical and psychiatric social workers, according to the field studies of positions and functions in this area, were essentially similar to what has been stated above.¹⁷ A good deal of their work also consisted of provision of specific social resources like medicines, financial assistance or shelter etc. There are no empirical studies from other areas of social work practice regarding social work functions. But, it is very unlikely that they are significantly different from the functions discussed so far.

In pursuance of the Directive Principles of State Policy, the central and state governments have introduced several measures for the welfare of the normal population and to provide

protection to vulnerable groups in society. The community development and family planning programmes, and the National Service Scheme for university students are mass programmes started by the government with the aim of the welfare of the total population or a certain category of the total population. The social security programmes like the Employee's State Insurance Scheme, Central Government Employees Health Scheme and the old age assistance schemes introduced by several state governments are welfare measures for the protection of vulnerable groups in society. The nutrition programme for children of 0-3 years started by the central government and later incorporated in the Integrated Child Development Scheme, several self-employment schemes for the educated unemployed and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme are indicative of the emerging trends in the field of social welfare. All these programmes have personnel from several professions apart from social work like agriculture, nutrition, medicine, education etc. It means that social workers will have to work as members of interdisciplinary or interprofessional teams. This requires skills in team relationships and to practice in collaborative work with other professions.

In the Constitution, social welfare is a state subject. So the main responsibility for initiating and implementing social welfare measures is with the state governments. The welfare of the scheduled castes and tribes who constitute nearly 21 percent of the total population of the country is the constitutional responsibility of the central government. The schemes for their welfare are financed by the central government, but implemented by the state governments. In the field of social welfare excluding welfare of the backward classes, the responsibility of the central government is only in respect of formulation of a national policy, coordination, research and evaluation.¹⁸ A major administrative development at the central level is the creation of the Department of Social Welfare in 1964, originally named as the Department of Social Security. Most of the subjects pertaining to social welfare which were handled by several ministries before were gradually brought under the Department of Social Welfare.¹⁹ The subject of welfare of the scheduled castes and tribes was removed from this Department and attached to the Ministry of Home Affairs where it was before. After Independence, almost all the state governments have created either integrated directorates for social welfare or separate administrative arrangements for Harijan welfare, tribal welfare, women's welfare, etc. with a minister or ministers in charge.

The development of administrative structures at the central and state levels for the implementation of social welfare programmes, and the gradual expansion of these structures after the Independence has necessitated a need for considerable manpower to fill the various jobs created in the field of social welfare. This has led to the gradual occupationalization of social welfare which was until then dominated by volunteers. There is also a notable growth of welfare bureaucracy, mostly in the government sector. The top levels of this is filled by the personnel from the general civil service cadre, and the lower levels by persons directly recruited for specific jobs, who are mostly without educational qualifications in social work. Thus, the evolution of social welfare, especially after Independence has been toward greater role of the state in social welfare and the emergence of a welfare bureaucracy to implement social welfare programmes.

The human power studies conducted during the mid-70s have confirmed the continuing trend of the dominating role of the state, both in providing social welfare services in the country and also in providing the opportunities for the employment of social welfare personnel. They have pointed out the predominantly urban spread of the social work personnel, that too in some major cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, which are capitals of the states, and some more large cities which are industrial centers like Kanpur, Coimbatore etc. The incidence of employment of social work personnel continues to be small and insignificant, ranging from 10 per cent in U. P to 15 per cent in Delhi, and about 20 to 25 per cent in Mumbai. There is also a serious mismatch between the nature of professional education and the type of jobs available in the field. Bose who has served for a long period in the Planning Commission and later in the Ministry of Social Welfare, Government of India has stated.

“The administrative structure in India gives a pre-eminent position, to the generalist administrator, a situation which shows no signs of changing. The current structure has promoted extensively an alternative system to meet the requirements of trained manpower. Under this policy, a short period of training and orientation for supervisory staff is all that is considered necessary to enable a generalist to 'satisfactorily' perform social work tasks, thus considerably diluting the need and value of professional education. The decision makers in social welfare have not tried to dovetail social work education programmes with manpower requirements at different levels. Expansion of social welfare programmes and expansion of programmes of study in social work have taken place independently of each other, though both depend on government funding.”

Soares and Kulkarni were the first authors to point out that social welfare has no constitutional existence as an identifiable separate subject. It is not found either in the central list of subjects or in the state list. What we consider as social welfare is scattered in several lists both in the central and state. e.g. backward class welfare (scheduled castes and tribes) in the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) and also correctional services, education in the H.R.D. Ministry, consequently school social work in that Ministry, medical and psychiatric social work being part of Health Ministry, and the remaining subjects like women and child welfare in the Social Welfare Ministry in the 1980's and 1990's. Subsequently, the ministry has been split and three new ministries have come up at the centre-namely Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, the Ministry of Women and Child Development and Ministry of Tribal Affairs.

At the level of states there is no uniformity and so no general statement can be made. So, social welfare is not one unified whole area or field of operation, and consequently there is lack of coordination in terms of policy, provision of services and employment of qualified staff. In the 1970's, the then Ministry of Social Welfare sponsored manpower studies under a master research design (this author prepared it at the request of the PREM Division of the Ministry). Research projects were carried out in five states, namely, Delhi, U.P, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and West Bengal. Only the first three research reports are published. The findings

were not utilized to prepare a social welfare human power policy either then i.e. during the fifth five-year plan or subsequently. There is no strong professional association to lobby for the introduction of such policy in their own interest. When they were or are in existence (as of now only nominally) they have been content with organizing conferences. (The record was slightly better in the 1970's and 1980's). Social welfare, then is a freak creature with several heads and several limbs, and difficult to differentiate it from other professions which have an unified, identifiable presence, and usually a single ministry to deal with such as H.R.D, Health and Law, and professional bodies with legal backing like the Medical Council of India and the Indian Bar Association. The statutory professional bodies have not covered themselves with glory is another matter. (A former chairman of the Medical Council of India has been arrested and is facing trial for corruption).

Social welfare, however, has a name and habitation in the five year plan documents, as part of the social (services) sectors-health education and social welfare. This was due to a historical 'accident' as pointed out by Bose. The first member of the Planning Commission in charge of social services happened to be a prominent voluntary social welfare leader, Smt.Durga Bai (later Deshmukh), founder of Andhra Mahila Sabha with a long political career as part of the national movement for independence, and was highly influential and deeply committed to social welfare. It was because of the influence and role played by her that social welfare was included as a separate sector in the first five year plan and subsequently this continued. It has been argued by Kulkarni, Bose and some other authors, that social welfare in the plan documents has only a nominal existence and it is an insignificant mini-sector with less than one per cent allocation of funds. This is a misconception and it has been discussed elsewhere in detail (Pathak 1987)*. The total allocation for social welfare, if we include poverty alleviation programmes and other such programmes worked out to 8 per cent of the total plan allocations. As Bose has noted it is also politically significant. Old age assistance programmes were initiated, to begin with nominally, because of political reasons. In other words many social welfare programmes are "populist" measures, a favourite phrase of the media and some critics of these measures.

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