

# Challenges for Social Work Profession Towards People-Centred Development

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The paper traces the historical context of professionalisation of social work and its changing ideologies in the West, in order to explain the predominance of the urban middle class clinical and welfare oriented paradigm of intervention in the profession even in India. The role of social work profession towards people-centred development with specific reference to its interface with people' movements is then attempted. The challenges that the profession faces towards people-centred development with reference to elitism in social work, depoliticisation of the profession and social action, diversity of approaches, multidisciplinary orientation, integrating practice and research, and humanising research are examined.

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## **Introduction**

The role of professional social workers, as change agents towards people-centred development, is full of challenges as systems change is in contradiction to the norms of professionalism. A profession can be viewed not merely as a calling embodying institutionalised altruism, but also as an interest group concerned with professional perquisites, rewards, esteem and influence (Khinduka, 1987). Professionalism is seen by some as an ideological bulwark against egalitarianism, unionism and class struggle. By creating allegiance to the agency rather than to people in need and by downplaying issues of hierarchy and class division, the professional model, according to some of its critics, depoliticises social work, and retards the social worker's ability to engage in political struggle and movements (Withorn, 1984; cf. Khinduka, 1987).

Professionalisation could also be responsible for development of systems that are anti-people. Amar Jesani's paper in this volume shows

that community health activists saw the problems of health care delivery in the high level of bureaucratisation and professionalisation of services through the medical care model. The mandate of social work profession is such that it cannot be as impersonalised as the medical profession. When compared to the medical profession the social work profession in India is also not highly professionalised and empowered. However, the social work profession in India still carries the legacy of the elitist urban middle class Western paradigm which has led to more or less a hierarchical approach of work with people.' This paper traces the historical context of professionalisation of social work in the West, in order to understand its influence on Indian social work practice. The role of the profession towards people-centred development, with specific reference to its interface with people's movements and campaigns and the challenges faced, are then examined.

### Professionalisation of Social Work in the West

Professionalisation of occupations is a Western phenomenon, an outcome of development of sciences and higher educational systems in the nineteenth century. The origin of social work, as a profession, may be traced back to the Judaeo-Christian approach to charity which considered all human beings as born sinners and their need to be saved. Around the fourteenth century, when feudalism was being replaced by nation-states, England was leading in formulating non-sectarian laws to deal with the poor as voluntary religious charity was not thought to be enough. As the moralistic benefactor, the government enacted the Elizabethan Poor Law in 1601, followed by the United States, which emphasised the difference between the 'worthy' and the 'unworthy' poor. The conditions in the workhouses set up for the unworthy poor and the alms houses for the worthy poor were made very unattractive in order to discourage the poor from seeking help.

In the nineteenth century, the poor, who were considered good only at procreation, were not considered the state's responsibility by liberal thinkers such as Malthus. He said that the poor had no moral right to relief as they diminish the share of the more industrious and the more worthy. Charity would only increase population whereas poverty, according to him, was a natural means for population control (Rao, 1994).

This ideology brought a shift from state-sponsored relief to organised voluntary charity in the mid-nineteenth century. The benefactors

of the Charity Organisation Societies (COSs), that sprang up, perceived people to have problems because they deviated from middle class values and patterns of life; their objective, therefore, was character reformation. Settlement Houses, that were set up a couple of decades after the COSs, had more of an advocacy approach. The need for training functionaries of the COSs and the Settlement Houses, led to the beginning of social work education in the US at the turn of the century. Monopoly of technology, through formal education, was the major launching pad for the beginning of the profession.

The Progressive Era, the Settlement House Movement and the Great Depression of the 1930s, helped turn social workers' attention from character reformation to the social and economic problems. This sensitivity to the environmental determination of individual problems declined during the tranquil years immediately following the Second World War. During this time, many members of the profession were drawn to the development of psychiatric social work (Reamer, 1987).

A secular scientific and liberal ideology shaped American social work which perceived people's problems as psychodynamic. Pursuit for professionalisation led social workers to work hard for a scientific knowledge base as well as specialised skills, techniques and functions. Leadership of caseworkers in this venture, led to their subsequent dominance in the profession. 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. This is evident from the fact that in the first quarter of the twentieth century, social work in the West had allowed the major movements, such as the labour movement, the blacks' movement, and the women's suffrage movement, to pass by without contributing to them (Gore, 1997).

The clinical paradigm in social work continued to dominate the profession until the 1960s. During the time when the systems model of conceptualisation was being introduced in several disciplines, social work also reviewed its atomistic and system maintenance stance. A move towards transactional and synthesis oriented social work brought an understanding that problems are lacks or deficits in the environment, as dysfunctional transactions between systems, rather than a disease located within the individual. The systems orientation enhanced a much needed holistic view to understand the entirety of the social, psychological and physiological organism and enlarged an appreciation of the creative and adaptive potentialities, not only within the people, but also within the environment (German and Gitterman,

1987; Goldstein, 1973; Pincus and Minahan, 1973; ). The ecological paradigm of social work is not universally accepted by social work educators as much as the clinical paradigm is. The former is also criticised for not using sociological theories adequately to understand human ecology such as social stratification, power dynamics and so on (Roberts, 1990).

Some efforts have been made in the US to conceptualise a developmental orientation to social work. According to Sanders (1982), development practice in social work can be viewed as a movement, a perspective and a practice mode. As the 'means' of developmental social work, social development refers to the processes through which people are helped to realise the fullness of the social, political and economic potentials that already exist within them (Stein, 1976). Social development has also been defined as a multidisciplinary and cross-sectoral field of practice that seeks to improve the social and material well-being of people everywhere (Estes, 1992; 1993). Estes (1997) talks about eight levels of social development practice: individual empowerment, group empowerment, conflict resolution, institution building, community building, nation building, region building and world building. In social work, such interventions are encompassed within the broad area of social action/activism.

Social action is not a new term to social work education and practice. It was recognised as a method of social work as early as in 1922 when Mary Richmond defined it as 'mass betterment through propaganda and social legislation'. Later, in 1937, Grace Coyle defined social action (138-139) as the attempt to change the social environment to make life more satisfactory. It aimed to affect not individuals but social institutions, laws, customs and communities. However, the role of social workers as change agents has had limitations in the US mainly as it is in contradiction to the norms of professionalism.

Social work research has also suffered from scientism brought in by professionalisation. It was one of the eight areas required for accreditation even before the establishment of a standard two-year graduate programme in the USA. The research thesis was made an obligatory component in most Master's in Social Work programmes and became a mandatory requirement in the accreditation standards established by the Council of Social Work Education of the USA as early as in 1952 (Bernard, 1977). However, it has suffered from the limitations of social research, in general, though efforts have been made to develop alternative approaches to social work research.

Social scientists have generally asserted that their role is merely to do the research, devoid of philosophy and implications for 'goodness' in the world (Wallerstein, 1997). The ideal paradigm used in social research has been logical positivism/empiricism. Way back in 1970, Klein pointed out that (quantitative) social research methods are inappropriate to social work because of the tendency to develop categories or levels and force the findings to fit them, when people and their problems do not fit neatly into cubby-holes. Klein further opined that social work practice deals with complex and multifaceted relationship whereas social researchers like to examine single or at best small numbers of variables at one time.

Another issue with professionalism in social work is the high status attached to the American paradigm even in other countries, especially the developing countries. In India, the first school of social work was set up in 1936 by an American missionary. Although he rooted the training in the local Indian experience, he borrowed curriculum and bibliographies from the British and American schools of social work (Manshardt, 1967). The eurocentrism in our politics, our language and in our thinking, made this a natural process.

## **Role of Social Work Profession Towards People-Centred Development in India**

### *Vision of and Movements Towards People-Centred Development*

The value of people-centred development as well as the value framework of social work profession, both, have evolved over a period of time, in the West and in India. Religion provided the major source of ethics/morality ideology for the society and for philanthropic work for a long time. Attempts at indigenisation of social work profession in India were also largely made with reference to application of Hindu religious scriptures to philanthropy (Banerjee, 1972). Towards the end of the Middle Ages and beginning of the Renaissance, philosophy got free of its ties to medieval theology. As rationalism and sciences developed, non-religious ideologies developed for keeping the human context of people alive. These brought a shift from the condescending moralistic attitude to a people-centred approach as follows.

The ideology of humanism emphasised the prominence of human values in any treatment of science or of the world. It postulated the continuity of human beings with nature and recognised inherent worth and dignity of all human and non-human species (Geiger, 1947).

Humanism was also fostered by the mystical ideology of the Bhaktas and the Sufis in India around the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries. This ideology is unitive and transcends the subject-object duality on the basis of realisation of the supreme worth of fellow human beings.

With faith in human potentialities, democracy emphasised the process of people's participation in decision making of any entity (Creighton, 1992). Gandhi gave it the form of *Swarajya* or self-rule and *Lokniti* or people's policies. The ideology of socialism developed in reaction to the widely prevalent ideology of liberalism. The former aims at a society based on cooperation rather than competition, valuing equality and justice (Szelenyi, 1992). The Gandhian philosophy gave this ideology the form of Sarvodaya, the well-being of all.

The ideology of human rights that emerged in the post-Second World War times, is based more or less on liberal humanism. These, therefore, tend to be individualistic. They are critiqued for ignoring the reality of social stratification and marginalisation between groups due to which human rights are denied to a large number of people in the first place. As a result of this lacunae, only those who are already better off, can obtain their human rights. However, the rights are worded with the false assumption of equality between the haves and the have nots (Lobo, 1991).

India's Constitution lists Fundamental Rights in Part III which are inspired by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. On the other hand, Part IV of the Constitution which is called the Directive Principles of State Policy, provides the socialist orientation to the liberal ideology espoused in the Fundamental Rights. Because the Fundamental Rights are the needs of the haves and are justiciable in a court of law, they and not the Directive Principles have dominated the governance. The Ministry of Welfare, which is the main infrastructure to deal with the marginalised groups, has been developed devoid of the ethos of the Constitution. Instead of applying the Directive Principles in order to secure a just social order, it lays down 'schemes' that delivers services to the marginalised people as beneficiaries, which does not help to change the unjust social order. The government does wake up to human rights issues of the marginalised when the United Nations formulates specific Conventions which are to be ratified by the member countries. The *de facto* capitalist democratic polity of the state allows only a marginal implementation of the Directive Principles. Moreover, the adoption of global liberalisation policies, on the other, are the major reasons for increasing marginalisation of vast numbers of people.

In the 1960s, people were getting disillusioned with the development paradigms, at the national and international levels, and with their claims to bring about a just social order. Non-government organisations emerged at this time either with the ideology of human rights, Freire, Marx or Gandhi. They work as pressure groups acting from below, towards a cumulative change brought about through a mass participatory base. Their number, widespread character and the inter-linkages that have developed among them have given rise to contemporary social movements, aiming at development with people at the centre (Saldanha, 1995).

A conference was organised on 'Towards People-Centred Development' by the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in 1996, which deliberated on the movements and campaigns for the empowerment of marginalised groups (TISS, 1997). At the Conference, the vision of people-centred development was discussed as follows. According to David Cox in this volume, people-centred development can be said to rest on five foundations: Awareness-raising, social mobilisation, participation, self-reliance and sustainability. He emphasised that a people-centred development approach is one which emphasises process over outcomes. It essentially represents faith in people. However, there are many groups in all societies who do not share that faith.

B.D. Sharma has stressed in this volume that people themselves have to question and resist the unfolding logic of the system. The most distinguishing feature and the real source of strength of people's movement is that it gives expression to people's aspirations in terms of an idiom which the people understand, about which the people can deliberate, which the people can guide and whose theme is the experienced reality of every citizen. Such people's movements have the potential of graduating into a pan-Indian people's movement which may force the ruling elite for a basic structural transformation.

Thus people-centred development is a vision that is an outcome of an amalgamation of several ideologies such as humanism, democracy, socialism, human rights and philosophies of several socio-political thinkers such as Gandhi. In the present scenario, it is also an expression of people's awareness, aspiration and struggles and, is therefore, sustainable.

### *Developmental Orientation in Social Work*

The importing of social work profession took place at the time when Mahatma Gandhi was mobilising people for social reconstruction.

Later known as the Sarvodaya Movement, this approach was based on the recognition of the need for change in social, religious, economic and political structures that victimise the weaker population, namely Dalits, women, rural people, tribals, labourers and so on. This truly ecological understanding of the Indian scenario was missing from the professional social work approach that was initiated around the same time. In fact, the interface between the two, even at a later stage was marginal.

In 1964, an attempt was made to bring together the professional social workers and Gandhian constructive workers in order to evolve an integrated philosophy of social work for India. Both the groups felt enriched by the exercise. The constructive workers accepted the need for education and training. Professional social workers recognised that social work should not confine itself to ameliorative work, but should aim towards social action designed to remedy the roots of social malaise and to change the social order (Dasgupta, 1967).

Simultaneous to the efforts for an integrated philosophy of social work in India, the University Grants Commission (UGC) and the Ministry of Education had set up its first Review Committee on Social Work Education, the Report of which countered the efforts at integration. It states that, (UGC, 1965: 7):

Now that the main aims of social reform have been achieved, the task of social worker has taken a different form...he has to look after the needs of children in orphanages, rehabilitate unmarried mothers and save children from the stigma of illegitimacy... Today the field of social work coalesces more or less with the field of the social workers in the West. Now that the social worker has ceased to be the social reformer in the old sense, it has become possible to benefit from the experience of social work training institutions in other countries.

This UGC report is subsequently highly criticised by writers on the role of social work in the field of development. The Association of Schools of Social Work in India (ASSWI) had organised a seminar in 1966 on 'Role of Social Work Profession in Rural Reconstruction' where the traditional welfare approach was severely criticised and the need for a developmental perspective was emphasised. The Second Review Committee Report of the UGC (1980) differentiated the need for social work in India as against that in the USA. While the main concern in the USA was to provide social services to residual groups who are outside the mainstream of national life, the major problem in

India is to assist the majority of our population and not a peripheral group. In fact the Report identified the global need to emphasise teaching of social action, social policy and social administration.

The beginning of social work literature focussing upon developmental issues can be traced back to the late 1960s. There were many sceptics and some critics when developmental social welfare began to be talked and written about. Desai had stated in 1984 that the profession needs to move away from too much dependence on provision of services to organising people to promote change, from institutional to non-institutional programmes, from remedial to those which seek to affect the very causes which create poverty, from private concerns to public issues, from research with a problem focus to one of action oriented studies — testing ways and means to solve our multiple problems, building models and testing processes and approaches. The profession has made a shift but not significant enough.

A review of literature by Pathak (1997) shows that social work authors have made substantive and pioneering contribution to the emergence of developmental perspective in social welfare, both, nationally and internationally. However, he also finds this literature containing vague and contradictory definitions and not reflecting later changes and additions to development ideology. There has been very little research and documentation done of developmental social work practice, since Dasgupta's path-breaking study carried out in 1967.

The need for reorienting social work education for greater relevance and to widen the scope for social work practice was advocated vigorously through the late 1970s and in the 1980s. Several institutions undertook major review of their curricula and developed new courses with a more developmental focus and focus of poverty. The ASSWI organised seminars on developmentally oriented curricula (Desai, 1987). From 1988 to 1990, another major curriculum review was undertaken at the national level under the auspices of the UGC. Courses such as social action, social development, policy and planning, social conflict and others were considered important for inclusion. In spite of all these efforts, unfortunately, social work education has not cultivated or pursued vigorously or as comprehensively as required to practice what it has professed (Pathak, 1980; Siddiqui, 1984).

### *Interface of Social Work Profession with People's Movements*

Shah (1996) has made a useful comparison of social work practice and social movements. While social work deals with the problems based

on immediate needs, social movements analyse the issues in their historical context. Social work interventions are guided by methods that emphasise compromises with the systems, and through professional organisations. On the other hand, social movements question the systems and use the confrontation approach by working through people's organisations. Social work approach is non-political whereas social movements are political in nature. Training for social work is based on scientific knowledge whereas training for social movements is more experiential and outside the formal system. The former is influenced by Western thoughts and the latter is an amalgamation of grassroots organisations' experiences and network of international organisations.

Historically, social work professionals have played only a marginal role in social movements, if at all. As medical and psychiatric social work, family and child welfare, and personnel management and industrial relations were the oldest social work specialisations in India, social work in the fields of health, family and children and industries has been widely developed. However, the orientation of work in these fields has largely been clinical or welfare oriented. As Vimala Nadkarni, Shubada Maitra, Gurmeet Hans and K. Anil Kumar's paper in this volume notes, social workers have failed to view health as a multidimensional complex phenomenon with its sociopolitical ramifications. Asha Rane and Jeroo Billimoria's paper also laments about the hierarchical approach used by social workers in work with children as mere beneficiaries of services. A developmental orientation seems to be emerging in the fields of child rights, tribal and environmental issues and gender issues. Social work initiatives are also seen in the fields of health, literacy and housing campaigns, campaigns for communal harmony and organising the unorganised labour. Some have joined social action groups, whereas some have started their own action groups. Some have been making a contribution through employment in the academic institutions, and some have been working through international organisations. However, the issues related to the Dalits have been hardly dealt with by social work professionals in any capacity. A. Ramaiah's paper observes that social work professionals tend to assume that the main problem affecting Dalits is their economic backwardness and, thereby, ignore caste oppression. An update study on where professional social workers are working, with what ideology, and using what approaches is not available.

A study of social workers and their areas of intervention needs to be examined at the national level, in order to get an accurate picture of the role of social work in people-centred development. Professional social work practitioners, who are active in people' movements and campaigns, often do not like to identify themselves with the profession. As a result, reorientation from within has been a slow process.

Although people have been at the centre in social work, social work has not so far viewed people as partners. The value base of the social work profession was character reformation in the initial phase; or individual dignity, basic needs and equal opportunities during the Great Depression in the USA Casework principles have valued acceptance, non-condemning attitudes, confidentiality and controlled emotional involvement (Mathew, 1987). The first Code of Ethics adopted by the National Association of Social Workers in the USA (1960) made a series of proclamations concerning, for example, every social worker's duty to give precedence to professional responsibility over personal interests, to respect the privacy of clients; to give appropriate professional service in public emergencies and to contribute knowledge, skills and support to programmes of human welfare (Reamer, 1987). The NASW Code of Ethics was printed in the first volume of the *Encyclopaedia of Social Work in India* (1968) and is being used in Indian institutions of social work education.

Efforts have been made in India to indigenise the code of ethics for the profession. A Declaration of Ethics for Professional Social Workers (TISSSEWF, 1997) has been prepared to counter the Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers which was found to be highly clinically oriented and, therefore, inappropriate to the developmental approach of work, preferred for India. The Value Framework of this Declaration integrates the partnership vision of people-centred development and is indigenised in the Indian context as follows.

As a professional social worker, I pledge to promote the following values in myself, in the profession and in the society.

1. I pledge to perceive people as having inherent worth and dignity, irrespective of their attributes and achievements and having the capability of continuing development;
  - I pledge to perceive myself and other people as part of nature, needing to live in harmony with other non-human existence.
2. I pledge to work towards the overall well-being of people in the spirit of Sarvodaya, through the achievement of the following goals;

- Equity, non-hierarchy and non-discrimination of human groups in terms of race, religion, tribe, language, regional origin, gender, sexual orientation and other such factors, and condemning segregation/apartheid/discrimination among them;
  - Social, economic, political and legal justice, ensuring satisfaction of basic needs and integrity and security, universal access to essential resources and protective safeguards for the marginalised people; and
  - People-centred development, in the spirit of Swarajya and democracy from micro- to macro-levels, where people participate to determine their life styles and goals for development.
3. I pledge to work with people, guided by the following values.
- Solidarity and partnership with the marginalised people; and
  - Peaceful and non-violent approaches in the spirit of Ahimsa for resolving conflicts with self, others and the environment.

### **Challenges for Social Work Profession**

The vision of professional social workers' role, as partners with people as against the traditional role of benefactors, is full of challenges. While making a commitment of solidarity with the marginalised groups there is a need to redefine the traditionally valued principles of objectivity, non-judgmental attitudes and controlled emotional involvement. The culture of confidentiality needs to be demystified. There is a need to develop an egalitarian and non-hierarchical approach in not only work with people but also with research respondents, students and co-workers. Alliances need to be formed with others who are working towards the same goals. Basically, the paradigms for professional intervention in practice, research and teaching need to be redefined. Professionalisation in social work may have helped the discipline to maintain its unique identity, however, it may not help it in reaching out to the masses, if scientific temper is to be emphasised at the cost of intuitive responses to ground reality (Dasgupta, 1967; TISS, 1997). Dealing with the legacy of professionalism of Western urban and middle class paradigm of social work and its functionality with reference to the job market, is the major challenge that the profession in India faces in moving towards people-centred development.

### *Elitism in Social Work*

Professionalisation has led to elitism in the social work profession. The second UGC Review Committee, states the following on elitism in the knowledge base in social work curriculum (UGC, 1980: 16).

While knowledge has become largely elitist in mould in the various fields of social sciences, and elitism still provides the lever for the determination of standards in every field, social work will have to remain non-elitist, both in terms of the treatment of the courses it offers, and in terms of the catchment area, that is the social class, from where it draws its students. In so doing, it will still be required to raise its standards.

Elitism is evident in social work profession with reference to who joins the profession as students, who trains them, at what level they are trained and who funds their practice. Schools are anxious to offer courses which provide better job opportunities to students, and select students who possess the qualities needed for the existing jobs rather than having a developmental orientation (Siddiqui, 1984). An increasing number of social work graduates opt for high salaried organisational and city-based jobs. It is necessary to recognise that the students in social work education generally come from the urban middle class families, with the goal of career advancement. While no educational institution can force the students to take up a particular career approach (Dasgupta, 1967; TISS, 1997), the social work curriculum has to deal with their attitudes into which they may be socialised depending on their background. They have to be helped to understand the formation of their self-identity and prejudices with reference to the marginalised groups with whom they have to work. It is the prejudicing ideologies such as ageism, ethnocentrism, casteism, sexism and classism of the haves that have led to role stereotypes, hierarchies, intolerance; discrimination and thereby justified violence against the have-nots. Students need to understand and deal with these prejudices in themselves before they can work with any social problem or issue.

As the social work educators also generally come from the urban middle class background, they also similarly need to understand their stereotypical prejudices and develop methods for dealing with them among students. Another problem observed is that a majority of the social work educators do not remain in practice and are often removed from practice realities (UGC, 1980). It is necessary that social work educators should be in touch with practice. Some institutions have

initiated field action projects which provide an opportunity to demonstrate alternatives and develop appropriate strategies. However, this provides only a partial solution, and other mechanisms for faculty involvement in field practice, also need to be worked out.

The lopsided growth of social work education with emphasis at higher levels, is a major correlate of the job market orientation. There is a need to develop BSW and para-professionals where the bulk of workers are required (UGC, 1980). According to David Cox, there seems to be three crucial levels of social work education, in each of which there needs to be reflected the conventional, developmental and social reform aspects of social work: basic, intermediate and advanced levels. He observed that in India, the basic and the advanced levels are inadequately developed. India needs more rural based schools of social work within the more impoverished parts of the country. Poverty alleviation, feasible social welfare services and an appropriate social development plan are three crucial underpinnings of human well-being in this country. The role of social work education is to prepare social workers to work in these areas, he stressed.

Specialisations in social work education is another indicator of elitism in the profession. Setting up of social work specialisations in India was in response to government programmes and highly influenced by American social work education in the beginning (Desai, 1991). These did not provide a holistic approach to problem solving. A nation-wide study of professional social workers by Ramachandran and Padmanabha (1969) noted that two out of every five social workers were employed in settings other than the ones for which they had undergone training. Moreover, only three out of every ten agencies were in favour of social workers performing only specialised functions. Thus the social work specialisations often do not have relevance to the actual requirements of the field (TISS, 1997; UGC, 1980). Social work education generally trains students for the first level job. Specialisation in a particular field is generally developed by the students after they start working.

For a people-centred curriculum, specialisations would be counter-productive as it may focus only on women-centred development or only on child-centred development and so on. An integrated curriculum with a course each on issues of and work with the marginalised groups such as Dalits, labour, women, tribals, children, elderly, disabled and so on and optional courses on basic needs of health, housing, literacy and basic education, environment and so on would give all the

students the required holistic approach with specific foci to problem solving.

A concern was expressed at the TISS Conference (1997) regarding the role of international funding agencies in promoting a task-oriented approach towards research. Over the last few years, an increase in international funding for research has begun to create a culture of managing research projects which, in turn, is taking the focus away from people. The same dynamics are observed in the field of non-government organisations which is creating a new elite culture of practitioners. Unless the ideologies and the motives of the funding organisations are alertly monitored this trend could lead practice to unintended horizons.

### *Depoliticisation of Social Work and Social Action*

A major reason for resistance of social workers to interface with people's movements is that professionalisation has depoliticised social work. It is now acknowledged that social work interventions are political in nature, because it intervenes in situations where the power relations are unequal, whether in the family or in a large community (TISS, 1997: 44). The social action model (Rothman, 1987) and the integrated social work practice approach (Pincus and Minahan, 1973) allow for the use of political processes and methods of conflict, confrontation and direct action in practice. Yet, there is ambivalence related to the notion of social work being political. Social workers may not choose to get involved in 'party-politics', which is one aspect of political practice. However, the acceptance of the political processes, in which social work is inextricably involved, is an urgent necessity. Professionals need to face and confront squarely, the question, 'whose side are we on!'

Social action is an approach which deals with system change issues. Barnabas used the term 'Loka-Sakti' for social action, where group 'force' is generated by educating the people into a willing cooperation for the need of action for or against change (1964: 96-97). Desai (1984) further goes to state that social action should not be seen only as a method, but as the overriding philosophy behind social work education and practice in India. Here again, in spite of an intellectual conviction about the need for macro-level interventions through social action, it largely remains a hypothetical and non-existent method and perspective in social work practice (Prasad, 1980). Deliberations at the TISS Conference (1997: 44) observed that even today, 'Social workers are

limited in their response to macro-level issues and interventions, thus suggesting that social activism is low among social workers. It is also a fact that many known social activists have not been trained by the social work institutions'.

It was further emphasised that all actions/practice need to be aimed at institution building, which helps to change the access to resources in favour of marginalised groups (TISS, 1997). The Declaration of Ethics of Professional Social Workers of TISSWEF (1997) emphasises that the professional's accountability are to the marginalised and other people in need they work with. Their commitment and professional stand should be with them. The worker should empathise with people's marginalisation and thereby respect and give credence/value to their life experiences. Social workers should work towards changing the systemic and contextual forces which marginalise people, on behalf of and in partnership with them. People's right for self-determination should be respected and it should be ensured that they themselves play an active role in relation to the course of action to be taken about their life situation. A relationship of partnership should be nurtured with people such that it promotes mutual reflection on our life situation and our development. People's access to opportunities and resources should be facilitated and they should be empowered for work towards their stated goal.

Social work education should incorporate discussions on social movements, through presentations of case studies and other methods (TISS, 1997). Students need to be exposed to social action documents and studies. Fieldwork, which provides students with direct experiences in the field realities, is a major medium to initiate them into social action. Field work in unstructured settings, in communities, and around problem areas; and block placements with movements; are some of the recommendations for preparing students for appropriate strategisation in the present social realities. Students also need more practical exposure to the dynamics of the working of government agencies, banks and financial aid giving institutions (TISS, 1997: 29). It should be noted that the social work training by itself may not be enough to meet the specific requirements of the movements. These have to be built upon through individual interests, experience and additional training. If this is not recognised, students and agencies may have unrealistic expectations of each other.

It is crucial that the perspective and values taught need to be sustained in the institutional ethos, or else it could generate cynicism

among the students. As social work interventions are political in nature, social work education is also 'political'. However, social work education has been accused of being too apolitical, too professional and too limited in its concern (TISS, 1997). For example, institutions of social work education rarely engage themselves in macro-level issues and, thus, even if courses such as social action are included in the curriculum, students experience these only at an intellectual level. Institutions of social work education do operate within the larger framework of other societal systems, for example, the education system. Yet, this cannot be a justification for 'fence-sitting' and inaction. The institutions of social work education need to review their management ideologies which perpetuate the fence-sitter attitude and even penalise, in direct or indirect ways, those who have the courage to stand up for their convictions and beliefs (TISS: 1997). There is a need to see whether the 'spaces' available to the academic institutions are being fully used, and the extent to which social work educators can stretch as agents of change (Narayan, 1995). Institutions could encourage academic activism (TISS, 1997), through critical research, policy level interventions and by expressing solidarity and support with people-centred movements.

At the TISS Conference (1997), it was emphasised that research takes place within a social context and researchers, themselves, are part of this social context. This awareness highlights the need to recognise that research is shaped by one's ideology, perspectives and values. In this context, reconceptualising research is necessary, because the collection and expression of knowledge is an exercise of power. Thus, the potential of research to promote the knowledge-power access must be recognised. From this perspective, research is also a political process. It is, therefore, important to be aware of whose interest is being served by the research.

### *Diversity of Approaches*

Social work practice today reflects the varied ideologies that have historically dominated the profession at different stages of its development. The differences also reflect the multiple levels of intervention, structured and unstructured and primary and secondary settings, and the wide spectrum of issues and concerns which the social workers are involved with. It is also a reality that the existing problems are not dealt with while newer ones emerge. For example, remedial services are still required in health settings; crime and delinquency are on the increase

and correctional institutions exist; malnutrition amongst children and drop-outs from the education system persist. Thus, the need for remedial interventions continue even as the developmental approach is propagated.

As social action is universally limited to a few inspired individuals and groups, it would be unrealistic to expect that all students of social work become social activists. The Second UGC Review Committee (1985: 197) states that the social worker has to act as the enabler, guide, teacher, advocate, broker, negotiator and if required, lead the confrontation on behalf of the people. Social activism is considered one of the roles in the spectrum of roles that a social worker can play. What is required is an understanding of the range of strategies and roles which may be applied and that the worker develops a judgement about the action/practice which may be best suited for that particular situation. The choice of strategy in a particular situation depends upon several factors such as the perception of the situation by the people who are affected, including perception of their own strength, organisation goals, worker's skills, and value framework (TISS, 1997: 44). Therefore, it needs to be accepted that the scope of practice is ultimately determined by the social and political convictions of individual social workers, which do not come from training alone.

The TISS Conference Report (1997) asserts that it is not always necessary to use confrontational strategies as a response to all situations of injustice. People-centred approaches can be used also through methods of social casework and social group work. The training should expose students to a wide array of skills and knowledge which inculcate a 'development perspective and an integrated practice mode towards people-centred development. At the TISS Conference, it was suggested that professional social workers need to move away from the two phase cycle of giving and receiving help to a three phase cycle, where the receivers are also givers in a mutual helping and caring process.

Traditionally, social work approach of intervention is comprehensively divided into methods of work with individuals, groups and communities as social work orientation has been traditionally geared towards system maintenance. In a developmental approach, practice should not be reduced to these conventional methods. A problem orientation rather than a method orientation is required. The core perspective within which the entire social work curriculum is taught is of prime importance. The analytical framework taught to students is the key determinant, as it is within this political framework that the

techniques and methods are practised. This would necessitate a holistic and integrated perspective to problem-solving (TISS, 1997).

### ***Multidisciplinary Orientation***

Social action can never be an exclusive domain of social work, but social work professionals must make greater attempts to relate themselves to the larger democratic struggles and movements in the country. Though social workers may not always initiate campaigns, they can and need to participate more actively and establish linkages of support and solidarity with campaigns and networks related to areas of concern. They also need to learn from the strategies used by the various movements and initiatives. For example, public interest litigations, campaign approach in the literacy campaigns, feminist processes linking personal situations with political contexts and so on.

Datar (1996) observes that the scientific revolution has promoted fragmentation of knowledge through disciplinary boundaries. This kind of reductionist methodology prevented the academicians and the practitioners, with social work background and others alike, from the rich processes of cross-fertilisation of ideas and also learning from praxis, that is, the process of practice-reflection-theorisation-practice. We need to cross the boundaries created by disciplines and take the multidisciplinary approach so that the reality can be contextualised and be dealt with holistically.

Multidisciplinary practice was always attempted by social workers in settings/agencies where social work was not the primary service, for example, work with teachers in schools and with doctors in hospitals. Social work education has always drawn from other professions and disciplines to provide students with a holistic perspective of society and relevant interventions. According to Adiseshiah (1981: 309):

It was social work which pioneered the multi-disciplinary and interdisciplinary path for the social sciences. It was the social work theorist who was the first to put into a theoretical frame realisation that social service calls for the skill of the biologist, the medical engineer, the social psychologist as well as the sociologist and statistician. Thus the typical faculty of a department or school of social work has come to represent an amalgam of the various social science disciplines and it is this multidisciplinary analysis, team work and action that has come to distinguish this branch of knowledge.

Within the gambit of people-centred development, multidisciplinary approach takes on newer dimensions with several more actors in the field of social change. For example, on issues related to housing and environment, partnerships and alliances are forged between architects, engineers, geologists, lawyers, social workers and others. Linkages with the bureaucracy and state machinery are established to further the cause of development. In a way, social action is deprofessionalised as monopoly of technology is neither realistic nor desirable in these endeavours.

Some institutions of social work education offer pure social science courses in isolation, and without its application to the present reality, while some institutions offer very limited courses in social sciences. Social work curriculum needs to give a strong multidisciplinary foundation of social systems analysis to understand development, social stratification, inequality and marginalisation by ethnicity, gender, age, abilities and so on. It is important for social work students to understand that groups that have control over resources also have control over ideologies that influence resource allocation. These groups include the systems of family, religion, organisations, the state and the market. In this context, students need to develop a critical understanding of how marginalisation gets aggravated in the dominant paradigm of development which emphasises profit and power rather than people and their needs. The resultant poverty and deprivation of basic needs of survival and health, livelihood, housing, education and equal access to environmental resources need to be elaborated. Problems at micro levels need to be understood in the context of the macro level issues. To provide such a foundation, the social work curriculum needs to ensure integration of knowledge developed in the growing fields of gender studies, environmental studies development studies and so on.

The TISS Conference (TISS, 1997) recommended that special inputs were required to sensitise students to the varied sociocultural aspects of the Indian ethos, for example, festivals, folklore, religious rituals in their historical and contemporary perspective. The curriculum needs to draw from the Indian culture, such as, music, art and dance. The humanities also describe and analyse the social reality in a different way (Wallerstein, 1997).

### ***Integrating Practice and Research***

Towards the development of praxis, practice and research also need to be integrated. Research has the potential to contribute to the process

of social action and social change and, therefore needs to play an important role in critical policy intervention for the marginalised groups (TISS, 1997). Social work research is defined by Ramachandran and Naik (1987: 387) as 'the use of scientific method in the search of knowledge, including knowledge of alternate practice and intervention techniques, which would be of direct use to the social work profession and thus enhance the practice of social work methods'.

Austin (1979) observed that the legitimisation of the social work profession has depended on social utility rather than on its scientific base; that the domain of social work has, in fact, continued to expand throughout the twentieth century without a unified scientific base. He concluded that social work is a profession based on organised practitioner wisdom and is not and probably will not be a truly service-based profession in the foreseeable future. Austin, therefore, inferred that the major function of research in social work is not theory building or theory testing in the scientific model, that the major contribution of research to practice is to be made through the systematic study of practice.

Powers, Meenaghan and Toomey (1985) highlighted the need for a practitioner to make informed decisions. These decisions and subsequent practice behaviours are precisely the types of things that professionals should justify. They stressed that the ultimate test of effective knowledge building in any profession is the degree to which the body of knowledge is applicable in practice. To use action only as a demonstration of theory is a limited understanding of the linkage. As of now, how practice contributes to the knowledge building process is not studied adequately.

Since the education of social work research has traditionally been modelled on pure social research, students of the professional course are trained for research which can tell one the state of things as they are, than research that aims at bettering them. On the other hand, the methods/practice courses are not empirically derived. Social work students, therefore, fail to see the direct link of research to practice. As a result of such a training, most of the social workers think that they have nothing to do with research. Such a training makes social workers poor researchers and poor users of research in the practice situation (M. Desai, 1992). This may explain why practitioners generally do not document their own work and analyse it. As a result, much of the contributions of social work practitioners to people-centred development remains irretrievable for the purpose of replication or social work

education. Similarly, social work educators also do not document their teaching methods, or teaching aids, or analyse students' field work records for dissemination and replication.

A.S. Desai (1992) recommended that the goal of the research curriculum for social work students should be to train them for a humane and holistic approach, first to utilise research findings for practice; second to document and assess accountability of their interventions; and third to generate interventional innovations.

Within the social work profession, there has always existed a long drawn out tension between academicians and field practitioners. Roberts (1990) writes about the existence of two 'cultures' of social work: the 'thinkers' or the theoretical sub-culture, and the 'doers' or the practice sub-culture. The practitioners feel that the 'thinkers' live in an ivory tower with no base in the field; while the 'thinkers' feel that the strategies used by practitioners are often irrelevant and out-dated.

At the TISS Conference (1997), the need for an open dialogue and transparency between practitioners and researchers, was emphasised, such that their roles are not narrowly defined. It was recognised that the differences in language and terminology used by researchers and practitioners need to be managed constructively. These tensions can be minimised by regular and frequent interactions with mutual respect for each other's role in building up the social work profession. Interactions may be through workshops, seminars and training programmes collaborative research projects and publications and so on. There is also a need to organise refresher courses for both educators and practitioners, to update their knowledge and practice skills.

### *Humanising Social Work Research*

According to Haworth (1984), social work requires a knowledge base that comes from experiencing and understanding the single reality of 'knowledge, values and action' that is characteristic of the human situation. He reported on a London-based group called the New Paradigm Research Group which has been vigorously investigating research methods that break away entirely with positivist heritage. The unilateral hypothesis testing is rejected as dehumanising and an attempt is made to create techniques for involving research subjects as co-researchers, whose interests, values and desires are central to all stages of the investigation, resulting in participatory research. Their efforts are towards responsible social work practice and aspirations are

for 'new rigour of softness' to make research more human and practice more visible within that same process. In fact, Haworth saw the practitioner in the ideal position to be a researcher for knowledge as the utility and meaning of the behaviours must be gained from involvement in the ongoing lives of human beings. Demystification of research and the adoption of new alternative methodologies were considered necessary for empowering the marginalised also (TISS, 1997).

The Declaration of Ethics for Professional Social Workers of TISSWEF (1997) emphasises the need to select the topic for research considering its possible consequences for human beings within the value framework of the profession and towards the goals of people-centred development. The informants of research should be considered as co-partners in understanding the phenomenon. Therefore, the research objectives should be shared with them and their informed and voluntary consent should be obtained. Their knowledge and attitude about their life situation should be respected, and the findings should be shared/interpreted with them. The study should not cause them inadvertent physical or mental discomfort, distress or harm. The confidentiality of the information shared by them should be protected and the findings should be used for their benefit, by revising policies and programmes concerning them. Moreover, information services should be provided to them, as and when necessary, during the process of data collection.

## **Conclusions**

The paper has examined the challenges that social work profession faces with references to people-centred development. The ambivalent approach of the social work profession towards developmental issues may well have its roots in the Indian legacy of Western professional social work, which has not been development oriented. The urban middle class paradigm with which the profession began, has been functional in terms of education infrastructure, job market and so on. The fallout is that it has only marginally responded to the needs of the Indian reality.

Professionalisation has brought elitism in social work which has led to a hierarchical relationship with people. Elitism in social work with reference to the urban middle class background of the students and the educators and the pulls of the funding organisations have to be dealt with in a planned way rather than denying it or wishing it away. The levels of education and specialisations need to be revamped. A

profession's role of partners with people is full of challenges which comprise of dealing with several contradictions. An indigenised practice is needed for relevance but in the context of globalisation. Social action has to be promoted while valuing the diversity of approaches to intervention. Activism has to be promoted even in the academic field. It implies acceptance of politicisation in the profession. While acknowledging social work profession's unique contribution with reference to intervention with people's problems, the profession has to ally itself with other disciplines that are contributing to people-centred development in order for development to be people-centred rather than discipline-centred. A people-centred approach has to be deprofessionalised. Social change was never an exclusive domain of social work, but today all professionals need to join hands to achieve the goals of people-centred development. The social work profession has to bring a new rigour for relevance and credibility in this scenario. This also means integrating practice and research instead of making them independent careers. While doing that, research has to be made more humanised. The vocabulary of the profession which has words such as 'client system' for the people and 'catalyst' to denote the role of the social worker also needs a relook. These and other related issues need serious consideration at all levels.

There is an urgent need for social work professionals, new and old, to engage in a review process and retrain themselves to the developmental perspective of intervention and the strategies required, in order to make practice more meaningful to meet the needs of the changing social realities. The priorities need to be rearranged, so that the primary problems affecting the masses receive greater focus than the other issues. These challenges will also have to be dealt with by institutions for social work education, the professional associations in social work, the proposed National Council of Social Work, the next UGC Review Committee of social work education, the next Encyclopaedia of Social Work and other structures and processes that influence the profession.

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Center for Social Development. 30 April 2020. The CDA in SEED OK was rigorously tested and has positive financial and nonfinancial impacts, especially for the most disadvantaged families, even during and after the financial crisis of the Great Recession. Let's not allow our "social distancing" to counteract the importance of our profession's commitment to social integration, social science, and social justice as we pursue many of the fault lines in our society that this virus is cracking open. Follow this link for more information: <https://grandchallengesforsocialwork.org/covid-19-resources/>. Professional social workers have been educated since 1991, when social work was introduced in Russia as a profession and educational program. National Standard exists to regulate the content of education. Today social work education exists in different formats: 5 years "speciality" programme which is traditional for Russian educational system; 4 years Bachelor programme at some universities; 2 years Master programme at 3 universities in Russia; 1 year International Master programme at private school: Moscow school of social and economic sciences. According to our ethnographic observations in two Centers for Social Services in Saratov, there are several areas of agency jargon. The first area relates to definitions of the clients. The profession of social work seeks to improve the quality of life for individuals and to effect system-wide change through the pursuit of social justice. Just like any helping profession, such as nursing and teaching, social work seeks to help people overcome some of life's most difficult challenges. What separates social work from other helping professions is its focus on the person-in-environment model and its emphasis on social justice. Social workers not only consider individuals' internal struggles, as a counselor might, they also work with people to examine their relationships, family s