

Social Work in India: Stuck in Childhood or Ready for Change?

Dr. Dipanjan Bhattacharjee

Assistant Professor (Senior Grade) & Chairperson (Post Graduate Diploma in Counselling Psychology Programme), Department of Social Work, School of Social and Behavioural Sciences, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Coimbatore – 642109. Tamil Nadu.

ABSTRACT

The social work profession in India, though nearly a century old, continues to face developmental, structural, and identity-related challenges. Despite significant contributions to social welfare, social workers struggle for recognition due to societal misconceptions, cultural barriers, and their frequent relegation to subordinate roles. Persistent issues such as caste hierarchies, gender norms, and political interference often impede their ability to implement sensitive interventions effectively. The discipline's overdependence on Western theories has also hindered the evolution of indigenous frameworks. A lack of regulatory mechanisms, non-uniform curricula, and disparities in training quality weaken professional credibility. Additionally, limited government integration of trained social workers, unstable NGO funding, inadequate compensation, emotional burnout, and insufficient mental health support further undermine the sustainability of the profession. Strengthening regulatory bodies, enhancing educational standards, improving workplace conditions, and encouraging research and evidence-based practice are crucial for advancing professional social work in India.

Key words: India, Social Work, Regulatory Authority, Social Work Training

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INTRODUCTION

Although the discipline of social work is nearly a century old, it has not fully developed into what it could have been. Despite many years, its status in India remains unstable. The profession formally began its journey in India in 1936 with the establishment of the first school of social work, the Sir Dorabji Tata Graduate School of Social Work, later renamed the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS). Thereafter, several schools of social work have been established across the country. Each year, thousands of Social Work PGs graduate from those institutes. We can find the issues affecting the discipline of social work under the following headings:

Social and cultural challenges and barriers

The discourse surrounding the utility, roles, and contributions of professional social workers is abundant, yet the underlying narrative remains essentially unchanged. Social workers are often relegated to the status of ancillary or associate

Corresponding Author- Dr. Dipanjan Bhattacharjee, Assistant Professor (Senior Grade) & Chairperson (Post Graduate Diploma in Counselling Psychology Programme), Department of Social Work, School of Social and Behavioural Sciences, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Coimbatore – 642109. Tamil Nadu.

Email id - dipanpsw@gmail.com

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professionals across various domains, as if they are perpetually burdened by a stigma that prevents them from being recognised as independent and mainstream human service professionals, akin to fields such as medicine, psychology, and nursing.

In the context of India, social workers grapple with a myriad of challenges that hinder their professional recognition and respect. These challenges stem not only from intrinsic academic issues—such as the need for robust training programs and standardised curricula—but also from broader societal factors that undermine the profession's credibility. As we reflect on the journey of social work in India, it becomes evident that a concerted effort is necessary to elevate the status of social workers and to ensure they receive the acknowledgment and treatment befitting their vital role in society. The social work profession in India has played and continues to play a vital role in addressing poverty, inequality, discrimination, and social injustice in the country – and it is undoubtedly true that social work has made significant positive changes in recent and distant pasts. Despite its importance, the profession continues to face several systemic and structural challenges that limit its effectiveness and societal impact. These problems stem from historical perceptions, weak institutional support, and the complex socio-economic realities of the country.

India's intricate socio-cultural landscape presents significant challenges for effective social work practice. The persistent issues surrounding caste dynamics, rigid gender norms, and deeply ingrained religious beliefs often cultivate resistance among communities, particularly when social workers attempt to implement sensitive interventions. This resistance can manifest as suspicion or reluctance to engage, making it crucial for practitioners to navigate these complexities with cultural sensitivity and awareness (Sharma, 2008).

Moreover, political interference frequently undermines community participation, further complicating the social workers' roles and diminishing their autonomy. This interference may take the form of bureaucratic hurdles or an insistence on compliance with governmental policies that do not align with community needs, thereby hindering the potential for impactful social change (Banerjee, 2012).

Failure to associate social work with Indianess and indigenous constructs

From day one, the discipline is plagued by a narrative that presents it as an imposition of Westernised concepts and ideas with minimal or no connection to Indian understandings of 'needs', 'problems', 'requirements', or 'social-cultural' and 'philosophical standpoints'. It has been vilified by several quarters as an intrusion in the Indian system. History suggests the partial truthfulness of those claims – indeed, Indian social work education and training has always been the

avid and dedicated follower of the West, and every issue associated with people and society is examined and viewed through the prism of Western thought. From this angle, Indian social work failed to develop and propagate its own indigenous theoretical perspectives and narratives for understanding people, their issues and problems as a practice-based discipline.

Marked disparity in training, lack of uniformity in the academic curriculum and absence of regulatory authority

Even within the discipline, there is a stark lack of parity among professionals in terms of notions, understandings, values, and, more strikingly, basic skills and abilities. Some schools produce exceptionally well-trained and skilled social workers, whereas others do not. One of the most fundamental issues is the absence of a regulated professional identity. Unlike medicine, nursing, or law, social work in India lacks legal recognition and a statutory licensing body. The absence of a National Council for Social Work results in unregulated practice, allowing anyone to claim the title of "social worker," which dilutes professional standards (Desai, 2006). The public often conflates social work with charity, thereby diminishing its perceived value as a scientific and professional discipline (Bhatt & Kulkarni, 2020). According to the National Association of Professional Social Workers in India (NAPSWI), the absence of a statutory regulatory body limits uniformity in training and ethical codes (NAPSWI, 2014). However, the establishment of the National Commission for Allied and Healthcare Professions (NCAHP) is a silver lining for the discipline of social work, as this statutory body includes social work as a professional discipline. Nevertheless, this kind of effort should have been done much earlier – a democratic country with 1.4 billion people cannot afford to be reticent about the force that can promote the concept of welfare and democratic ethos through its beliefs and professional service scope.

Inadequate Government Regulation and Policy Support

A significant barrier to the professionalisation of social work in India lies in the insufficient integration of trained social workers within key positions across government schemes. Despite the critical role that social workers can play in ensuring efficient and effective service delivery, many government programmes continue to overlook the necessity of appointing individuals with formal training in the discipline. This omission not only undermines the quality and impact of these schemes but also diminishes the visibility and recognition of social work as a specialised field within the public sector (Kumar, 2019).

Furthermore, social workers in India often face challenging working conditions, especially in the non-governmental organisation (NGO) sector. Empirical studies have highlighted that these professionals routinely work long hours and receive inadequate salaries that fail to reflect the complex and demanding nature of their responsibilities (Gautam, 2018). The prevalence of contractual employment arrangements, coupled with donor-driven funding models, adds another layer of insecurity. This environment results in minimal job security for social workers, making it difficult for them to establish stable, long-term careers in the field (Thomas, 2017).

Overall, the lack of regulatory requirements for professional qualifications in government schemes, together with the precarious and under-compensated conditions in NGOs, continues to impede the growth and development of social work as a respected and sustainable profession in India.

Insufficient Field Training and Educational Gaps

Research conducted by the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) underscores significant shortcomings in curriculum design and field practicum supervision across numerous universities in India (TISS, 2016). These gaps result in uneven skill development among social work students. Many institutions struggle with a shortage of trained faculty members, and the absence of robust partnerships with high-quality field agencies further impedes the development of practical competencies among future social workers (Ranjan, 2019).

NGO-Centric Job Market and Funding Instability

The challenge is further complicated by a pervasive reliance on international donor funding, which contributes to high staff turnover and disrupts the continuity of project implementation (Sen, 2010). This cycle of dependency not only destabilises organisational structures but also significantly hampers the sustainability of community development initiatives. A report from the World Bank highlights that the persistent uncertainty surrounding funding sources severely compromises long-term capacity-building efforts, jeopardising the effectiveness of community development initiatives and leaving vulnerable populations at risk (World Bank, 2015). This reliance on external financial support creates an unstable environment that undermines the ability to foster lasting positive change within communities.

Limited Use of Research and Evidence-Based Practice

Evidence-based practice in India is still in its infancy, facing significant challenges that hinder its development. A pressing shortage of financial resources for research initiatives, coupled with inefficient and inconsistent monitoring systems, severely restricts the potential for innovative social work programs (Joseph & Varghese, 2014). As a result, numerous organisations tend to rely on traditional, time-worn methods rather than embracing systematic assessments and robust evaluation mechanisms that could enhance their effectiveness (UNDP, 2019).

Harsh Workplace, Limited Recognition, Emotional Burnout and Lack of Mental Health Support

Social workers in India navigate a complex landscape filled with pressing issues such as trauma, crisis intervention, poverty, and violence. The emotional toll of these challenges is substantial, as research highlights alarmingly high levels of burnout and compassion fatigue among practitioners. This distress is often exacerbated by the absence of adequate institutional support or access to professional counselling services (Ray & Pranee, 2011). Ultimately, very few organisations offer opportunities for professional development or provide essential stress-management resources, leaving social workers vulnerable and overextended in their vital roles.

Lack of Recognition and Marginalisation of Social Workers

In addition to the challenging workplace conditions social workers face, a significant concern is the persistent lack of recognition for the profession. Policymaking and implementing authorities often adopt a diminutive stance towards social workers and their roles (Ray & Pranee, 2011). This attitude is reflected in the broader societal narrative, where the term 'Social Worker' itself can evoke ignorance or a sense of demeaning for many people. Social workers are frequently perceived as lower-order professionals with limited roles and responsibilities. There is a prevailing notion that they are not equipped to contribute meaningfully to critical areas such as therapeutics, decision-making, and administration. Such misconceptions inadvertently position social workers as subservient or nearly declassed, relegated to functioning as satellites or associates of other disciplines, including medical doctors, nurses, clinical psychologists, and engineers. This marginalised status undermines the potential and value that trained social workers bring to multidisciplinary teams and further restricts their professional growth and visibility within the wider public sector (Dash et al., 2020).

Conclusion

Despite its importance, the social work profession in India continues to face issues with identity, inadequate regulation, poor working conditions, educational gaps, and socio-cultural barriers. Strengthening policy support, establishing a National Social Work Council, elevating educational standards, improving work environments, and investing in research are crucial steps for empowering the profession. A more robust social work framework will help India better address its socio-economic challenges and foster a more inclusive and equitable society.

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