Social Work in India: A 'Bright' Future?

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The liberalisation era is accompanied with criticisms of Indian achievements and by extension the state. Surmounting the complexities of caste, religion, language and history, an industrial base and a democratic polity have evolved. Enormous problems remain and the market is seen as the panacea. Would these problems find a place in the new order when the existence of the nation-state is a question mark? Under conditions of deprivation and inequality, would weakening the ability of the state to mobilise resources and prioritise investment further the manifest goals of social work? Growth of the market economy will apportion the cast offs to the care of the social worker who, intentions notwithstanding, can play only a limited role in alleviating human misery arising out of structural forces.

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INTRODUCTION

The root of social evil was poverty and unemployment. This was not to be bribed away by charity and donations, which would only reward and further stimulate evil action. The correct way was to supply seed and food to those who lived by agriculture and cattle-breeding. Those who lived by trade should be furnished with the necessary capital. Servants of the state should be paid properly and regularly so that they would not then find ways to squeeze the janapadas. New wealth would thus be generated, the janapadas liberated from robbers and cheats. A citizen could bring up his children in comfort and happiness, free from want and fear, in such a productive and contented environment. The best way of spending surplus accumulation, whether in the treasury or from voluntary private donations, would be in public works such as digging wells and water ponds and planting groves along the trade routes.

Buddha or some early anonymous early disciple propounding duties of the monarch... Circa 5th Century BC.

Kosambi not only found this a, 'snarlingly modern view of political economy' but also, 'an intellectual achievement of the highest
order' since it was said, 'at a time of Vedic yajna to a society that had just begun to conquer the primeval jungle'. However, anachronistic the author and his thoughts may appear to sections of present-day Indian opinion, it addresses the concerns of large sections of our populace even today by giving, 'man control over himself (1982: 113). In these days of religious obfuscation it is significant to remember that much of the religious content dealt with secular issues and which probably was its intrinsic appeal to people.

INDIAN REPUBLIC'S SUCCESS AND FAILURES

The problem of poverty, illiteracy, child mortality, malnutrition, joblessness and homelessness is glaring. Pervasive corruption and inefficiency in the institutional structures apart, even safe drinking water and roads are not available. Creating and funding organisational structures to manage prestigious Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) and Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) should have been based on effective primary health centres, schools and the removal of gross poverty. But this could not happen because the poor were too divided to force the state to make the necessary investments.

The sections who gained the most from the 'Nehruvian' public sector are in the forefront today wanting less of the state and more of the market — they choose not to remember the public investments made in IITs, IIMs, medical colleges and universities. Critics ignore the compulsions of governance in India where complex factors of caste, federalism, illiteracy, feudalism, poverty, social backwardness and poverty operate in unique permutations and combinations. The reference point (unstated) is the United States America and Europe, whose present affluence is based on the capital accumulated over one to two centuries of industrial and social development, which the Indian critics underplay. The conditions in the early phase of industrialisation in these countries may not have been substantively better than what it is in India today.

In the last 50 years, the Indian Republic has achieved a measure of success in some of its endeavours. Since 1950, an independent economy has developed based, 'on her own resources' and, 'basic decisions regarding the nation are taken by Indians and the Indian state in perceived Indian interest' (Chandra, 2000). A flaw by a democratic polity could evolve in spite of the stresses of a heterogeneous population living amidst serious problems.
LIBERALISATION, INFRASTRUCTURE AND POVERTY

Since 1991, the year the Congress party launched the liberalisation era, there has been a powerful lobby led by the chambers of commerce, the corporate media and the mainstream political parties wanting the state to withdraw from deciding on investment priorities and abolish the regulatory framework established so far. Internal liberalisation is to be accompanied by applying the prescriptions of the Bretton Woods Twin. Foreign Direct Investments have been sought to build up the country's infrastructure.

The results have belied the hope. The myth of the efficiency of multinational companies was revealed when the Dabhol Power Corporation (DPC) started producing power at rates higher than the power produced by the Maharashtra State Electricity Board (MSEB). The National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC) produces power, which is even cheaper than that of MSEB. As a multiplier effect, MSEB has to compulsorily buy DPC power and shut down its plants producing cheaper power. The financial viability of the board is at stake, and in the long run subsidised power may not be available for the farmer, thereby affecting capital formation in the agricultural sector.

The chimera of Foreign Direct Investment building up the infrastructure in the country remains only that — most of it has gone to the consumer market segment. In spite of liberalisation, fast-track approaches, and counter guarantees, more than three-fourths of the power generated in the country in the last few years has been by the public sector utilities and not private companies. The low level of development precludes the rate of profit, which can attract foreign investment in infrastructure building. For higher profits, prices have to be increased. The other hope of foreign investment reducing poverty and unemployment has also been belied. As an Editorial in The Times of India (2000) says:

One of the paradoxes of the reform era is that even though economic liberalisation has led to a broad upswing in growth rates, no significant dent has been made in the country's poverty profile. In 1991, the year Manmohan Singh — who was finance minister at the time — launched the first set of reform policies, 36.3 per cent of the population was considered poor. By 1997, the latest year for which complete National Sample Survey data is available, the rate had fallen only by two per cent to 34.4 per cent. This despite the economy having grown by more than five per cent per annum
during the period. Even more curious is the fact that the poverty rate fell steadily during the 1970s and 1980s — when the socialistic era of controls, permits and licenses was in full swing the country's economy grew only at what was derisively known as the 'Hindu' rate of growth. If the results of the 'thin' survey conducted by the NSS in 1998 are taken into account, the contrast between the reform and the pre-reform period periods becomes even starker still. The 1998 survey — drawn from a smaller sample than earlier surveys — reveals that the number of those below the poverty line might actually have increased in the last few years and could be close to 40 per cent.

The most vulnerable group is the landless labourers whose meagre wages gets affected through changes in inflation and food prices. The Editorial (The Times of India, 2000) while correctly identifying the need for more investment on the poor in health, education, housing, transportation and sanitation ignores land reforms. Ravillon (2000) mentions that,

It is the rural sector that has lagged in poverty reduction in the 1990s. Indeed, Datt's (1999) estimates suggest that the trend reduction in rural poverty going back to the 1970s virtually ceased after about 1991; the momentum in urban poverty reduction has been maintained, however. The broad sectoral composition of India's post-reform growth has not been particularly pro-poor.

Higher agricultural productivity is important in removing rural poverty since non-farm growth cannot benefit the rural poor unless rural development and human resource development accompany it. Non-farm economic growth was less effective in reducing poverty in states with poor initial conditions in terms of rural development and human resources. Health, nutrition and literacy are important variables in the prospects for pro-poor growth. It leads to higher labour productivity and enhances the capacity to participate in the opportunities created by economic growth (Ravillon, 2000).

Since Independence, the peasantry was protected against the vagaries of the world market and price fluctuations via the controls put in place with regard to trade in agricultural products, the institution of state support and procurement prices for a number of key crops. As the century drew to a close the protection is being withdrawn through the instrumentality of the World Trade Organisation (Patnaik, 2000).
LIBERALISATION AND REGIONAL UNDERDEVELOPMENT

Ahluwalia, member of the Planning Commission has pointed out that in the future India may be divided between states, which are growing fast, and states, which are stagnant, such as, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh (UP). The per captia state income grew by only 1 per cent in Bihar in the nineties, as against 7.6 per cent in Gujarat — a ratio of 7 times. There are internal differentiation within the states — Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh did much better than UP and Bihar. He says that,

The future belongs to states, which can attract investment in the newer industries. Unfortunately, the poorer states are less equipped to do this, precisely because their literacy rates are poor, infrastructure is inadequate and overall governance is poor. Obviously, with liberalisation, the government cannot direct future corporate investment to particular states. Private sector business will go where they get an attractive environment...this means that the poorer states can expect little in the form of help in the post-license raj regime.

This disparity is already visible in the, 'large movements of people from Bihar/Orissa/UP to the metropolitan centres' (cited in Venkitaramanan). Urban problems and nativistic movements apart, this raises the larger question of who is to fund and organise the programmes for human resource development in these states.

Insurgency so far has been in the periphery, the United Liberation Front of Assam being an exception with a social base in the Indian heartland. In the coming decades, mainstream India could be lured by fundamentalist and chauvinist forces, necessitating a bout of 'pacification' measures from the sundry law and order forces. Sant Bhindranwale and the passions he unleashed with complicity from various quarters have barely been contained. These problems have to be viewed in a context, the economic context of low per capita income and a modest gross domestic product and the political context of a fractured polity where the National Democratic Alliance with the Bharatiya Janata Party at its core is governing with a strength of 182 as against a total of 540 members of the Lok Sabha.

PROFESSIONAL SOCIAL WORK, THE NGO SECTOR AND ALTERNATIVES

In this debate, professional social work (henceforth PSW) is not a factor but it furnishes the framework for the NGO sector, which with support from international agencies, contributes to the ideological
baggage for reducing state intervention. Rao based on Kothari (1989) says that, 'after four decades, we are having second thoughts', about the efficacy of the state, 'as a neutral arbiter for the liberation and enfranchisement of the poor, deprived and other marginalised minority groups' (cited from Vohra, 1990). Talking in a similar vein, Prasad (2000: Inner Flap) attributes the growing importance of NGOs to the failures of the Indian State. The last decades of the twentieth century may justly be described as the decade of the NGO. For the profession, this sector provides the major practise domain apart from its intervention at various governmental levels and to that extent its ties with the NGO world is deep and wide.

This development is not confined to India. It is a worldwide phenomenon, although it has become particularly conspicuous in the less developed countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America. In some of these countries, the NGO sector is seen as the main driving force in economic development and social change. The NGOs are now active in practically every field: literacy, education, health, sanitation, child-care, nutrition, habitation, and so on (Beteille, 2000). In the by-gone days when this sector had its roots in the Gandhian, religious and humanist tradition and a degree of simplicity, it was commonly referred to as the voluntary sector which was its defining element. But with professionalisation the context changed and the abbreviation NGO is now a part of the terminology. Sen (1986) says that the only way of defining this sector is by stating what it is not — categorically it is not the public sector and to a lesser extent not the private sector.

To infer a larger-than-life role for the 'third sector' owing to the pioneering work done by some NGOs is to underestimate the arduous process of capital accumulation and the long-term commitment needed to get rid of illiteracy, superstition, casteism, enhance the status of women, poverty and unemployment. Exceptions apart, many NGOs are an outcome of political patronage, while an equal number are mired in corruption — CAPART has blacklisted 248 NGOs of which 61 cases have been referred to the CBI for investigation (Gandhi, 2000). The Report of the Estimates Committee of the Maharashtra Legislature, in the context of the NGOs in anti-AIDS campaign, found during their field visits that many of the NGOs existed only on paper while in other cases, 'it was unable to understand what type of work was done by many of them' (Chaware, 2000).

Effective NGOs are an outcome of committed individuals but with the passing away of that person the momentum dies down. An NGO,
even a committed one can work only in a limited geographic area —
its strength, in fact, is its small size. With success, ageing of its
founder, increase in funding and growth in size, all the infirmities of
the much-maligned bureaucracy also creeps in. The NGO sector can
be a small supplement to state efforts, given the present level of devel-
opment of the country. In certain areas there can be partnership, but
the state cannot abdicate its responsibility (Desai, 2000: 327). The
role played by the state in Ireland, 'has been a critical factor in reduc-
ing unemployment levels' (O'Brien, 2000: 404). A political move-
ment for decentralisation of power and a budget catering less to the
interest of affluent may yield better results than the depoliticised de-
velopment of the NGO sector, which keeps people away from the
structures of decision-making.

Without weakening the ability of the state to decide the socioeco-
nomic priorities of the nation, an alternative programme can be thought
of. Delegating financial and other powers to the respective states and
the Panchayati structure; regular elections; strengthening of the public
distribution system; a network of minor irrigation schemes; and re-
form; mass literacy through popular movements at the community
level and creation of employment attempts at the inclusion of large
sections of the people in the developmental process by creating op-
portunities for work and enhancing production leading to higher in-
come. These measures *ipso facto* would constitute the pre-conditions
leading to subsequent equitable changes. The plethora of schemes an-
nounced at various points of time yield handouts on a minor scale, but
it does serve the larger and latent purpose of keeping up the pretence
of ongoing 'development'. At a deeper level, it speaks for the sover-
eign right of all citizens to take decisions in accordance with their
self-interest.

The new millennium could be of chronological consequence but of
greater significance is the idea that state intervention has to be reduced
to be complemented by the private and the NGO sector in as many
spheres of life as possible. The idea is not new but what is new is the
manner in which the mass media mainstream political parties and the
chambers of commerce present it in a doomsday manner. Excepting the
leftist political parties, none of the mainstream political parties are putt-
ing forward an alternative (Goyal, 1999). No alternatives or thought
need to be given to the different levels of development of respective na-
tion. The impact of privatisation, liberalisation and globalisation in un-
derdeveloped countries with high rates of unemployment and poverty
(a euphemism for destitution) could exacerbate the existing problems. Many writers have commented on the adverse effects of global capitalism. Mohan has linked the, 'rise of social inequality, moral meltdown, and cultural terrorism' to global capitalism. Central to these problems is the question of social justice, which is a binding force of civil society (Millar, 1999: viii). Sharma (1999:6) as highlighted the power dimensions of global capitalism. Globalisation of production and marketing is going to adversely affect the, 'goals of equality, equity, democracy and liberalism'. Probably, in the coming decades, a networking of the upwardly mobile cutting the boundaries of the nation-state may evolve.

**SOCIETAL CHANGES AND TRENDS IN PROFESSIONAL SOCIAL WORK**

What changes would be wrought on Indian society? In the short run the benefits may accrue to the propertied and educated sections, while the destitute may see further erosion in their standard of life. Could violence increase differentiation along caste, religious and gender lines? One impact of these changes on professional social work would be the creation of new areas of work. Deprivation and consumerism may increase violence with legalistic notions of human rights becoming a major area of study in the social work curriculum with further sub-areas of violence against wives, violence related to children, caste violence, and so on. To cite a second example, economic and infrastructural development will lead to displacement — rehabilitation of project affected people could become a major area of social work intervention.

The impact of the neo-liberal policies would depend upon one's position in the caste framework. Till 1990 the recruitment of Scheduled Castes (SCs) to government services, public sector undertakings and public sector banks was in proportion to their share in the population, but post 1990, 'the employment of SCs has declined both in absolute numbers and in proportion' (Thorat, 1997). This trend is yet to be seen in public sector banks. Studies have indicated that informal channels are used in 60 per cent of the case for job recruitment. These channels, to a great extent, means the caste network, in which case, access to recruitment in the private sector gets restricted to the SCs. The same restrictions would operate in case the private sector plays a major role in providing access to land, capital, information and social service. To mitigate this discrimination the requirement may be of more state interventions (Thorat, 1997). The same conditions would apply for the large number of castes down the socioeconomic ladder.
The glimmering of a consumerist society is already visible, and the changing lifestyles should affect the family structure. With individualism as the leitmotif of the human personality, single parent families, divorcees, loneliness and adjustment problems of teenagers could become other areas of work for professional social workers. In the coming decades, ageing will become a specialised area of social work intervention. Variations notwithstanding, the Indian path of social change may not differ substantively from the western one of free enterprise, private property and individualism.

The situation in India is ironical. The faster the pace of changes the greater the need to address it—a situation where, by training and practice a professional social worker has legitimate place. The training equips the social worker with practice skills and a wider perspective as compared to a doctor, engineer, lawyer or a bureaucrat. Professional growth will depend upon the speed with which workers are trained to work effectively. A weakness of the training is that it does not prepare a person to work at the policy making level the conceptual knowledge and theoretical foundation is inadequate for the higher levels of administration where policies are enunciated. Many of the schools of social work do not even have a paper on social policy. At the other end the training of practice skills are poor or workers are over qualified for field level jobs where the wages are low. The requirements at both ends have to be addressed for the profession to grow. The internal logic of a market economy will create the space by dislocations, both at the family level and at the economic level. It is up to the profession to utilise the space.

But the larger question of whether the profession should view people, 'simply as objects of policy' or, 'as subjects in politics' remains (Shaw, 2000: 318). Langan (cited from Shaw, 2000:317-318) has referred to the new trend of co-option of radical themes through the instrumentality of the social work profession and that, 'too often, empowerment means reconciling people to being powerless'. Professionalisation has contributed to the profession's growth but at the cost of 'fragmenting people and communities and negating the need for holistic and integrated approaches for responding to needs at all levels'. It is, 'increasingly seen as part of the problem' (Cox, 2000: 159).

Klein, writing in the *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (1954) says that social work practice is, 'addressed to the socially detrimental by-products of capitalism as the here and now'. The founding fathers
of PSW in India who were criticised for imparting an American perspective to Indian social work could now be eulogised for having the foresight to anticipate global capitalism half a century back.

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