

**Social Policy, Justice and Democratic Rights**  
*A critical view of Social work in India today*

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**Abstract**

This article examines the development and models of social work in India, both the structural and individual based models, set within a discussion of the effects of social policy on the concerns and foci of social work in India. It has particular focus on issues of migrant workers, and of agrarian poverty, as examples of some of the key issues in Indian social work.

***Introduction***

This article examines the micro-level, individualistic based models of social work, and the more structurally based models, within discussion about the effects of social policy on the concerns and foci of social work in India.

What we have learned in the sixty four years since Indian independence is just how complex is the interaction between the economic growth and social development policies. Obviously, in a plural society with many traditional and emerging hierarchies, economic growth does not benefit everyone equally.

Unlike the EU, India does not have to contend with migrant workers coming into India from neighbouring countries and take away jobs from natives. In this paper, internal migrants' situation and social protection of Indian unorganized labour is discussed, as an example social work areas of concern.

'Professional' social work as a discipline in India has seen several paradigm shifts. The journey from Social Service Administration in 1936 to social work with specialization in Medical and Psychiatric Social Work (1948), Criminology and Correctional Administration (1950s), Family and Child Welfare (1950s), Urban and Rural Community Development (1960s), and Social Welfare Administration (1972), Rural Social Work (1993) mark the first phase of the shift in which scope and exclusive domains of social work expanded into specific fields of practice. This phase lasted till about the late 1990s.

By 'paradigm shift' one refers to professional discourse that includes the profession's written texts and/or the language spoken between specialists in the same profession (intra-professional discourse), between those in different professions (inter-professional discourse), and between professionals and clients. It also includes different forms of non-verbal communication. A 'paradigm' is a form of social practice operating according to conventions and generally accepted rules, even if those are not explicitly stated or formalized or consciously complied with. Professional social workers tended to adopt the professional jargon used in the institutions in which they studied or worked, and this jargon influenced the type of interaction they create with their clients. The more formal the discourse (e.g. written documents such as codes of ethics, mission statements, public professional reports), the more it tended to reflect the profession's declared ethos and ethical codes. The more informal the discourse (e.g. oral discourse, intra-

profession conversations, staff meetings, corridor talk), the less self-conscious it was till the early 1990s.

‘Professional’ social workers have been engaged in protection of populations at risk, extend material assistance, counselling of individuals and families, organization and development of communities and capacity building. Most social workers enjoyed and even today enjoy a relatively high degree of professional autonomy. Today, they are employed in a wide variety of social settings, mainly in the private, non-government, non-profit voluntary sectors but also in state services in small numbers.

A variety of voluntary organizations were receiving substantial amounts of government grants over the years for their welfare and development activities. Though political leaders were running a good proportion of the NGOs, gradually government grants started drying up in the late 1980s. Civil society responded by springing to life a variety of NGOs in the 1980s. The support of bi-lateral, multi-lateral and non-government foreign development aid became increasingly available to them. The NGOs were subject to little or no governmental oversight in these initial decades. The NGOs came to be donor-driven in the 1980s. In this process, ‘professional’ social work encountered systemic barriers such as mass poverty, unemployment, population explosion, illiteracy, malnutrition, ill health, low productivity, partisan state and other social and economic barriers.

In the context of sixty four years of enormous, worldwide economic and social change, India became vastly richer with an economy fuelled by ever rising aspirations. Society became much more individualistic. Aspirations had become more privatized. It became increasingly a society much more concerned with rights. The position of women had changed dramatically. Neo-liberalism was having an enduring influence on almost all the political parties and public policies. The nature of work changed with the collapse of traditional occupations. India was becoming demographically a much older society and was poised to reap the benefits of demographic dividend. Indian people, especially some of the progressive thinking people started worrying about the sustainability of contemporary way of life. Some of these problems were seen as having a global dimension.

During this period, disparities among the rich and the poor and regional disparities increased. It was during this period that the shift to a rights based approach can be said to have begun in India. Especially when a ‘rights based approach’ was adopted at the international forums, and when the idea percolated to ‘professional’ social work in India, that social work is political in nature and content was acknowledged first by radical sections among the ‘professional’ social workers. It was also acknowledged that the causes of the ‘problems’ faced by individuals belonging to the excluded sections were structural in nature.

During the early 1980s social workers along with activists and other professionals began to learn how to bring about *social policy*, a form of social consensus, public opinion about equality, social justice, and the rights of the excluded and the marginalized. Based on the social consensus, social workers learnt to get *social policies* pertaining to marginalized sections formally adopted by the state through democratic institutions. When a *social policy* is formally adopted by the state, it became *public policy*. Sometimes, social workers and activists have had to resort to judicial intervention and street politics to convert a *social policy* into *public policy*. In this way, a small section of radical social workers, especially social workers belonging to urban English speaking middle-class, began to engage in “structural social work”. Analysis of professional discourse during this period is important for understanding the profession, its practice and the links between everyday practice, larger issues of social structure, meanings and shifts in the perspectives.

Conventional remedial or residual social work began to be denigrated. The radical social workers started by trying to integrate unorganized informal labour with political economy of formal labour market through social action and advocacy.

‘Structural social work’ can be practiced both from within and outside government. Given the fact that only exceptionally committed civil servants can take the risk of bringing about structural change from within the government, social workers committed to equality and social justice goals have been able to function mainly from outside the government in order to question public policies and choice of development trajectory adopted by government. Between the mid 1980s and mid 2000s, the discourse among professional social work educators reflected and structured reality by defining the role and status of social work in society, its values and norms, and the normative relationships between professionals themselves, between them and the ruling classes and between them and recipients of their services.

Sixty years ago the nation state<sup>1</sup> ruled in the social policy arena. Few issues seemed beyond the reach or grasp of the newly independent nation state. Key social problems were national and nation-specific. National government could deal with them. That has changed in various ways. With the introduction of economic reforms, state driven development has changed and along with it, role of institutions such as the Planning Commission has changed. Instead of federal arrangement, the central government had monopolized the task of planning and raising resources for development projects and states were relegated to implementation of the projects. There are now more and more areas or sub-altern specific social problems which simply cannot be solved by the nation state acting alone in a one-size-fit-all manner. The *absolutist nature of the state* has come to be contested. Some consider this a feature of a “maturing” federal republic and social democracy while others point out that the nation-state is yet to find ways to develop consensus through dialogue and not through adversarial interaction between stake-holders.

Social work academicians and practitioners showed the impact of state directed development policies was having on marginalized sections starting from early 1980s. Once social workers started questioning the government, it was no longer possible for social workers to be part of an NGO sector which was engrossed in delivering welfare remedial residual services on behalf of the state. Radical social workers increasingly preferred to work independently without the trappings of formal organizations. Apart from other factors and forces, individual radical social workers have contributed to these developments in episodic ways.

Essentially then, the thrust of ‘structural’ social work involves understanding, changing the position of the oppressed and the oppressive structures at the societal level while simultaneously counteracting the negative effects of social change at the micro individual/family levels. Viewed this way, ‘structural’ social work is primarily concerned with conventional micro-level helping processes, while simultaneously being engaged with societal macro-level social change. From this, three distinct foci emerge namely, (i) core of direct service delivery to the marginalized disadvantaged vulnerable groups, (ii) planning, administration and implementation of welfare programmes and (iii) social action and social advocacy (Gore as cited in Nair: 1981:13). In this, several political realities stand out. ‘Structural’ social work moves from performing the conventional system maintenance function to the task of changing the social structures in favour of the vulnerable, the victimized, the excluded and the marginalized. (Desai as cited in Nair: 1981: 211-212).

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Generally, the term "state" refers to the formal and informal instruments of political power, while the terms ‘regime’ or ‘form of government’ refer more to the way in which such instruments are accessed and employed.

This paper now turns to the particular example of internal migrants' situation and social protection in India as an example of social work's areas of concern.

### ***International Migrant Labour***

Yes, we do have refugees, human trafficking and illegal entrants. These are confined to certain locations. And they perform jobs that natives do not want to perform. Bangladeshis live and work by and large in the seven north eastern border states; Nepali young girls are trafficked for domestic work and prostitution in Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata. Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in Tamil Nadu and Tibetans in northern border states such as Jammu and Kashmir, and Himachal Pradesh do find favour with local politicians but do not enter Indian labour market in any big way. Apart from these, India is not a very attractive destination for most of the educated skilled Bangladeshis, Sri Lankans, Nepalis, Pakistanis and Bhutanese; they prefer to migrate to developed western countries.

In Assam, politicians have been blowing hot and cold towards the Bangladeshi refugees. They want them as 'vote-banks' and as labourers. The politicians look the other way when it comes to extending welfare benefits or citizenship rights to them. Their unorganized labour is exploited by the upwardly mobile middle-classes, government contractors, agriculture land owners, and tea estate owners, small and medium industrial entrepreneurs. They are confined to live in certain locations in Assam. They do not have official 'refugee' status. They are in India illegally. Attempts to deport them periodically do not guarantee that they will not return. Violent clashes erupt between the native Assamese insurgent groups who oppose illegal Bangladeshi migrants and Bengalis. These clashes are considered as a law and order problem by local government and do not amount to a burden on the local labour market. Government has responded in favour of the native insurgent groups demanding deportation of illegal migrants. The problem of illegal Bangladeshi migrants is comparatively less troublesome compared to native insurgent groups demanding secession from Indian Republic. A small number of social workers works with the native insurgent groups demanding secession and with the state to bring some sort of reconciliation.

In Tamil Nadu, a southern state, Sri Lankan refugees have official 'refugee' status and are confined to locations assigned by the government. Between the national/state governments, they become pawns in the hands of the two regional (Dravidian) political parties. The refugees, because they are Tamilians, are able to negotiate with the national ruling coalition government and get their rights as per the United Nations convention with the help of the regional political parties. Indian social workers have been involved in the struggle to get justice from Sri Lankan government for the internally displaced Tamil refugees living in transit camps within the Sri Lanka whose human rights have been violated by the Sri Lankan government. But Indian social workers have had little role in the Sri Lankan Tamil refugee camps on Indian soil because the issue of Sri Lankan Tamil refugee has been highly politicized. These activists have been working through international organizations such as the Amnesty International and other international civil society organizations to pressurize Sri Lankan government to be tried for crimes committed by the armed forces against humanity. But in India, as government is in full control of the refugee camps, social workers have not been involved in any significant way. It is important to note that issues of 'illegal migrants' and 'refugees' hardly attract public attention except episodically. And social work in India started including peace and conflict studies in the curriculum only since the mid-1990s.

### ***Internal Migrant Unorganized Labour***

On the other hand, we have the problem of 'sons of the soil'. Indian states, like the European countries, are divided along linguistic lines. For instance, people living in the majority of the north Indian states speak Hindi; people of four southern states speak four different Dravidian languages; Benaglis in the east speak Bengali while Assam people speak Assamese and so on. No two ethnic groups speak the same language even though they are referred by an umbrella term “tribal people”. When unorganized skilled labourers migrate from their native state to another state within the country due to “pull and push” factors, usually there is resistance and hostility towards them from the people of the host state. The Indian Constitution confers the right to free movement from one state to another on all citizens. Migrant unorganized skilled and unskilled workers have the option of settling down permanently in a state other than their native state by applying for a domiciliary certificate – permission from host state to reside. It is not easy to get a domiciliary certificate even if they stay for years. Most of them are able to get domiciliary certificate with great difficulty because they normally do not have proof of their identity. In any case, the migrant workers do not bother because regardless of domiciliary status, they are able to get paid work; and anyway there are no public social protection entitlements that they can claim as a citizenship right.

Most of the migrant unorganized workers do not have any identity (ID) card. Voter ID is used as an important proof of a person's identity and domiciliary status; it is necessary for accessing ration cards, mobile phones, a gas connection, opening bank accounts, getting children admitted to schools, accessing health services in public hospitals, and other social services. Without proof of their citizenship status, they are not able to exercise their voting right. They approach regional political parties for help in getting a ration card or voter ID or domiciliary certificate. Political competition between political parties to siphon off mass support from one another provides an opportunity for the politically competent migrant workers to manage to secure voter ID cards with the help of local politicians and elected representatives and by bribing local bureaucrats. Depending on the history and size of the regional political party and their support base, some politicians belonging to regional political parties oppose giving voter ID cards to the migrant workers to protect the interests of the natives by raising the 'sons of the soil' issue. These parochial regional political parties resent including migrant workers in the census also.

Violence between the host community and migrant workers erupt periodically and after a while the situation returns to normal. Migrant workers get accepted eventually because the migrant workers supply most of the essential services – milk, vegetables, groceries, construction, transport, taxi, newspaper, courier etc. Though most of them earn a living in dignified way, they are at the mercy of local politicians, bureaucrats, police and money lenders. Social workers have started organizing migrant workers along class line - as working class and not as ethnic groups to avoid identity politics; by glossing over caste, insider/outsider, and other ethnic differences; social workers prepare them to demand their citizenship right and livelihood security from the ruling classes and the government.

The political competence of migrant workers gives them an edge over the native residents. Once organized, migrant workers manage to get voter ID and vote as 'vote banks' for the national political parties while the original residents vote for regional parties. In this way, democracy obliquely facilitates 'national integration' of insiders and outsiders, and maintenance of balance. This still does not resolve the issue of depriving migrant workers of their 'citizenship' rights. NGOs and social workers bring up this question time and again, and have succeeded in one or two instances. The few success stories have not been publicized as precedents adequately. Hence, most

of the *migrant workers* continue to be denied their citizenship rights.

It is only in the past twenty years that social workers have got involved with *unorganized contract labour*. When public-private partnership came to be accepted as a way of getting government's work done, there was apprehension about its impact on the working classes. Fortunately, labour laws were not allowed to be repealed. With the metropolitan cities spreading on all sides, the municipalities started outsourcing solid waste management including collection and disposal in the 1990s. These companies hire casual daily wage labour on contract for this work. Though there is a law to protect welfare of contract labourers, the labourers are not aware of their rights, nor are they organized. The majority are migrants belonging to lowest untouchable castes coming from rural areas of other states. Social workers have started organizing these workers as working class.

Similarly, *construction workers* are also migrant contract labourers. Social workers jointly with left oriented trade unions have organized the construction workers also and have been successful to some extent in securing some of the entitlements under the labour welfare laws. But social workers have had to resort to judicial intervention to get them their entitlements. The financial burden of providing welfare benefits to construction workers and garbage collectors is passed on to the contractors and government completely washes its hands of it. In turn the contractors quote high rates while bidding for the contract and eventually extract it from the government; ultimately the tax payers and consumers bear the burden.

In India, 98% of the workforce is informal and unorganized. They are not unionized. Despite having a host of labour welfare laws including Minimum Wages Act, Payment of Wages Act, etc most of these laws protect only 2% of the workers in the formal organized sector. Whatever laws are applicable to the workers in the informal sector are patchy and implemented only in breach. It is often said that a growing economy makes it easier to afford a comprehensive social security system. A healthy, full-employment economy is supposed to be an engine for the development of social security and social protection system in its own right. In Indian economy the informal sector has been propping up the formal sector. More and more aspects of industrial production and services are outsourced to *unprotected informal home-based small enterprises*. Trade Unions have failed to take up the issues of exploitation of the *informal unorganized workers*. For example, street vendors, home-based workers, domestic workers, and seasonal workers remain completely unprotected because there is no employer-employee relationship.

In the state I come from (Maharashtra state), social workers have organized *domestic workers* and have successfully got a law enacted to protect their right to minimum wages, protection from sexual harassment, paid leave and maternity leave. Social workers have also organized *street vendors and hawkers* in some cities and have been successful in getting space allocated in urban city development plans and in making licensed hawking legal.

The Integrated Child Development Scheme, a flagship poverty reduction programme introduced in 1975 aimed at improving health and nutrition status of pregnant and nursing mothers and children in the 0 to 6 years age group is implemented throughout the country. In this programme *community-based child care workers* are treated as voluntary workers and receive an honorarium. In each state there are nearly a million trained community-based child care workers who are high school graduates implementing this programme. Their services are utilized for implementing a number of other social welfare programmes also though they are voluntary workers. Apart from the fact that government itself is exploiting women's labour by treating them not as regular government servants (regular permanent government employees get pension, different types of

leave, Provident Fund, health insurance etc), their demand for regularization of their service as government servants has not been conceded to date. As such, social workers jointly with left oriented trade unions are organizing them to demand regularization of their employment.

Social workers organize *rag-pickers – children, women and men* – as self-help groups. The rag pickers are given ID cards by Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) that are recognized by police and spares them from police harassment. However, the ID cards are not honoured by government for the purposes of conferring welfare benefits. The self-help groups offer fair price for the paper, glass, metal, plastic picked by them and eliminate exploitation by middlemen; some NGOs extend health services, nutritious food at reasonable price, savings facilities, locker facilities and night shelter to the rag pickers. Government just provides required space.

Social workers instinctively take up the problems of the *pavement dwellers, the street children, the homeless people, the involuntarily displaced people, the nomadic tribes, the beggars, the urban poor, the residents of unauthorized slums, the victims of mass violence, victims of man-made/natural disasters and other deprived sections* with the government. Social workers independently or through NGOs fight for their right to food security, livelihood security, housing etc. As they do not have any proof of their identity, as far as the government is concerned, these groups do not exist on the face of the earth. In order to help them, NGOs issue some sort of identity document. Though this ID is not honoured by government or bank or any public institution, these marginalized sections are saved from police harassment. There are a few instances of social workers succeeding in their efforts to get ration cards issued by public distribution authorities. Without ID, their citizenship status is questioned. Most often, social workers end up delivering welfare services on humanitarian grounds through NGOs. Recently social workers are taking up the citizenship issues of these groups with local governments with some success.

In the past twenty years, several states have adopted social security programmes for the *tree climbers, dairy workers, rickshaw pullers, head-loaders* and others. They are supposed to be eligible for defined benefits to cover disablement, unemployment and death. However, due to administrative and federal arrangement of governance, governments run out of money to fulfil these commitments. In any case, eligibility criteria are such that it generally costs more to prepare the required documents than the benefit itself in these programmes. Social workers have had no role either in formulating these programmes or in the implementation of these poverty reduction programmes.

In order to attract foreign direct investment in industrial development, a law on Special Economic Zones (SEZ) was adopted in 2005. The government exempts industrialists who come forward to invest in these SEZs from paying a variety of taxes as incentive. Industrialization in the SEZs was expected to generate millions of jobs. SEZ was expected to help shift surplus agriculture labour to industrial manufacturing sector. Land is acquired from small farmers to develop SEZs. It was expected the farmers who sell their land to the government would be provided adequate compensation package including employment in the SEZs. Without appropriate skills, they lose even the livelihoods they had. In this way their economic status gets worsened and they are impoverished. The SEZ law is such that within the zone, no labour law is applicable; law enforcement is kept out; no one can go to court to get redress; no self-government institution is allowed to function. In short, reminiscent of colonial rule, citizenship rights are completely suspended in these zones while private corporations and foreign multi national companies (MNCs) have a free hand. This was stoutly resisted by people and some of the SEZ site proposals have been cancelled in some states.

The credit for resisting SEZs goes to social work activists. Activists educate people about the implications of SEZ, mobilized public opinion and people against SEZs. Social workers are not against development or industrialization. Social workers want a model of development and industrialization that will improve the quality of life of people, not deprive people of what they already have and pauperize them. Today, people and people's movements have asserted their sovereignty and have succeeded in requiring the government to take people's consent before taking decisions on putting up large development projects. Though it appears as if social workers instigate people against our own government, social workers have been striving for inclusive development, development without deprivation.

### ***Social Work and Agrarian Crisis***

The question of agriculture and poverty is interlinked. In India, where agriculture contributes 13% of total GDP and employs around 55% to 60% of the population, the economy has seen major fall in the growth rate of agriculture in comparison to growth of population. What we have seen is a very sharp fall in the food grain production. There has been a downward trend in the profitability in agriculture in these last 15 to 20 years. It has had its implications for the incomes of farmers. This has had its nutritional implication as well. There has been nutritional crisis and the nutritional crisis has deepened after the 1990s. It has impacted child nutrition where 50% of the children in the country are underweight today.

This agrarian crisis is policy induced crisis. A technology based solution that was called the 'green revolution' in the 1960s and 70s was promoted across crops, across classes, across regions in a big way. While it is true that 'green revolution' did not achieve its potential of agricultural growth and agricultural productivity, nevertheless it raised agricultural production in India in significant ways in terms of the availability of food at the macro level. 'Green revolution' made a difference in increasing agricultural production even though the distribution at the micro level has been a historic failure. 'Green revolution' rested on four important policy pillars - 1) the system of price support to farmers, 2) the subsidies for fertilizer, seeds and other inputs which helped in keeping cost of cultivation in check for the farmers, 3) agricultural credit provided to the poor farmers, and 4) marketing support and market regulation to remove middlemen. These policies along with technology produced by public research institutions came as a package which was the backbone in the progress of agriculture till the 1970s.

This was questioned in the late 1980s and early 1990s. We were told that these policies are actually discriminatory to farmers. We were told if our currency was devalued, our agriculture produce will become competitive in the international market. To avail these opportunities, we should move from producing food grains which has less competitive advantage in the international market to producing high value agricultural products like fruits and vegetables. We were told in an era of free trade, food security has no meaning because export earnings will provide enough support to agriculture.

We were told that agriculture sector policies are inducing repression of financial sector. So we need to actually deregulate interest rates on agriculture credit in a big way. We were further told that we need privatized banks; and they can actually be forced to lend to agriculture sector. Firstly, private banks could not be forced to open branches in rural areas because they were not viable; secondly, though both private and public sector banks were to treat agriculture credit as a priority, credit flow to small borrowers was reduced to a trickle in the 1990s. The small farmers continued to depend on usurious money lenders, who charged extortionate interest rates.

Public agricultural research was discouraged during the post-reform period and private sponsored agricultural research was welcomed. We had a completely new seed policy in 1986. The liberalization and the foreign direct investment in the seed research sector have encouraged companies like Monsanto to come in. Though these policy shifts were intended to increase productivity and production, Genetically Modified seeds made farmers completely dependent on MNCs.

There was an additional component to economic reforms in India. It was pertaining to a reversal of land reform. State after state amended its land laws in ways to promote economy of scale in agriculture. In order to encourage contract farming by large players in agriculture, land reform laws and land ceilings were repealed, and permissible size of land holding was increased significantly. The land ceilings laws were removed in many states so that companies could acquire agricultural land and convert it into real estate for commercial and residential purposes. Not only companies even the individuals could own large tracts of land now. This has resulted in promotion of capital intensive agriculture.

These policy packages played havoc not only on agriculture after 1990s but also on the nutrition and health of our people. The rate of farmer suicides is only a symptom and there is a need to address these issues much more comprehensively. Primary concern about agrarian crisis rests on policy. Clear policy shifts have escalated risks in agriculture. Because social protection is framed primarily to minimize risk faced by government and the economy, the idea of social protection has amounted to very little. Social workers have not been engaged with agrarian crisis as social work curriculum does not include political economy of land administration, agrarian relations and agriculture technology. Only now some small scale efforts are being made to prepare social workers to work on this matter.

All of these elements affected social work and social policy in India.

### ***Social Work and Social Policy***

‘Modern’ welfare systems in India developed under a favourable climate of low, but steady growth, relatively low dependency ratios, stable family structures and high levels of political consensus during the post-independence period lasting till the mid 1980s. Social security, social protection and social welfare have developed independent of one another. It was expected that this system would face challenges in the context of liberalization, privatization and globalization.

Social work was involved in remedial residual social welfare policies to some extent in the post-independence era, but totally neglected social security and social protection. Impoverishment and marginalization of the vulnerable have been going on unabated since the 1980s. Governments and the media were camouflaging unacceptable levels of disparities by diverting peoples’ attention. Media covertly started fragmenting people helping the government with its divide and rule policy. It is only after 2005 when government wanted to increase agricultural productivity and efficiency by shifting surplus agricultural labour to industrial and service sectors of the economy that civil, economic and political dimensions of sustainable development began to sink in. Social workers realized the implications of globalization on unorganized labour and deprivation of livelihoods of rural and tribal people. Trained ‘professional’ social workers began to engage with economic and political aspects of social development. It was a major departure from colonial ‘professional’ social work legacy which consisted of a preoccupation with case work and ‘clinical’ evidence based social work.

Social work was mainly urban oriented till the 1990s. Even after 1991, professional social workers

did not engage with poverty reduction, agriculture and rural development in any significant ways. It was the concept of 'poverty' and how it is measured that drew the attention of social workers. Methodology of measuring poverty continues to be contentious. One thing that the debates about measurement of poverty bring to the fore is the fact that agricultural growth and food security are closely related. But social workers have been active only on the demand side. They have been able to mobilize rural and urban poor to demand food security. They have been successful in stalling wrong policy decisions regarding food security of the poor. Currently social workers are closely working with activists and government in drafting a new law on food security.

In such a socio-economic political scenario what we actually see in social policies is a major shift from universalism to targeting. The shift from universalism to targeting has played a major role in limiting the social welfare entitlements to a small section of the poor. And the quality of life in society depends, probably increasingly, on what governments do not do about a wide range of social issues impinging the lives of the poor. However, social policies cannot be promoted without reference to their impact on economic development and vice versa. And professional social work educators are waking up to this fact today.

In recent years the brief of social policy has hugely extended. The great danger in the sort of policy 'creep' involved in this huge widening of the scope of social policy is that the reach of social policy all too easily exceeds its grasp. Public opinion feels that something should be done and looks to government for action. Government, especially state governments, extend their roles and responsibilities in response to electoral politics. Their grasp inevitably tends to weaken. Governments move into areas where it is less clear what it can do or how it can achieve the desired objectives without compromising on social justice, democracy and secularism. On the face of it, these areas are central to human well-being. But they are very complex. Failures are inevitable but not readily forgiven by voters and commentators.

In the last ten years there have been more than 15 Acts of the parliament to do with employment guarantee, right to information, well-being of persons with disability, domestic violence, food security, right to education, etc in a period when starvation deaths, farmer suicides, children dropping out of school have not been falling. This rush to legislate about guaranteed right to employment, food security, education and information – all central government laws to be implemented by state governments - hardly inspires confidence that the government has carefully considered the issues and knows what it is doing. Without ability to implement, vision amounts to delusion. Without dismantling patriarchy and casteism, creating political space for the lower castes, tribes and women in local self-governance by statutes raise questions about their implementability. Hurried enactment of laws looks more like government by knee-jerk reaction to events or media scares rather than a measured, reflective, evidence-based approach to policy-making.

Confidence in the state's basic capacity and competence has been greatly weakened over the years by this kind of serious and well publicized policy and administrative failure. An aspect of this loss of confidence in the state is to do with a loss of trust. A majority of voters do not now trust politicians or the media to tell the truth on controversial issues. Trust in government is central and essential to effective policy development because of the complexity, wide-ranging and long-term nature of so many issues. However, people have no alternative but to trust the government. If governments cannot command, sustain and justify that trust so necessary for governance, they are hugely weakened.

An area which brings together the two issues of capacity/competence and trust is the position of bureaucrats and professionals. They are the key technicians of the social policy enterprise and they

themselves have played a significant part in that decline. Bureaucrats are no longer generally seen as disinterested servants of the public good but as actual or potential self-interested rent seekers – out for policy developments to secure greater powers and larger rewards for themselves. They must also take a large share of the blame for huge and costly administrative mistakes and inefficiencies.

Professionals have their own charges to face. In recent years, doctors have successfully negotiated massive increases in salaries alongside significant reductions in hours of work, reducing their availability in public health facilities, especially in rural areas. Social workers in government service are repeatedly shown to have failed in their basic responsibilities and as corrupt. There seems to be a never-ending flow of inquiries into mistreatment and malpractice in residential care facilities for vulnerable people.

High court judges are found to have given in to corruption. Miscarriage of justice in dealing with specific acts of human rights violations against “untouchables”, tribal people despite laws such as the Prevention of Atrocities Against Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Act 1986, hardly inspire confidence in the judiciary.

Now these issues are seen as arenas where civil society should be active. Tackling inequalities, discrimination and human rights violations are certainly basic to people’s welfare. But the task of keeping a watchful eye on the whole area of government activity, governance, public education, policy formulation and implementation processes, responding to individual complaints and dealing with large and complex public and private organizations, especially with nebulous entities like the Maoists or naxalites is proving to be a daunting one for government and social workers. The job is much more complicated than is the provision of traditional basic social welfare services such as school education, correctional services, health services etc.

Order in society and freedom from fear of crime, disorder and violence are, after all, the very basis of welfare. This is important in societies where the bondage between different communities traditionally bound together have been weakened, strained or broken in the name of development and internal security. Social policy’s brief has extended to building societies where there is respect for people and property, a regard for the common good and fostering of ‘social capital’. But it is a new, complex and hugely daunting task. The factors which hold societies together – which create society and maintain order – have become immensely complex.

In 1947, many social policy academics did not give a lot of thought to economics even though there was an emerging literature on economic planning. Many of the social work academics taught their students rather little about the emerging debates about levels of public expenditure or levels of taxation or the supposed virtues of competitive markets or even investment in poverty reduction programmes and their implications for demand. They assumed that these issues would get resolved gradually as the majority of social workers until the 1990s were from the elite class and were statist. They also took the state’s role in maintaining continued economic growth pretty much for granted. They assumed that the grand designs they formulated for social development were readily affordable without significant opportunity costs. This state of blissful innocence was brought to an end by two things – events and changes in ideology.

Equally important has been the rise of neo-liberalism at this stage, which argues that the economy rather than welfare development was the main engine of well-being of all citizens. The neo-liberals also promote a set of powerful, if overly simplistic beliefs about what made for a healthy economy and how economic growth could best be promoted by reducing rates of public

expenditure in general, lowering taxes, giving greater incentives to risk-taking entrepreneurs, cutting public expenditure on social benefits to reduce dependency, pricing people back into work, and so on. In a context where neo-liberalism is the dominant ideology, these assumptions are a powerful force for holding down social benefits and wages. They can also, of course, in some contexts be a force for the promotion of the so-called 'social investment state' for increasing the skill levels and quality of the labour force. These 'beliefs' assumed the status of given truths which can be captured very clearly in the reports of the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, Five Year Plans, Development Reports and other government documents in the 1990s. Beliefs without supporting evidence were presented as accepted fact because multi-lateral authorities said so.

Globalization has also contributed to the pressure it has put on states to see competitiveness as the key route to growth and economic success and to an increase in well-being. Again, certain assumptions are made as to what best promotes and ensures competitiveness. And there was apprehension that these assumptions can be threatening to the edifice of the existing welfare system and its future development.

Differences of opinion do exist in an open democratic society like India. These differences have provided the necessary energy for competition, conflict and for consensus to emerge. In all these time consuming untidy political processes, certain new values and norms have emerged; and generally both the rulers and the ruled have been able to detect them and allow themselves to be governed by them. As new experiences shed new light and generated new ideas, and as new groups came to political life at different times, these norms and values have represented narrow areas of consensus. However, this consensus has been generally transitory. These areas of consensus generally have reflected the values of the elite, but are held in high esteem by the society as a whole. Social workers realized that these, then are to be considered as *social policy* held by people, because, *social policy* not only elicits compliance from the masses, but the elite themselves do by and large adhere to them in deference to their sense of justice and fair-play cultivated in the political cultural contexts, in deference to a desire to belong, to be able to mobilize and retain support.

### **Conclusion**

These developments and the rise of the middle classes have been increasingly making the job of "structural social work" challenging so much so that social work is experiencing an identity crisis in India. In recent times, anti-oppressive social work discourse has emerged within professional social work. Anti-oppressive social work phase commenced from 2005 in which Dalit and Tribal Social Work, Disability Studies and Action, Women Centred Social Work, Social Work to reduce Impoverishment and Vulnerability, Socio-legal Rehabilitation Practice, Youth and Change, Social work for Peace and Human Security and Gerontology Social Work emerged as new areas of study and practice. Anti-oppressive social work represents deeper social work theoretical knowledge about the position of the oppressed and the oppressive structures at the societal level and the knowledge required to resist anti-people forces.

India is yet to figure out at what level direct participatory democracy works and at what level representative democracy is appropriate. Social work is engaged in this process of discerning the boundaries of sovereignty of the people and the state in small ways as part of anti-oppressive social work.

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