Scope and Challenges of the Social Work Profession in India

Pankaj Yadav
Student, Master of Social Work
Amity Institute of Liberal Arts, Amity University, Uttar Pradesh, Lucknow Campus

Abstract:

Social work in India is a growing profession addressing diverse social needs. Over the past century, formal social work education and practice have expanded from the first programme at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in 1936 to hundreds of institutions today. This article reviews the historical evolution of social work in India, outlines the current scope of practice, and identifies key challenges that the field faces. Methodology: The study was a conceptual review were in the inclusion criteria were language (only English) and cut off year of publication that was 2020 onwards. Results and Discussion: The analysis focuses on the Indian context, highlighting government-led welfare programmes, non-governmental initiatives, and educational frameworks. Data from government surveys and academic studies indicate that over 100,000 students are enrolled in social work programmes and more than half a million social workers are active in sectors ranging from child welfare to health and corporate CSR. However, obstacles include lack of regulatory standardization, uneven educational quality, resource constraints, and socio-cultural barriers. Examples from practice and emerging trends (such as COVID-19 relief efforts) illustrate both progress and limitations. Conclusion: The paper concludes with recommendations for strengthening regulation, curriculum, and professional recognition to better align social work's potential with India's development goals.

Keywords: Social work, India, professional practice, education, policy, community development

Introduction

Social Work is a practiced based profession which operates within a context of deep socioeconomic and sociocultural need. India's vast population, with persistent poverty and inequality, creates demand for interventions to improve health, education, and welfare. For example, hundreds of millions still live below the poverty line, and issues like malnutrition, disability, and social exclusion are widespread. Against this backdrop, professional social workers aim to complement governmental and community efforts by empowering marginalized groups and facilitating development programs. The social work profession has expanded notably: since the first course at TISS in 1936, the number of social work colleges has grown to over 500, with more than 100,000 students enrolled in Bachelor's and Master's social work programmes in 2018–19. These graduates enter careers across government, NGOs,

and corporate sectors, tackling issues from child protection to disaster relief. In fact, an estimated 500,000 Indian social workers are active in various roles today. (Bhatt & Phukan, 2016) This article examines the scope of these roles and the challenges the profession faces in India's unique socio-economic environment.

The aim of this paper is to survey the current scope of social work practice in India and to analyze the challenges facing the profession. We focus exclusively on the Indian context, citing relevant government policies, educational systems, and social realities. We examine how social workers operate within government programmes (e.g. rural livelihoods, health and child development schemes), NGOs, and community initiatives, and how the educational system prepares them. The emphasis is given to institutional frameworks (such as the draft National Council for Social Work Education bill), professional associations (like ASSWI and NAPSWI, and cultural factors that shape practice. (Bhatt & Phukan, 2016) (National Herald, 2020) The following sections cover the historical development of social work in India, the present scope of practice, key obstacles (policy, institutional, educational, socio-cultural), examples of current interventions, and prospects for strengthening the field.

The roots of organized social work in India date back to the early 20th century. The Servants of India Society, founded by reformer Gopal Krishna Gokhale in 1905, was one of the first secular organizations devoted to welfare of rural and tribal communities. This society trained volunteers in education, health, and relief work among the underprivileged. Many social reformers of that era (e.g. Mahatma Gandhi, Savitribai Phule, Raja Ram Mohan Roy) also laid the ideological foundation by emphasizing seva (selfless service) and social justice. However, formal professional social work in its modern form emerged with academic training. The first professional training programme was established in 1936 at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (then Sir Dorabji Tata Graduate School of Social Work) in Mumbai. (Bhatt & Phukan, 2016) TISS pioneered a systematic curriculum in community organization and welfare, producing graduates who went on to work in relief camps and development projects.

After India gained independence in 1947, social work education expanded rapidly. In August 1946, the Delhi School of Social Work began as the National YWCA School of Social Work in Lucknow (with support from the YWCA of India), becoming the second school of social work in India after TISS[8]. It later moved to Delhi University and grew into a major postgraduate department. During the 1950s–70s, many more universities and colleges started social work programmes (for example, schools in Kolkata, Chennai, Ahmedabad, and Lucknow), often in affiliation with regional universities. Specialized courses emerged: for example, the first Diploma/MPhil in Psychiatric Social Work was launched at the All-India Institute of Mental Health in Bangalore in the late 1960s. (Bhatt & Phukan, 2016)

Professional associations are formed to support this growth. The Association of Schools of Social Work in India (ASSWI) was established in 1957 to coordinate curricula and conferences, although it later lapsed. Other bodies, such as the Indian Society of Professional Social Work and the National Association of Professional Social Workers in India (NAPSWI, est. 2005), now advocate for standards and recognition. By 1980 the profession had a substantial cadre, but it remained largely unregulated: a University Grants Commission review that year recommended creating a National Council for Social Work Education to maintain

standards. That idea resurfaced many times, culminating in recent draft legislation. Overall, over eight decades, social work in India has shifted from informal welfare activities to an established (if still evolving) profession embedded in universities, government schemes, and civil society.

Community literacy class in Tamil Nadu, India. Social workers often facilitate adult education and skills programs in rural areas. Social work professionals in India serve across diverse sectors. They are employed by government and public agencies, academic institutions, NGOs, and increasingly by private companies through CSR initiatives. For example, social workers are placed in hospitals as medical or psychiatric social workers; in schools as counsellors; in child and women's welfare homes; and in rehabilitation centres for disabled or elderly persons. The law also recognizes social work roles explicitly: for instance, factories law designates a Welfare Officer position (often filled by a social work graduate), and recent legislation (Mental Healthcare Act, Juvenile Justice Act) defines counsellor/social worker roles in institutions. (Devi Prasad, 2023) Women, children, and the disabled are key client groups where social workers are active, in programmes such as women's shelters, integrated child protection services, and disability rehabilitation.

Examples of sectors employing Indian social work professionals include:

- Government and Public Agencies: Social workers work in central and state ministries (Women & Child Development, Social Justice, Health), in Child Welfare Committees, as Probation Officers, and in development bodies (e.g. rural employment initiatives). They contribute to implementing flagship programmes like the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme (for Anganwadi education and nutrition), the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (Day-NRLM), and urban poverty alleviation projects. These roles often involve community mobilization, counselling, and case management.

- International Development: United Nations agencies (UNICEF, UNDP, WHO, World Bank) and international NGOs operating in India employ social workers for program planning, monitoring, and community facilitation. These professionals work on issues such as education access, health campaigns, disaster relief, and gender equity in projects funded by global development partners.

- Non-Governmental Organizations: A vast number of Indian NGOs rely on social work staff. Well-known examples include PRADAN (rural livelihoods), Pratham (education), SEWA (women's empowerment), CRY (child rights), and others. In NGOs, social workers often engage in grassroots community organization, training local leaders, and linking beneficiaries to services (microfinance, skill development, etc.). Many NGOs also run helplines, counseling centers, and advocacy campaigns on social issues.

- Corporate Sector / CSR: Indian corporations and public sector undertakings increasingly hire social workers to run their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs. Large companies like BHEL, SAIL, and Infosys have community

development cells where social workers design and implement projects in adjacent communities (literacy camps, health camps, vocational training). The Companies Act (2013) mandated CSR spending, which has opened opportunities for social workers to manage large-scale projects in sanitation, health, and education funded by industry.

In addition to these formal sectors, social workers are active in research and academia (writing theses on Indian social issues), in professional associations, and as independent consultants. Based on official data, three-fourths of social work graduates reportedly secure employment in government, NGO or corporate sectors soon after completing their degrees. This reflects the high demand for their skills: knowledge of local languages and cultures, program management, and community counselling. Quantitatively, India's social work workforce is substantial. A study found that in 2018–19, over 100,000 students were enrolled in BSW and MSW programs nationwide, and it estimates about 500,000 professional social workers currently practicing in India. These workers contribute directly to national development goals, such as poverty reduction and social justice (Devi Prasad, 2023). The breadth of their roles—from healthcare to education, from policy to grassroots—illustrates the wide scope of social work in addressing India's development needs.

Methodology:

This study was a conceptual review. The review of secondary literature was conducted. The inclusion criteria for selecting the specific sources of literature were as follows: a) Articles published in Journals, Articles published in Online Website, and Newspaper Reports authored in English were selected. b) The timeline of publication of the said articles and reports, which were published after 2020 selected. The selection of specific resources was conducted purposively keeping the relevance to theme of the academic work into consideration.

Results and Discussion:

The thematic analysis from the review of literature, when conceptualized displayed the following findings.

Key Challenges

Despite its growth, the social work profession in India faces significant challenges on multiple fronts. These obstacles span policy and institutional issues, educational and professional standards, and socio-cultural barriers:

- **Policy and Regulatory Challenges:** India still lacks a statutory regulatory framework for social work. The idea of a national council was first proposed by the University Grants Commission's 1980 review committee on social work education, and a draft bill was prepared in 1995, but these did not become law. As of 2025, social work degrees are offered without unified accreditation, and there is no mandatory license or registration for practitioners. In 2020 the government circulated a draft *National Council for Social Work Education* bill aiming to standardize curricula and register qualified social workers; it proposed, for example, making practice without a BSW/MSW degree a punishable offense. While the bill seeks to improve quality and uniformity, it has raised concerns among educators and activists. Critics worry that

strict licensing could exclude skilled community workers and volunteers who lack formal degrees. They also note that the voluntary sector and informal caregivers play huge roles in India's social welfare but may not be acknowledged by a rigid regulatory scheme. (Harini et.al., 2023) (Mandlik et.al., 2024) In sum, the absence of clear national policy on the profession leaves social work without official status, making it harder to secure government support or set uniform standards.

- **Educational and Professional Standards:** The rapid expansion of social work programs has led to uneven educational quality. India has no single accrediting body dedicated to social work (UGC and NAAC oversee higher education broadly), resulting in wide variation across colleges. A recent review notes a "serious lack of accreditation" and calls for unified certification of graduates. Many programmes lack experienced faculty and sufficient fieldwork training. For instance, UGC guidelines require 900 hours of fieldwork in MSW training, but enforcement is inconsistent and the draft council bill did not explicitly address this requirement. There is also debate over curriculum content: students often learn models developed abroad, with insufficient focus on India-specific issues. Some educators argue for integrating indigenous knowledge (e.g. local community practices, Gandhian methods) into teaching. The result is a skills gap: some graduates have strong theoretical knowledge, while others lack practical competencies needed on the ground. Enhancing faculty training, modernizing syllabi, and strengthening field practicum are widely seen as urgent tasks for improving social work education.

- **Institutional Challenges:** Within government and social service institutions, social workers often have ill-defined career paths. Unlike medical or engineering professionals who have formal cadres, social workers in government are frequently hired on contract or through generalist civil service streams. This limits their job security and status. Pay scales for social work posts are often low, leading some trained professionals to leave the field or move to unrelated jobs. Additionally, many government departments (e.g. Social Welfare, Women's Commissions) are headed by administrators with little understanding of social work principles. Insufficient funding further hampers the sector: most social welfare schemes in India allocate only a small percentage of GDP, and bottlenecks in disbursement leave projects under-resourced. In the NGO sector, too, organizations operate on tight budgets and often depend on variable donor funding, which can affect continuity of social programmes. Together, these institutional constraints make it difficult for social workers to plan long-term interventions and to make their contributions sustainable.

- **Socio-Cultural Challenges:** The practice of social work in India must navigate complex cultural dynamics. The profession itself suffers from low public awareness and prestige. Many Indians do not fully understand what a "social worker" does; some conflate it with charity or activism rather than a distinct professional service. Even in educated circles, social work is not widely viewed as a career like medicine or engineering. Social work also challenges entrenched social hierarchies: issues of caste, class, and gender can affect how interventions are received. For example, in

conservative rural communities, a female social worker may face restrictions on interacting with men, or tribal groups may distrust outsider approaches. India's linguistic and cultural diversity means that one-size-fits-all solutions often fail; yet curricula and policies may not adequately reflect regional differences. Finally, stigma associated with poverty, disability, or mental health sometimes hinders community engagement. All these factors require social workers to adapt flexibly and sensitively, but they also underscore the need for public education about the value of social work.

In summary, the profession's key challenges are interconnected: policy gaps affect education and careers, while social attitudes influence both policy and practice. Addressing these obstacles requires coordinated efforts by educators, policymakers, and social work leaders.

Examples:

The recent practice highlights and trends demonstrate both innovation and persistent gaps. During the COVID-19 pandemic, professional social workers played a crucial role in India's response. Many mobilized relief efforts in urban and rural areas—organizing food distribution, connecting patients to medical services, and conducting community education on health precautions. A survey by the National Association of Professional Social Workers in India (NAPSWI) documented that social workers provided essential emergency support services during the second wave in 2021. (Devi Prasad, 2023) For example, they ran helplines, arranged oxygen supplies for families, and helped migrants who were stranded by lockdowns. This demonstrated the adaptability of the profession in crisis situations.

In education and community development, social work practice is also evolving. Institutions have begun offering more specialized training in mental health, disaster management, and child protection, reflecting emerging needs. Grassroots case studies illustrate innovative interventions: for instance, in a tribal district of Rajasthan, social workers collaborated with local leaders to revive traditional self-help groups for women's empowerment, combining microcredit with literacy classes. Similarly, HIV/AIDS social workers have pioneered community-based counseling and anti-stigma campaigns. In the corporate sector, some companies engage social workers to implement Employee Community Volunteer Programs, where staff work alongside NGOs on projects, introducing new models of urban social work.

There is also a growing emphasis on integrating India's own social traditions with modern practice. Historically, community mobilization movements (like the Pulse Polio immunization drive) showed the power of local participation. Today, many advocates call for "Indianizing" social work: this includes drawing on indigenous systems of community support and understanding. For example, practices like yoga and Ayurveda are sometimes incorporated into wellness programmes run by social agencies. Non-governmental networks and academic forums have proliferated: NAPSWI, the ISWO (International Social Work Online), and student conferences have raised the profession's profile. Finally, technology is making inroads: NGOs and hospitals increasingly use databases and mobile apps for case management, and some social workers are experimenting with tele-counselling to reach remote clients. These trends suggest that the practice of social work in India is diversifying and adapting to new challenges, even as the need for systematic support and reform remains evident.

Future Directions

Strengthening the social work profession in India will require coordinated action on several fronts. One priority is formal regulation: for decades experts have recommended a National Council for Social Work Education to accredit programs and register practitioners (Prakash, 2024). If enacted, the proposed Social Work Council could harmonize curricula, ensure minimum field training standards, and create a registry of qualified social workers. (Devi Prasad, 2023) In education, integrating more field-intensive, context-specific training (including indigenous perspectives) is needed to prepare students for India's diverse realities. Investment in faculty development and research will improve capacity: universities and professional bodies could collaborate to develop shared curriculum standards and exchange best practices. At the policy level, closer linkage of social work with national development goals can increase the profession's relevance. For example, including social workers in planning for the Sustainable Development Goals or in state-level social audits could highlight their role.

Expanding career pathways and recognition is also crucial. Government and private employers could create dedicated social work cadres (similar to judicial or medical services) with clear promotion ladders. Hospitals and educational institutions should acknowledge and remunerate their social work staff as specialized professionals. Public awareness campaigns (e.g. celebrating an "National Social Work Week, 15th August to 21st August") could improve the profession's image and attract young talent. Technology and data science offer new tools: training social workers in digital literacy and evidence-based practice will help them measure impact and advocate for resources.

Overall, a multifaceted strategy combining regulatory reform, educational quality improvements, professional advocacy, and public outreach is required for the sector's future growth. Social work has the potential to significantly contribute to India's development, but realizing this potential depends on strengthening its institutional foundation and social standing.

Conclusion

Social work in India has evolved into a broad profession tackling many of the country's pressing challenges, from poverty and health to education and human rights. Centuries-old traditions of service now coexist with formal academic programmes, and thousands of trained social workers are active in government, non-profit and corporate roles. This progress is notable, but limitations remain. Key challenges include the need for unified regulation, consistent educational standards, adequate resources, and adaptation to India's cultural diversity. Government initiatives like the proposed Social Work Council and welfare schemes offer opportunities but must be balanced with the realities of grassroots practice. By addressing gaps in policy, training, and professional recognition, India can harness the full potential of social work. The coming decade will be crucial for strengthening the profession's foundations so that social work can better serve the diverse needs of the Indian population.

References:

Modi government circulates draft Bill to regulate autonomy in social work practice and education. (2020). *News Article*. https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/india/modi-government-circulates-draft-bill-to-regulate-autonomy-in-social-work-practice-education

Bhatt, S., & Phukan, D. (2016). Social work educational institutions in India: An analysis. *Journal of Social Work Education, Research and Action*, 2(1), 46–66. https://www.researchgate.net/figure/State-wise-Distribution-of-SWEIs-in-India_tbl1_349324328

Prasad, B. D. (2023, November 26). *Why should social work education in India have a council?* Medium. https://medium.com/@bdeviprasad2/why-should-social-work-education-in-india-have-a-council-b6cfd7a5e249

Harini, V., Missier, A. C. T., Senthilarasan, P., & Lakshmi, J. (2023). *Influence of social work education on recognition of social work as a profession in India*. Juni Khyat, *13*(12), 176 -182. https://socialserviceworkforce.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/SocialWorkEducation.pdf

Mandlik, A. D., Pradeep, M. D., & Raj, R. (2024). *Challenges to the social work curriculum in India: A review of literature on the existing research gap*. International Research Journal of Modernization in Engineering, Technology and Science, *6*(1). https://www.doi.org/10.56726/IRJMETS48535

Prakash, V. (2024). *Revitalizing social work: A call for Indianizing social work education and practice with integration of indigenous and modern approaches*. American India Foundation. https://aif.org/revitalizing-social-work-a-call-for-indianizing-social-work-education-and-practice-with-integration-of-indigenous-and-modern-approaches/