

## Analysis 3

### Musings on social work as a career

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As against purely personal activities intended to earn more income or build wealth, social work is a different set of activities, intended to improve society's wellbeing. But people do carry out activities that are neither in the nature of social work nor are intended to maximise incomes. They try to promote a traditional sport such as atya-patya in Maharashtra; they take time away from jobs to travel, they nurse and care for stray animals, they work towards cleaning or reviving rivers and towards conserving threatened species. In a strict philosophical sense, everything one does is because it gives one satisfaction: *atmanastu kamay, sarva idam priyam bhavati*. Only a subset of activities that are not oriented towards earning income can classify as social work.

International Federation of Social Workers defines social work as a 'practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change, cohesion and development, besides empowerment and liberation of people, with social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities as central principles'. To the extent, this does not include actions that may not primarily be directed at enhancing communities' wellbeing (activities such as protecting rare species of plants or conserving forests), this definition is a shade incomplete from our point of view. I would like to view social work as a class of activities that are not undertaken primarily with a view to earn money or benefit one's own family and kin *and which have a direct relation to a public goal*.

#### Attributes of social work

- Self-appointed: There are of course many of us who get employed in NGOs or other social service organisations and we get paid for the work we do. But the person who begins the work often does it because s/he feels the urge to do it. Virtually never is one formally asked to undertake social work. Except for paid professional staff of these organisations, it is voluntary or at least starts in voluntary mode.
- No formal mandate or authority: Even more importantly, the social worker does not have any formal authority or legal mandate to engage in what s/he does. In fact, for a substantial period of time, his/her locus standi can often be questioned not only by lay people but also by state authorities, and at times with fairly serious consequences. For instance if a socially oriented lady decides to help women victims of domestic violence, she may feel compelled to intervene in marital affairs of impugned couples without any formal mandate. The husband, his family and the neighbours can question her locus standi. And if she goes on to create a halfway

home or a shelter for women who want to escape tyranny of the husband and parents-in-law, she may be accused of holding these women without their consent or even worse felonies. This is no exaggeration, there have been such situations in reality!

- Spectator views: The work is meant to benefit others and /or the public. The person doing it has no mandate. So every passer-by who may not have the slightest intention of contributing anything will air his or her views on what ought to be done and whether the person initiated it is doing it right. If I buy a few laptops, get internet connections and teach digital transactions in a village, chances are that someone would tell me that I should have used the money to feed the children good food or give the women sarees! This would be in addition to the comments pertaining to the desirability of teaching villagers internet (“they will visit only inappropriate sites”) or my ability to teach them!
- Negative effect on stakeholders: Seldom do people carry out bad, oppressive things wantonly. Usually one does something because it helps him / her or provides a gain. A husband beats his wife because he can then snatch her wage to get himself a drink. If he knew she had no money, chances are he would perhaps abuse her very badly but may fall short of hitting her. A teacher screams at a Dalit boy because he wants the boy to clean the school toilet. If there were no toilets and nothing to be gained by beating or ill-treating the Dalit boy, the boy might have been just shunned and neglected. A poor Muslim father sells his daughter to a sheikh because the sheikh pays him money and the father is relieved that the daughter is off his hands for now. If a social worker intervenes in such situations it might negatively affect the interest of an individual or a group.
- Challenging established practices, authority or hegemony: There are occasions when social workers challenge existing social practices or customs. When a social worker insists on women entering a temple, the established custom of the temple is challenged. When a social worker teaches women to make them literate and independent, the men feel that their women are ‘getting out of hand’ and hence feel threatened. When a social worker encourages people to guard and protect bamboo in their forest, the bamboo contractor’s hegemony is challenged.
- Intended changes and consequences: This is not intended to be a mere repetition of the definition. The point is a little subtle but of course often a subject of debate and comments. Had the social worker not done anything about the matter, status quo would have continued. People were used to it. Poor young women were used to being thrashed by the drunk husband or by the parents-in-law. The Dalit boy was used to being forced to clean the toilet in his school and given leftover food from the tiffin boxes of others. The Muslim family had resigned to selling their young girl to a sheikh, knowing well that he would discard her after making her pregnant. The chemical factory was happily discharging its effluents in Belandur lake and the fire in

that lake made for an interesting if frequent news. There may have been eyebrows raised and impotent anger expressed in poetry or cinema, but life went on.

But now the social worker intervenes and changes the situation. For a while the young woman is not bashed up. But the husband and the family resent the interventions. The Muslim family cannot sell their daughter to the sheikh and the alcoholic father resents it. The teacher now has to make arrangement to clean the toilet or it remains dirty and the headmaster resents it. The chemicals cannot be let into the water body and the factory owner resents it. The social worker may not be around forever. It is also uncertain that s/he would receive future alerts as a result of the campaigns, or there would be sustained state watch or public support.

So when the young woman goes back, the husband and the family may make life more miserable for her, and the Dalit boy may be at the receiving end of more anger and despise. The factory owner may not let the effluents into the lake but may let it out right outside his factory in the middle of a slum! Thus the short-term relief that gave the social worker the sense of doing a public duty may make matters worse in the longer run for the very same people!

So we have a peculiar situation: what the social worker does out of compassion often challenges customs or power of some people, interferes in the lives of others, or hurt some people's interests unintentionally. The social worker's action is for achieving what s/he considers is good, without any mandate or locus standi or even a guarantee of being there to manage the situation after the desired outcome. Is it not important to see why people do such seemingly irrational acts, what makes them undertake these acts, who undertakes what kind of acts and how they manage them?

### **Appeal of social work**

Let me hasten to add. Social work is a desirable facet in any society. Dedicated social workers make the society more livable and leave their inevitable influence on others. For our world to become more livable for everyone, for positive changes in the lives of the poor and the voiceless, for the future to be more secure for our children, social work is a necessity. I certainly do not place too much hope in governments. Governments tend to maintain the status quo: they defend those who control resources, they defend unjust legal and social customs and through bureaucracy they tend to be tolerant and partial to those who hold power in the society. Since governments by themselves will not bring about desirable changes, there is a real need for people who will strive to do so. Social workers fulfil this need. While it is desirable in abstraction, every specific manifestation of social work will tend to have some, if not all, of the attributes noted in the above paragraphs.

### **Is social work only for the career outliers?**

In general people are attracted to wealth, prestige, power and comfort in life and hence seek them. America explicitly recognises 'name, fame and pursuit of happiness' as the proper means to an end of individual citizens; elsewhere we may not recognise it so explicitly. Economic theory too talks only of a 'rational economic man', subtly hinting that anyone not working towards wealth maximization is necessarily other than rational. So when they get an opportunity, their efforts are to discover and take up careers that help them achieve these perfectly respectable and understandable ends. There are people who get influenced in their childhood through their *samskara* to strive for goals other than wealth maximization. There are individuals who get drawn to religious pursuits. One may get drawn to non-economic goals because of some deep personal experience. Above we saw that those who engage in social work may encounter situations where their locus standi would be questioned. They may be held responsible for consequences of their work when they stop working and they may face the wrath of those whose interests they hurt. The end results of social work are desirable; but neither do they meet the life goals of typical 'rational economic individuals' nor do they offer a smooth career trajectory. Then why would anyone wish to engage in social work?

### **Current cost of professional education**

There was a time when education was highly subsidised. I for one, graduated in science from a college, where my annual fee was Rs 144 and the university examination fee was Rs 56. Against this total of Rs 200 that I paid the college or the university, I used to get a scholarship of Rs 150 per month through the three years. Such was the level of subsidy I enjoyed in education, up to graduation. Even when I joined Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad (IIMA) in 1977, the fees including basic mess bill for two years was a shade short of Rs 11,000 and my salary in my first job was Rs 1,200 per month; which was perhaps close to the average salary drawn by fresh graduates then. Thus the cost of education was about nine times the first salary drawn. In today's world, the cost of IIM education has perhaps reached an average of Rs 28 lakhs, which is about 18 times average monthly pay of a fresh graduate. Thus the level of subsidy in this stream has come down substantially. The level of subsidy in engineering or medicine fields has perhaps reduced even further. As a number of students take educational loan, repayment of that loan weighs on their mind. Naturally such students cannot think of joining social work where the level of remuneration, if any, would be quite low and there would always be a question of uncertainty about the income. This naturally makes engagement with social work less attractive.

## **Motivations and incentives**

Yet it is creditable that people take to social work. They are outliers because they do not behave in a rational economic manner and are willing to face the potential issues outlined above. They are somehow blessed so there is no need to worry about recovering or repaying the cost of their education. Even when this is granted, one needs to understand their motivations and what attracts them to social work. I venture to hypothesise that there are three broad categories. The first category is of compassion. The second category is of a strong commitment to an idea or an ideal. The third category is one of wanting to prove one's mettle in addressing and successfully solving a challenging problem. I do not imply that an individual fired with the zeal to solve a challenging problem has no compassion for the people involved. If an ideal fires a deep commitment in an individual, it does not mean s/he would feel challenged by technical or managerial complexities. Thus I do not mean that these are mutually exclusive categories. The motivation in the first category is perhaps dominant in most 'human service' activities. Late Baba Amte's work in tending to and caring for leprosy affected persons squarely falls in this category. The second category is of motivations arising out of ideas or ideals. This class may include ideals of social transformation and thus could have political overtones too. Commitment to an ideal or idea is perhaps illustrated by say the personnel of the Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti (BGVS) working towards their goal of education for all children. Another illustration could be those who sincerely try to conserve threatened flora and fauna because they strongly believe in the idea of biodiversity. In an argumentative manner it can be said that BGVS people felt deeply for the poor children because they believed that the children remained poor due to lack of education. Their compassion took the form of bringing them education. But surely there is, or so it appears to me, much higher, closer human touch in tending to leprosy patients than in running learning centres for children. And the case for compassion of biodiversity activists is often compromised because of infamous and unnecessary dilemma between tribal people and tigers that arose when the Forest Rights Act was being debated. The third category of doing social work because one is fired by the challenge of solving some complex problem is illustrated by a fair number of technocrats who work on evolving appropriate technology solutions.

It is not pertinent to discuss who, or rather who among the outliers will get attracted and fired by which motivation. It is tempting to argue that engineers and scientists will get motivated by the third category while doctors will really find a happy convergence of their professional training and motivation in providing compassionate healthcare. But such statements would remain in the main to be mere stereotypes. Human beings are amazingly unpredictable. Also we seem to be attracted by different motivations as we transit through our life cycles. Ideals and challenges may fire when we are young, while security, stability and compassion may drive our actions in middle age. It is perhaps more pertinent to explore

the implications on the personal lives of social workers. It is possible to argue that society sees that the needy need and deserve service; when they see someone providing it, the society looks at him / her with favour and may even offer assistance and support. Those who are fired by an ideal are quite likely to ruffle many feathers and tend to challenge existing order. They therefore are likely to be viewed with much concern by at least the establishment. The establishment therefore could make their lives difficult. The third category of people striving to demonstrate their mettle to solve some challenges that affect humanity are quite likely to be least understood and appreciated. After all, we get used to a problem and a way of solving it. We often may not see it as a problem. Even if it is seen as a problem, we may have much greater trust in proven technology and solutions. This preference is often coloured by our almost ubiquitous reverse racism in which we believe that something developed in America or Germany is ipso facto superior. When a maverick sees that as a challenge and tries to develop a local solution, we may find it difficult to appreciate his efforts.