

Professional Social Work in India: Historical Evolution, Contemporary Challenges, and Transformative Futures

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Abstract: *Professional social work in India has evolved through the interaction of indigenous welfare traditions, colonial administration, nationalist reform, and post-independence development policy. Despite considerable institutional growth, the profession continues to confront challenges of professional identity, theoretical dependence, regulatory fragmentation, and persistent structural inequality. This paper critically examines the historical evolution, theoretical foundations, contemporary realities, and future trajectories of Indian social work. Drawing on Marxist, Gandhian, and Ambedkarite perspectives alongside critical, human rights-based, and decolonial approaches, it argues that Indian social work must move beyond dependence on Western paradigms toward contextually grounded, socially transformative practice. The paper reviews recent policy developments- the National Education Policy 2020, the Sustainable Development Goals, corporate social responsibility, and digital transformation- and proposes an integrated framework combining professional competence with social justice, human rights, and democratic participation.*

Keywords: Professional Social Work; India; Indigenization; Social Justice; Social Work Education; Critical Social Work; Gandhian Thought; Ambedkarite Perspective; Marxist Social Work; Sustainable Development Goals

1. Introduction

Professional social work in India sits at the intersection of humanitarian tradition, state-led development, and struggles for social justice, consistent with the profession's internationally recognized mandate to promote social change, empowerment, and human rights (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2014). Where Western social work emerged largely in response to industrialization and urban poverty (Midgley, 2014; Payne, 2021), its Indian trajectory has been shaped by indigenous traditions of *daan* (charity), *seva* (service), and *dharma* (social obligation), alongside colonial administration, nationalist reform, and post-independence planning (Desai, 1994; Gore, 1987).

Formal professionalization began in 1936 with the Sir Dorabji Tata Graduate School of Social Work in Bombay- now the Tata Institute of Social Sciences- marking the shift from voluntary philanthropy to organized professional practice (Desai & Patel, 1987). The discipline has since expanded across hundreds of institutions, with graduates working in healthcare, child protection, community development, corrections, disaster management, CSR, and public policy (Singh & Saumya, 2021).

Despite this growth, Indian social work continues to grapple with questions of professional identity, statutory recognition, and theoretical orientation, particularly its heavy reliance on Western frameworks that inadequately capture the realities of caste, religious diversity, informal labour, and regional inequality (Desai, 2002; Gray, Coates, & Yellow Bird, 2010). These concerns are sharpened by contemporary developmental paradoxes: while roughly 248 million people exited multidimensional poverty between 2013–14 and 2022–23, sharp disparities persist across states, castes, and tribal populations (NITI Aayog, 2024), compounded by neoliberal

reform, urbanization, climate vulnerability, and digital inequality.

Recent policy shifts — the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020's emphasis on multidisciplinary, experiential learning and Indian Knowledge Systems, and the Sustainable Development Goals' integrated human-rights framework (United Nations, 2015)- further redefine the profession's role. Against this backdrop, this paper critically examines the discipline's historical evolution, theoretical foundations, contemporary realities, and future direction, arguing that its relevance depends on integrating indigenous knowledge with evidence-based practice, policy engagement, and professional regulation.

2. Historical Trajectories

Indian social work's evolution is rooted in civilizational traditions of collective welfare rather than an industrial-capitalist rupture (Midgley, 2014; Payne, 2021). Concepts such as *daan*, *seva*, *dharma*, and *lokasangraha* (welfare of society) run through classical texts including the Rig Veda, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, and Arthashastra (Sharma, 2005). Kautilya's Arthashastra, for instance, assigned the state explicit responsibility for widows, orphans, older persons, and disaster-affected populations, treating public welfare as a governance function rather than an act of personal charity (Kangle, 1965). Yet these welfare traditions operated within a stratified caste order that alleviated immediate suffering without challenging its structural causes; contemporary scholars therefore describe traditional welfare systems as simultaneously compassionate and exclusionary (Oommen, 2001; Desai, 1994).

Colonial administration introduced modern legal institutions, municipal governance, hospitals, prisons, and poor-relief measures that gradually supplemented traditional

mechanisms of support. These interventions, however, primarily served administrative and political objectives rather than social justice, so poverty, famine, and labour exploitation remained widespread throughout the nineteenth century (Desai, 2002; Midgley, 2014). Alongside this, the century's social reform movements fundamentally reshaped public understanding of welfare. Reformers including Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule, Pandita Ramabai, and Swami Vivekananda challenged sati, child marriage, and caste discrimination, shifting welfare from individual philanthropy toward organized reform grounded in equality, education, and dignity. Organizations such as the Servants of India Society and the Ramakrishna Mission institutionalized voluntary service and shaped the philosophical foundations of modern Indian social work (Gore, 1965; Oommen, 2001).

The national movement further broadened welfare's scope by linking political freedom with social reconstruction. Gandhi's Sarvodaya (welfare of all) and *Antyodaya* (upliftment of the last person) emphasized village self-governance, decentralization, sanitation, women's empowerment, and constructive voluntary work as instruments of nation-building (Gandhi, 1931). At the same time, Ambedkar redefined the discourse on social justice by exposing caste as a structural system of graded inequality maintained through religious sanction and economic exclusion, rather than merely a cultural institution. His advocacy for constitutional rights, affirmative action, and democratic participation shifted welfare discourse from charity toward rights, justice, and institutional transformation (Omvedt, 2004; Thorat & Newman, 2010).

Formal professionalization began in 1936 with the Sir Dorabji Tata Graduate School of Social Work in Bombay, introducing systematic education in casework, group work, community organization, social research, and supervised fieldwork, and marking the transition from voluntary service to a profession grounded in scientific method and professional ethics (Desai & Patel, 1987; Gore, 1965). Following Independence, the state adopted a welfare-oriented developmental model embedded in constitutional commitments to justice and equality. Successive Five-Year Plans expanded programmes in education, health, rural development, and tribal and labour welfare, while initiatives such as the Community Development Programme (1952), Panchayati Raj institutions, and Integrated Child Development Services (1975), followed later by rights-based legislation including MGNREGA, the Right to Education Act, and the Mental Healthcare Act, substantially expanded professional practice.

Social work education likewise expanded rapidly after Independence, with hundreds of universities now offering undergraduate and postgraduate programmes and practitioners employed across government agencies, hospitals, schools, correctional institutions, and civil society. Unlike medicine, nursing, or law, however, India still lacks a statutory national regulatory council for social work education and practice, contributing to persistent variation in curriculum quality, professional standards, and occupational recognition (University Grants Commission [UGC], 2020; Singh & Saumya, 2021). Viewed historically, then, Indian social work is not a simple transplantation of Western professional models but a layered synthesis of indigenous

ethical traditions, colonial administrative structures, nationalist reform, and constitutional planning — a trajectory that continues to shape today's debates on indigenization, decolonization, and professional regulation.

3. Theoretical Foundations: Toward an Integrated Framework

No single theory adequately explains the complexity of Indian social realities; an integrated framework combining several perspectives offers the strongest foundation for practice (Gray, Coates, & Yellow Bird, 2010; Payne, 2021).

Marxist perspectives locate poverty and marginalization in structural economic exploitation rather than individual deficiency (Marx & Engels, 1848). This remains highly relevant given that nearly 90 per cent of India's workforce is informally employed, with limited labour protection (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2024); the approach pushes practice beyond individual casework toward advocacy and collective mobilization (Ferguson, 2008), though class analysis alone cannot capture caste-, gender-, and region-based exclusion.

Gandhian thought grounds practice in ethics, decentralization, and community self-reliance through Sarvodaya and Antyodaya (Gandhi, 1931), resonating with today's asset-based and participatory development methods (Chambers, 1994)- though it offers limited structural analysis of caste and patriarchy on its own.

Ambedkarite thought shifts the frame from charity to rights, dignity, and constitutional justice, treating caste as institutionalized hierarchy rather than cultural custom (Ambedkar, 1936). Given continuing disparities in education, employment, and land access among Scheduled Castes and Tribes (Thorat & Newman, 2010), it provides one of the strongest indigenous foundations for rights-based practice.

Critical social work interrogates how institutions and policy can reproduce inequality even while claiming neutrality (Fook, 2016), encouraging reflexive, accountability-oriented practice that complements Marxist and Ambedkarite analysis.

Human rights-based approaches reframe beneficiaries as rights-holders rather than charity recipients, reflected in legislation such as the National Food Security Act and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act. Finally, **decolonial and indigenous perspectives** call for integrating Indigenous Knowledge Systems and constitutional values into education and practice in dialogue with- not rejection of- global scholarship (Gray, Coates, & Yellow Bird, 2010), echoing broader calls to decolonize social work curricula, research methods, and practice models rather than treating decolonization as a peripheral concern (Gray, Coates, & Hetherington, 2013), a direction reinforced by NEP 2020's emphasis on Indian Knowledge Systems.

Together, these six strands- Marxist, Gandhian, Ambedkarite, critical, human rights-based, and decolonial- move Indian social work beyond dependence on imported models toward a discipline rooted in constitutional values, empirical evidence, and transformative social justice, providing a conceptual foundation running from historical roots through

practice domains to outcomes aligned with Viksit Bharat 2047 and the SDGs. Figure 1 depicts this integrated framework, tracing the flow from historical foundations through theoretical perspectives, levels of practice, emerging

practice domains, and transformative outcomes, to the profession's alignment with national and global development goals.

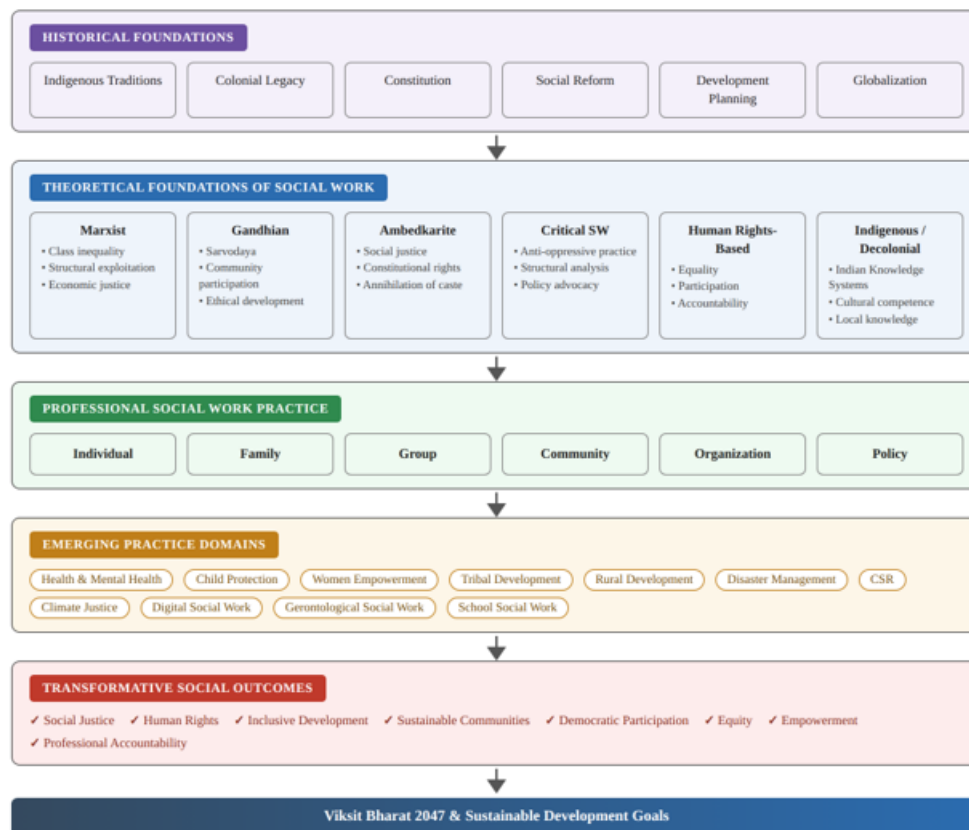


Figure 1: Integrated Conceptual Framework for Professional Social Work in India

4. Contemporary Realities: Expansion, Diversification, Contradiction

Over the past three decades, liberalization, decentralization, globalization, and technological change have collectively broadened both the scope and complexity of professional social work practice. Today social workers engage across healthcare, mental health, education, child protection, disability services, correctional administration, disaster management, CSR, rural development, urban governance, migration, ageing, and environmental sustainability (Singh & Saumya, 2021; Payne, 2021). Education has expanded accordingly: universities and autonomous institutions across India now offer undergraduate, postgraduate, and doctoral programmes, with fieldwork remaining the defining pedagogical component that integrates classroom learning with supervised professional practice, further strengthened by the multidisciplinary and experiential-learning orientation of NEP 2020.

Professional identity nonetheless remains one of the most persistent challenges confronting the discipline. Unlike medicine, nursing, psychology, or law, social work still lacks a statutory national regulatory authority responsible for accreditation, licensing, and ethical oversight, producing considerable variation in curricula, fieldwork requirements, faculty qualifications, and graduate competencies across institutions (Desai, 2002; Singh & Saumya, 2021). The

diversification of practice settings has simultaneously created new opportunities and new tensions: government welfare programmes continue to employ social workers across health, education, and tribal development, while the rapid growth of civil society organizations has expanded opportunities in programme implementation, advocacy, monitoring, and policy analysis- even as an increasingly regulated funding and compliance environment requires practitioners to balance professional ethics against organizational priorities and donor expectations.

CSR, mandated under Section 135 of the Companies Act 2013- making India the first country to require CSR expenditure of eligible companies- has emerged as another significant arena of practice, with annual CSR spending steadily increasing to support education, healthcare, skill development, and rural livelihoods. Social workers increasingly occupy positions in CSR planning, stakeholder engagement, and social impact assessment, though scholars caution that CSR interventions sometimes prioritize corporate visibility and short-term outputs over long-term community empowerment, raising questions of professional autonomy and accountability.

Health and mental health have likewise become major domains of practice: the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the profession's indispensable role in crisis counselling and psychosocial support, and the Mental Healthcare Act has strengthened rights-based approaches emphasizing informed

consent and community-based rehabilitation, even as disparities in infrastructure and workforce shortages continue to restrict equitable access, particularly in rural regions. Digital transformation has similarly reshaped practice through tele-counselling, online case management, e-governance, and AI-assisted programme monitoring, expanding accessibility while raising ethical concerns about confidentiality, informed consent, algorithmic bias, and the digital exclusion of vulnerable populations- making digital competence an emerging professional requirement for twenty-first-century practice.

Underlying these developments is a persistent theoretical dependence on Western frameworks that insufficiently address caste-based discrimination, indigenous knowledge systems, and informal economies (Gray, Coates, & Yellow Bird, 2010), alongside mounting pressure from governments, international agencies, and funders for rigorous monitoring, outcome evaluation, and demonstrated social impact. Viewed collectively, the profession has expanded far beyond its traditional welfare orientation to encompass policy advocacy, interdisciplinary collaboration, digital innovation, and sustainable development- yet this expansion is accompanied by enduring contradictions between professional autonomy and managerialism, globalization and indigenization, technological innovation and digital inequality, and institutional growth and regulatory fragmentation, whose resolution will shape the profession's future credibility.

5. Practice-Based Realities: Evidence from the Field

Social work's distinct identity rests on integrating theoretical knowledge with supervised fieldwork, requiring practitioners to translate conceptual understanding into direct engagement with communities, institutions, and vulnerable populations. In community development- one of the profession's most significant domains- programmes from the 1952 Community Development Programme through the Integrated Rural Development Programme, NRLM, and MGNREGA have expanded opportunities for social workers to facilitate participatory planning, institution-building, and livelihood promotion. Field-based research consistently shows that successful rural interventions depend less on financial resources alone than on community participation and institutional capacity; social workers facilitate self-help groups, producer collectives, and village development committees, though participation is frequently mediated by caste hierarchies and gender relations, requiring conflict-sensitive and socially inclusive approaches (Chambers, 1994; Desai, 2002). Practitioners thus act as facilitators, educators, advocates, and capacity builders rather than mere scheme implementers, reflecting a broader shift from welfare delivery toward participatory, rights-based development.

Health social work has expanded considerably following public health reforms and growing recognition of the psychosocial determinants of health, with social workers now integral to multidisciplinary teams in hospitals and rehabilitation institutions, contributing psychosocial assessment, counselling, discharge planning, and community outreach. The Mental Healthcare Act has strengthened rights-based mental health practice by emphasizing dignity, informed consent, and community rehabilitation, and COVID-19 highlighted the profession's role in crisis intervention and community resilience, even as infrastructure gaps, workforce shortages, and stigma continue to restrict equitable access, particularly in rural regions. In child protection, social workers contribute to adoption, foster care, and juvenile justice through Child Welfare Committees, District Child Protection Units, and Mission *Vatsalya*, with contemporary practice increasingly adopting ecological and strengths-based perspectives that situate children within their family, school, and community environments rather than treating them in isolation.

Within CSR, social workers undertake community needs assessments, stakeholder consultations, participatory planning, and sustainability evaluation, mediating between corporate priorities and community expectations; project-based funding cycles and reporting requirements, however, can prioritize measurable outputs over long-term empowerment, prompting growing advocacy for participatory monitoring and community ownership. Disaster and humanitarian practice has grown with the increasing frequency of floods, cyclones, droughts, and heatwaves, with social workers facilitating disaster risk reduction, coordinating relief, and strengthening local institutional capacity; emerging green social work scholarship argues that environmental and social justice are inseparable, since climate change disproportionately affects marginalized communities. Digital social work — spanning tele-counselling, online case management, and AI-assisted monitoring- has expanded access for geographically isolated populations while raising ethical concerns around confidentiality, informed consent, and unequal digital access, requiring digital literacy alongside traditional interpersonal skills.

Across these domains, practitioners increasingly need competencies in policy analysis, programme management, research methodology, impact evaluation, and interdisciplinary collaboration alongside traditional counselling and organizing skills, reinforcing evidence-based practice as a defining marker of contemporary professionalism and underscoring the need for continuous professional education and stronger university-field partnerships. Table 1 summarizes the major practice domains, their institutional settings, core competencies, governing policy frameworks, and emerging challenges.

Domain	Key Settings	Core Competencies	Key Frameworks	Emerging Challenges
Community Development	Panchayati Raj, SHGs, NRLM	Participatory planning, mobilization, capacity building	MGNREGA, NRLM, Panchayati Raj Acts	Caste exclusion, migration, climate vulnerability
Health & Mental Health	Hospitals, CHCs, District Mental Health Programme	Psychosocial assessment, counselling, rehabilitation	National Health Mission, Ayushman Bharat, Mental Healthcare Act	Workforce shortage, stigma, rural gaps
Child & Family Welfare	CWCs, DCPUs, schools	Child rights advocacy, foster care, case management	Juvenile Justice Act, Mission <i>Vatsalya</i> , ICDS	Abuse, trafficking, school dropout
Gender Justice	One Stop Centres, protection homes	Crisis intervention, legal aid referral, advocacy	PWDVA 2005, Mission Shakti	Gender-based violence, economic exclusion
CSR & Development	Corporate foundations, CSR units	Impact assessment, stakeholder engagement	Companies Act 2013, S.135	Corporate priorities vs. community ownership
Disaster & Climate	NDRF, SDMAS, UN agencies	Emergency response, resilience-building	Disaster Management Act, Sendai Framework	Displacement, livelihood restoration
Digital Social Work	E-governance platforms, tele-counselling	Digital literacy, ethical AI use, data management	Digital India Mission	Digital exclusion, privacy, algorithmic bias

Across domains, recurring competencies- community engagement, advocacy, interdisciplinary collaboration, and evidence-based decision-making- sit alongside shared emerging pressures: climate change, demographic ageing, technological disruption, and digital exclusion. This reinforces the paper's central claim that the profession's future depends on integrating theoretical knowledge with empirical evidence and culturally grounded practice.

6. Future Directions

The profession's future depends on its capacity to respond proactively to social, technological, and environmental change, repositioning itself from welfare provider to catalyst for inclusive, rights-based, sustainable transformation, organized around six interrelated pillars.

Indigenization and decolonization of knowledge remain a foremost priority: continued reliance on Euro-American theory limits the profession's ability to interpret caste, religious pluralism, and informal economies (Gray, Coates, & Yellow Bird, 2010); the goal is critical adaptation of global theory to Indian realities, not rejection of it, consistent with NEP 2020's Indian Knowledge Systems orientation.

Professional regulation needs strengthening through a National Council for Social Work Education and Practice to standardize accreditation, ethics, and continuing education while preserving institutional autonomy- addressing a gap nearly nine decades in the making.

Evidence-based practice and research capacity must expand through stronger quantitative, qualitative, and participatory methods and university-government-civil society collaboration, including systematic documentation of indigenous and field-generated practice models. **Artificial intelligence and digital transformation** bring case-management, predictive-analytics, and tele-health tools that expand access but raise questions of privacy, algorithmic bias, and equitable reach, requiring digital ethics and data governance in curricula.

Climate change and green social work push practice beyond conventional welfare toward environmental advocacy, disaster preparedness, and ecological justice, given the disproportionate impact of climate disruption on marginalized communities. **Public policy engagement** must

deepen, since the profession remains underrepresented in legislative and budget processes despite its frontline knowledge of programme effectiveness. Finally, **internationalization** should emphasize reciprocal exchange- Indian social work's experience with community development, disaster response, and rights-based mobilization has as much to offer global scholarship as it has to receive.

Together, professional excellence, evidence-informed practice, indigenous knowledge, technological competence, policy engagement, and transformative social justice provide a roadmap for repositioning Indian social work as a dynamic, socially transformative discipline.

7. Policy Imperatives

As India advances toward Viksit Bharat 2047, professional social work has a growing role in ensuring economic growth is matched by inclusion, equity, and sustainability — requiring a shift from programme implementation toward active engagement in policy formulation and governance. NEP 2020's multidisciplinary, experiential, and Indian Knowledge Systems orientation offers a concrete opportunity to redesign curricula accordingly, while the Sustainable Development Goals (notably SDGs 1, 3, 4, 5, 10, 11, 13, 16, and 17) provide a global framework that closely mirrors the profession's own commitments to rights and inclusion.

National programmes- MGNREGA, Ayushman Bharat, Mission *Vatsalya*, ICDS, POSHAN Abhiyaan, Mission Shakti, and NRLM- remain key institutional platforms, with practitioners increasingly contributing to social audits, monitoring, and policy feedback rather than service delivery alone. Digitalization of governance requires new competencies in data ethics and algorithmic accountability, while rising climate-related displacement, ageing, and urbanization call for stronger integration of environmental justice, migration, and gerontological content into mainstream education.

Realizing these imperatives requires deeper collaboration among universities, government, civil society, and corporate partners around knowledge co-production, longitudinal research, and indigenous theory-building- positioning Indian social work as professionally regulated, research-oriented,

and technologically competent while remaining grounded in constitutional values.

8. Conclusion

Professional social work in India has developed through a distinctive trajectory combining indigenous welfare traditions, colonial institutions, constitutional democracy, and post-independence planning. Nearly nine decades of professional education have brought substantial institutional growth, yet persistent challenges remain around professional identity, theoretical dependence, regulatory fragmentation, and structural inequalities rooted in caste, class, gender, and region.

Understanding the profession requires moving past descriptive history toward an integrated analytical framework combining Marxist, Gandhian, Ambedkarite, critical, human rights-based, and decolonial perspectives- not as competing paradigms but as complementary contributions to contextually grounded professional knowledge. Contemporary practice already extends well beyond conventional welfare service into healthcare, child protection, disaster management, CSR, digital governance, and public policy, demanding new competencies in interdisciplinary collaboration, evidence-based practice, and ethical decision-making.

This paper's central claim is that the profession's future rests on four mutually reinforcing shifts: strengthening indigenization and decolonization of knowledge; institutionalizing evidence-informed practice; embracing technological innovation without compromising ethics and equity; and repositioning social work as an active participant in public policy and democratic governance rather than confining it to programme delivery. As India pursues Viksit Bharat 2047 and the SDGs, professional social work's success will depend not on institutional expansion alone, but on its capacity to generate indigenous knowledge, strengthen professional standards, and remain steadfast in its commitment to marginalized communities- integrating scientific evidence with ethical practice and constitutional values to become a genuinely transformative force for an equitable and sustainable society.

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