Social Work Education and the Tribal/Indigenous peoples of India's northeast

Victor Narzary*

Abstract: *Social work as a profession has evolved out of contextualised human responses to social, political and economic questions that afflict human existence. Its education and practice in India, imported from the west as a part of the colonisation process, has remained stagnated, for long, with concepts and methods suited to respond to the ravages of industrial revolution in Europe. Thus, it has failed, in many ways than one, to position itself responsively to India's contexts. The tribal/indigenous situation of India's northeast, for instance, challenge social work education and practice to define programmes and strategies, respectively, suited to meet its unique needs. The present paper is an attempt to conceptualise a social work education framework suited to this context.*

Key words: social work, Tribal/Indigenous Peoples, Northeast India

*Victor Narzary is an Assistant Professor of Social Work, Assam Don Bosco University and can be contacted at victor.narzary@gmail.com

Origins: Out of response to social, political and economic questions

Social work as a profession emerged out of human response to questions posed by socio-economic and political situations during and after the Industrial Revolution. The practice evolved from efforts to assuage the issues of urban destitution caused by "industrialising cities" in Europe during the nineteenth century (Midgley 1981: 17). The unprecedented impoverishment of large groups of people who had migrated to urban centres was primarily triggered by the "mechanisation" of labour, "introduction of steam-powered machinery" and the whole scale application of the "laissez-faire" ideology for profit maximisation. It led to the rise of several social problems, such as, "extensive child labour, poor sanitation, urban epidemics especially cholera" (Pierson 2012: 5-6), "the great stink" of London, high levels of infant death, typhoid, rickets and TB, and malnutrition (Sheldon & Macdonald 2010). The state's response in Britain was, interestingly, to create a "stigma of pauperism" (Pierson, 2012: 8) by clearing the Poor Law Amendment Act (1834), that sought to deter individuals from becoming or remaining poor, in effect, created harsher conditions for the poor and the unemployed in the so-called "workhouses" (Sheldon & Macdonald: 2010). This amendment act that was designed to deter the poor from availing the services of government sponsored aid, thus, continued to be detested by the very constituencies it sought to support. The idea of help through charities to be extended to the poor under the over-riding doctrine of laissez-faire meant it to be that way then.

Charity Organisation Societies (COS) and Settlement Houses

We are drawn to understand, in the meantime, that these sufferings of human beings at such massive scales drew the attention of several voluntary associations, prominent among them being the churches. The efforts put in by these philanthropic associations were, however, "overwhelmingly local", haphazardly "in competition with each other" and often "sectarian", and without "trained" personnel, and were considered to have strayed far from the tenets of the Poor Law (Pierson 2012: 16). The Charity Organisation Societies (COS), it may be said, matured out of this necessity in the second half of the nineteenth century underlying the principles of the Poor Law, stressing the importance of individual character, moral make-up and sense of self-responsibility. Thus terms such as, "philanthropy, charity, correction, outdoor relief, care of dependents, defectives and delinquents" were most commonly used by the COS's practitioners. And in line with the dominant ideology of the times, Mary E. Richmond

significantly had pleaded, in 1897, for the establishment of a "Training School in Applied Philanthropy" (Steiner 1921: 475).

Whereas, the practice component of the COS aimed at the reformation of the individual by adhering to the dominant socio-political and economic doctrine of laissez-faire of the time, there was a rapidly expanding section that "emphasised on the social side of human existence, the influence of social context in the lives of individuals" (Fook 2012: 4). In this perspective, the approach was not to focus on the individual traits and shortcomings for reformation, but to target social environments that affected peoples' quality of lives. This radical perspective orientated social work intervention and activities around improving the "living and housing conditions, social surveys of various kinds, promotion of recreational activities," community organisation around social problems, and sensitisation of the people around issues that affected their everyday lives (Steiner 1921: 476), instead of seeking to reform the so-called "deviant" individuals. As seen in the subsequent developments of the field of social work, we know that Settlement Houses in Europe and United States of America, and the Guilds of Help and Councils of Social Service in England became the nuclear points of this approach and practice (Pierson 2012). This variance in terms of practice perspectives that were noticeable in the fledgling stage of social work has increased manifolds today (see for example, Mullaly 1993; Fook 2012; and bodhi 2014).

Secondly, while tracing the evolution of these two perspectives of social work practice to its very roots, it may also be observed that, simultaneous efforts were on, to produce trained individuals for dispensing charity in a "scientific" and "organised" manner (Devine, n.d., as cited in Steiner, 1921: 476). The big question at that time, and over which there arose severe differences was in what manner social workers should be trained. Should they be trained by practitioners in practice settings, or in academic by academicians? As is evident from the way social work training developed in the following years, there was a merger, albeit oppositions from both ends, of the "apprenticeship system of training for social work" as advocated by the practical workers, on the one hand, and the theoretical and professional grounding of social workers as advocated by the "men of science" in universities, on the other (Steiner 1921 and Bruno 1936).

Although, the social work education program in the universities evolved out of both the perspectives, there continued to be, and continues to this day, academic altercations arising out of different viewpoints pertaining to the academic credentials of the social work aspirant, curriculum content of the social work programme, and the manner in which these are to be delivered to the students (see for example, Leonard 1968; Mullaly 1993; and bodhi 2014). Further, the schism between the remedial approach that have continued to aim at individual reformation, and the structural approach aiming at changes in the institutions and structures that oppress and marginalise human beings have widened to a great extent to date (Mullaly 2007; bodhi 2014).

Colonisation and Social Work

The colonisation era was significant as it laid the ground for the expansion of social work to the colonised countries. The focal point of the social work interventions in the colonial countries were in the areas such as "health, education, and law and order in the urban areas"; often administered, or rather "imposed" by the westerners with a "civilising" bent of approach, serving thus, the interest of the colonisers rather than "these countries' development" needs (Cox & Pawar 2006: 5-6). Midgley (1981), as quoted in Cox & Pawar (2006: 6), stated that in order to promote "modern" social work in colonised countries, the experiences, training contents and the western professional standards of social work education were replicated in these countries by the "western social work experts." As can be seen from postcolonial scholarships, these efforts often has had lasting adverse and debilitating effects on the lives, relationships and agencies of large numbers of people worldwide who are still struggling to recover from the "unfortunate" processes of colonisation (see for example, Smith 1999, & Akhup 2013).

Social Work education and practice in India

In India, too, as in other colonised countries, the first professionally run social work intervention came about in the form of the Nagpada Neighbourhood House, started along the lines of the Settlement Houses in the West. In order to meet the demands of trained personnel for engaging in social work, it was soon upgraded into the Sir Dorabji Tata Graduate School of Social Work in 1936.

It is not surprising that the training curriculum followed by the first and newly established independent school of social work in India replicated much of the traditions that responded to the social, economic and political questions arising out of "industrialisation" in the west and did not, in effect, venture into the context relevant in India. And this tradition of social work has continued to this day with skin-deep changes, applied in different contexts across the length and breadth of the country, upheld and put into practice with much vigour by universities that have come forward to take up social

work education in India. Although there has been efforts to Indianize social work by invoking the socio-cultural and religious philanthropic traditions of India (see for example, Gore 1965; Desai 2002; and Patel & Dubey 2010), indigenising social work education and practice, per se, by making it responsive to the social, political and economic questions of India's context has remained wanting and neglected. In fact, much of the education and practice, till the restructuring of social work programme in the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in the year 2006, had retained and perpetuated the "remedial" model of the west (bodhi 2014).

This failure on the part of the social work education and practice to contextualise may be in concurrence with what Dominelli (2002: 28-32) calls the "oppressive caring profession" that perpetuate relations of domination and inequality by pretending to be "helpful" of those in need and at the same time becoming the "agents of social control" for the dominant. The negligence on the part of social work education and practice in India to frame within its ambit, for a long time, an education programme and intervention strategies that are responsive to the issues arising out of caste violence, for instance, tell tales about the failure of social work to contextualise in India and its deliberate attempt to act as silent spectator to processes and structures that dehumanise.

The deplorable plight of large groups of the tribal/indigenous peoples across the country (see for example bodhi 2013; Sharma 2014; and Sakhrani 2014), and the devotion of social work education for ameliorating their material conditions remain much in want. Similarly, the abusive experiences of India's northeast (see for example, Leo 2013; Narzary 2013; Narzary & Swargiary 2013; Riamei 2013; Rocky 2013; and Tripura 2013) and the long and continued failure of social work to address the issues there does not portend well for social work practice and education in India, either.

Setting the context
Having drafted a picture about the way social work education was imported to India, presently, I attempt to conceptualise a framework for tribal/indigenous social work practice in India's northeast. I feel that, at this point in time, it is beyond me and the scope of this paper, to draw or produce an outline of social work education for the entire northeast India, given the diversity of social, political and economic issues that confront the region and its ultra-complex mix of peoples. However, I feel that this humble attempt of mine to sketch a plausible framework, drawn largely from my experience of having been part of the first batch of

privileged social work trainees to train in the Dalit and Tribal Social Work programme (2006-2008) in the Tata Insititute of Social Sciences (TISS), along with my limited teaching and training experiences in the TISS Guwahati and the Department of Social Work, Assam Don Bosco University, and my lived experience as an individual who has been and seen as to what it means to be a member of a tribal/indigenous group, will be an expression of a truth long silent both within and outside social work education and training.

Presently, I will proceed with the paper by first presenting in short the context of Indian scenario pertaining to the tribes/indigenous peoples. This will be followed by a brief sketch on the socio-political and economic experiences of the tribal/indigenous peoples of India's northeast, and finally, a framework for engaging in tribal social work education in the region.

Tribal/indigenous peoples' scenario in India
There are ample scholarships to suggest that the tribal reality in the country today presents a distorted and paradoxical situation. Sakhranie (2014: 17-23), while reflecting on the politico-historical location of the tribes within the ambit of Indian constitution argues that "othering" of the tribal/indigenous peoples and their cultures "became part of the nation building project" since its formative days. Tribal/indigenous peoples, thus, have found themselves in the wrong end of the "demonising of the other" processes that has been a continuation of the colonial legacy. She further pointed out that "in many ways the colonial encounter with natives continues in post independence India with the tribes who are still considered subjects and not entirely citizens due to the national/ cultural/ racial hierarchy embedded in the ideology and governance of the Indian state (ibid: 19)."

Sharma (2014: 361-69) bemoans the absolute disregard on the part of the national politicians, academicians, administrators and social workers to the "historic injustice" that has been meted out to the tribal/indigenous populations in terms of the state processes that led to the "criminalisation of the tribal community". He further infers that a "policy vacuum" and the "trivialisation of the constitutional frame" are the factors that have brought about "total failure" of the state, a "deepening crises" and "disastrous consequences" in the lives of the tribal peoples across the country.

When we look at the material condition of the tribal peoples, the picture presented is grim an no better. Tribal peoples continue to suffer from lack and want in all sectors of development. They are to be found in the

lowest runk in every field of human development indices. This scenario of impoverishment and continued exclusion from the benefits of development has resulted in large scale rise in extremist movements in the tribal/indigenous peoples' areas (Mehta 2010). Xaxa (2011) contends that in the transactional relationship between the state and the tribals, the tribals were promised the benefits accruing out of development in the country. However, the large scale alienation of tribal lands, the loss of their resource-rich habitats and the impoverishment on a scale hitherto unprecedented, suggest that all throughout the post-independence period, the state has expropriated much from the tribes while denying to them the fruits of India's development. The tribal children, men and women therefore continue to languish in poverty and utter neglect.

Displacement is no longer an unfamiliar term in the tribal context in India. Its scale and magnitude has hardly been adequately documented in India (see for example, Sharma 2014). However, it has been carried on most recklessly by the state in the post independence era to the disastrous consequence on the lives and livelihoods of the tribal/indigenous peoples across the country (see for example, Mishra 2002). On the other hand, trafficking of tribal children and girls for forced labour and flesh-trade goes on unabated in the country (The Times of India 2014).

Thus, we have a tribal/indigenous scenario in the country that speaks of contradictions, injustices, human rights' violations, oppression, exploitation and criminalisation. The response of the state has been that of repression and violence though (see for example, (Sahoo 2013). The response of social work to this dire situation also has been lackadaisical, in that, apart from occasional "lip services" it has not done anything noteworthy in terms of social work education or formulation of intervention strategies (bodhi 2014).

Tribal/indigenous context in India's Northeast
Northeast India, comprising of eight states, namely, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura, is a frontier region having common borders with China, Burma, Bhutan and Bangladesh. Of late, an administrative and political unit, "the concept of north-east India and the regional reorganisation of this multi-ethnic setting has done colossal damage in social, political and economic parameters" (Shimray 2004) especially in the tribal peoples' context.

Shimray (2003) maintains that the complex and conflicting socio-political and ethno-cultural phenomena

of the northeast India has its inception in the superimposition of the unfamiliar state and socio-legal structures over the traditional institutions that continued to produce an unequal power balance and relationships among different ethnic communities of the region since the colonial days. The continued imbalance in power-sharing relationships served to maintain the hegemonic control of the dominant over the subordinate, evident in the language policies of Assam, Tripura and Manipur, where Assamese, Bengali and Meitei were introduced as medium of instruction among the tribal populations of the respective states. In this regard, education policies and practices of the state have also been found to perpetuate and reinforce a hegemonic social order by the dominant, while alienating the ethnically subordinated tribal/indigenous learner (Narzary & Swargiary 2013).

Recent scholarships on conflict in the northeastern Indian region also suggest that state has prolonged and fuelled divisions along ethnic lines by rigidly adhering to a "security-mindset" (Baruah 2003) and displacement meted out to the tribal groups in lieu of development projects (Fernandes & Bharali 2011; Daimary 2012).

Changing land relations among the tribal communities of the region, a by-product of the land-system-modernisation project of the state, beginning with the Permanent Settlement of Bengal 1793, led to extreme forms of exploitation of groups, who had hitherto had no exposure to the concept of individual ownership of land. Presenting cases of communities, such as, the Adivasis of Assam, Aka of Arunachal Pradesh, Garos of Meghalaya, and Bodos of Assam, Fernandes and Melville (2005) attribute several conflicts as arising out of confusion and non-recognition of the community ownership of land among the tribals in northeast India.

Immigration-related socio-economic problems, such as alienation of tribal lands and resources-linked conflict, have also contributed to the conflagrations in the region (Shimray 2004; Daimary 2012). Immigration, while it puts pressure on land and other resources of the tribal peoples, produces large-scale socio-demographic repercussions. Case in point is that of the tribals of Twipra (Tripura), who, in the second half of the twentieth century, have been reduced from being a numerical majority and a ruling community into a minority with no more economic and political hold in the land they behold as their ancestral right (Debbarma 2008). The state has imposed severe political and cultural repression and violence among the tribal/indigenous populations of the region. Cases of atrocities, human rights violations and inhuman treatment meted out to them by the 'security personnel' go unnoticed and unpunished many a time (see for

example, The Times of India 2013). The socio-cultural processes of forced-assimilation policies pursued by the state inflict cultural violence in the everyday life of the tribals (see for example, Narzary 2013).

Thus, we find that, issues in northeast India are generally "tribal" in character. They have propped up and continued to linger on with damaging consequences for these populations. As evidenced by the scholarships surveyed, they have emerged out of a variety of deep-seated concerns such as, superimposition of the unfamiliar political and socio-legal structures over the traditional institutions, imbalance in power-sharing relationships, poor governance, unemployment of youths, education policies and practices that alienate rather than enthuse the tribal, displacement meted out to them in lieu of the development projects, changing land relations, immigration-related socio-economic problems, alienated economy, repression and violence perpetrated by the state, among others.

There is, therefore, the need to right these wrongs. Therein lies the necessity to explore the ontological being and epistemological construction from an axiological 'emic-stance' of the tribal/indigenous peoples in northeast India; and the call to seek answers for how their trajectories are led to conflicting claims, counterclaims and contestations. Only by addressing these gaps and filling the voids could we hope to attain peace and dignified existence of all in northeast India. A situation such as this present before the social worker a complex and challenging set of socio-political and economic questions that cannot be left unanswered and untended to any further.

Tribal Social Work Education in Northeast India: a conception

As it has been discussed, we may trace to the roots of social work practice, the two broad approaches it adopted while responding and dealing with human problems- a remedial model aiming at the reformation of the individual while maintaining conformity with one's systems, and the structural model targeting structural changes that would liberate the individual from situations of expropriation, oppression and marginalisation. Secondly, in the case of dispensing social work education, we are aware that there was a prolonged tussle between the practitioner/activist and the theoretician/academic. Finally, the question now is- when a socio-political and economic scenario coming to pass, as seen in the case of the tribal/indigenous peoples in India's northeast is presented before social work, what do we do? Where do we go from here?

bodhi (2014(a): 69), for the first time laid down a conceptual frame forming the philosophical foundations that inform a methodological framework for tribal social work education in India. Referring to the tribal/indigenous communities as "epistemological communities", he posits that "historically pejorative ascription, socially and structurally distinct, egalitarian, ecologically and culturally embedded communities" form the ontological premise of this philosophy. Secondly, the epistemological premise is framed within the "informal knowledge systems, based on trust and respect", as also, it is rooted within a relational episteme and positioning. A move towards "egalitarianism within justice" and respect for diversity frame its axiological standpoint.

A social work education programme based on this philosophical foundation would, in essence, be imbued with a pedagogical approach that aims at promoting social work graduates who are committed to structural changes, rather than remedial/residual changes for ensuring social justice for all and of all. The knowledge content of the social work curriculum would be abreast with processes of colonisation and forms of colonisation understood from the lens of an indigenous worldview (see for example, Leo 2013). Smith (1999) contends that there is a need to redeem the indigenous/tribal peoples from the ravages of colonisation by "decolonising" the corrupt and distorted imageries of the indigenous/tribal selfhood as presented in the mainstream media, literature and education programmes. Appreciating the tribal/indigenous worldview and upholding it as an "active component of their identity and collective consciousness" (Morrissette, McKenzie & Morrissette 1983, as cited in Campbell 2003, in bodhi 2014) would form the value framework of the curriculum. The "time-table, group labs, rural practicum, and methods" (bodhi 2014: 72-74) should move away from its remedial model and accommodate structural and critical perspectives that seek social transformation rather than individual reformation. Such an approach would make social work education relevant and responsive to the socio-political and economic questions of the tribal/indigenous peoples of India's northeast. It will also give an impetus to the efforts of Indianising social work in the broader context.

References

Akhup, A. 2013. Revisiting tribal studies in india: an epistemological perspective. *Journal of Tribal Intellectual Collective India,* Vol. 1, Issue 1 (1) , 1-16.

Baruah, S. 2003. Confronting constructionism: ending india's naga war. *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 40 (3), 321-338

bodhi, s. 2013. Of savagery disruption, historical injustice and political distortion: reflections on chotanagpur, adivasi, state and empowerment. *Journal of Tribal Intellectual Collective India* , 1-24.

_____ 2014. On the politics of social work curriculum and pedagogy: an educator's perspective. *Indian Journal of Dalit and Tribal Social Work* , 71-78.

_____ 2014(a). Tribal social work: some reflection on its philosophical foundation. *Indian Journal of Dalit and Tribal Social Work, Vol. 2, Issue1 (6)*, 64-74.

Bruno, F. 1936. Newer trends in education for family social work. *Journal of Educational Sociology, Vol. 9* (5), Education and Social Work , 272-283.

Cox, D., & Pawar, M. 2006. *International social work: issues, strategies and programmes*. New Delhi: Vistaar.

Daimary, L. 2012. *Status of adivasis/indigenous peoples land, Series 5*. Delhi: Aakar Books.

Debbarma, M. 2008. *A handbook on the identity, history and life of borok people*. Agartala: Kokborok Sahitya Sabha.

Desai, M. 2002. *Ideologies and social work*. New Delhi: Rawat Publications.

Dominelli, L. 2002. *Anti-oppressive social work theory and practice*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Fernandes, W., & Bharali, G. 2011. *Uprooted for whose benefit? development-induced displacement in assam 1947-2000.* Guwahati: North Eastern Social Research Centre.

Fernandes, W., & Pereira, M. 2005. Changing *land relations and ethnic conflicts: the case of northeastern india.* Guwahati: NorthEastern Social Research Centre.

Fook, J. 2012. *Social work: a critical approach to practice, 2nd ed*. New Delhi: Sage.

Gore, M. S. 1965. *Social work and social work education*. New Delhi: Rawat Publications.

Leo, D. 2013. Reassembling the notion of land: from the lived experience of the poumai naga tribe in manipur. *Journal of Tribal Intellectual Collective India, Vol.1, Issue 1* (4) , 38-54.

Leonard, P. 1968. The application of sociological analysis to social work training. *The British Journal of Sociology, Vol. 19* (4) , 375-384.

Mehta, S. K. 2010. *Including scheduled tribes in orissa's development: barriers and opportunities.* New Delhi: IHD & UNICEF.

Midgley, J. 1981. *Professional imperialism:social work in the third world*. London: Heinemann.

Mishra, S. K. 2002. *Krepublishers.* Retrieved July 26, 2014, from www.krepublishers.com: http://www.krepublishers.com/02-

Journals/JSS/JSS-06-0-000-000-2002-Web/JSS-06-3-153-02-Abst-PDF/JSS-06-3-197-02-Mishra-S-K/JSS-06-3-197-02-Mishra-S-K-Tt.pdf

Mullaly, R. 1993. *Structural social work: ideology, theory and practice*. Ontario: M&S.

_____ 2007. The pursuit of social justice: structural social work. *Knowledge, policy and service: a dialogue between east and west on social work.* Sanghai: East China University of Science and Technology.

Narzary, R. 2013. Why 'script' movement of the bodos: revisiting debates in political sociology. *Journal of Tribal Intellectual Collective India, Vol. 1, Issue 2* (5) , 66-77.

Narzary, V., & Swargiary, B. 2013. Defamiliarising oppression: learning to read in a bodo medium school. *Journal of Tribal Intellectual Collective India, Vol. 1, Issue 1*(3) , 27-37.

Patel, A., & Dubey, M. 2010. *Philosophy of social work.* Delhi: Crescent.

Pierson, J. 2012. *Understanding social work: history and context.* Rawat Publications: Guwahati.

Reicher, S. 2004. The context of social identity: domination, resistance and change. *Political psychology, Vol. 25* (6) , 921-945.

Riamei, J. 2013. Contestations against forces of marginalisation: district council and tribal resistance in manipur. *Journal of Tribal Intellectual Collective India, Vol. 1, Issue 1* (5), 55-69.

Rocky, R. 2013. Tribes and tribal studies in northeast: deconstructing the politics of colonial methodology. *Journal of Tribal Intellectual Collective India, Vol. 1, Issue 2* (2), 25-37.

Sahoo, S. 2013. *ISA eSymposium for Sociology.* Retrieved July 26, 2014, from ISA eSymposium for Sociology: http://www.isa-sociology.org/publ/E-symposium/E-symposium-vol-3-2-2013/EBul-Sahoo-Jul2012.pdf

Sakhrani, M. 2014. On the politico-historical location of scheduled tribes in the indian constitution: reflections on critical intersections. *Journal of Tribal Intellectual Collective* India .

Sharma, B. D. 2014. The saptapadi (seven steps) for tribal empowerment in india. *Journal of Tribal Intellectual Collective India* , 398-461.

Sheldon, B., & Macdonald, G. (2010). A textbook of social work. London: Routledge.

Shimray, U. A. 2004. Socio-political unrest in the region called north-east india. *Economic and Political Weekly,* Vol. 39 (42) , 4637-4643.

Smith, L. T. 1999. *Decolonizing methodologies: reasearch and indigenous peoples*. London: Zed Books.

Steiner, J. F. 1921. Education for social work. *American Journal of Sociology, Vol. 26* (4) , 475-518.

The Times of India. 2013. Student, Tribal body denounce Chirang Killings (December 18). Retrieved July 26, 2014, from *The Times of India Guwahati*: http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati /Student-tribal-bodies-denounce-Chirang-killings/articleshow/27589581.cms

_____ 2014. Trafficking of tribal girls (July 26).. Retrieved July 26, 2014, from *The Times of India*: http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/topic/Traffick ing-of-tribal-girls.

Tripura, B. 2013. Tribal question in tripura- dialogue between its past and present. *Journal of Tribal Intellectual Collective India, Vol. 1, Issue 2 (*3) , 38-50.

Xaxa, V. 2011. *The status of tribal children in India a historical perspective*. New Delhi: IHD & UNICEF.