

## **Philosophy of Social Work**

It is important to know about the philosophical foundations of social work because they can be helpful to examine the ultimate realities of the concept, principles and values of social work and can help us to obtain deeper understanding about the essentiality of the profession. Before entering into the discussion on philosophical foundations of social work, it is necessary to understand what philosophy is and what social work philosophy is.

### **Concept of Philosophy**

At its simplest, **philosophy** (from the Greek word *phílosophía*, meaning ‘the love of wisdom’) is **the study of knowledge**. In a broad sense, philosophy is an activity people undertake when they seek to understand fundamental truths about themselves, the world in which they live, and their relationships to the world and to each other.

### **Philosophy is**

investigation of the nature, causes, or principles of reality, knowledge, or values, based on logical reasoning rather than empirical methods (*American Heritage Dictionary*).

### **Social Work Philosophy**

Like other professions, social work borne and grew out of certain needs of human beings. In the beginning social work served mainly the poor and helpless, but with changing situations, it took the face of other services as well. Now in the twenty first century, it is mostly concerned with the problems wherever human institutions or human relations either break down or threaten to break or even are not at the stage of maximum potential.

Social work is the youngest profession that emerged in 20<sup>th</sup> century. As a profession it is still in its tender age. Though it continue to exist from the very

beginning of human civilization as helping activity, has not produced great philosophers of its own. It therefore, uses the philosophical thoughts from other professions and relates those to the basic knowledge and methods applied in its own areas of operation.

**Edward C. Lindman** was the first social worker who made conscious efforts to identify some philosophical bases of social work profession. According to E.C Lindman, social work is based on humanitarian philosophy, for its main concern is the welfare and happiness of human beings. Except from devotion to the welfare of human beings, a social worker has to find a method of enabling those who are assisted to regain their confidence in themselves for the proper adjustment to normal life. The philosophy of democracy also has a sound base for social work. It strengthened the need to recognize every human being as an individual, worthy of respect and recognition. The basic philosophical components of democracy are, importance of the consent of ruled, rule of majority, respect for creative minority, freedom of assembly, speech and religion. These components lay the foundation for social justice, liberty,, equality and fraternity which form a significant part of social work philosophy.

**The American Association of Schools of Social Work** has set down the a statement that may be said to represent the current philosophy of social work. As the statement goes, “Social Work accepts as its main objectives the adjustment of individual in the society. It views this adjustment as dynamic and changing as individual development takes place and as the social setting is modified. Its views lack of adjustment as originated in the physical, mental and emotional make up of individual, and in the environment which conditions his behaviour. Thus, profession of social work functions in both areas, utilizing certain skills for service to the individual and other for the control of the environment”.

The main concern of social work is individual, the understanding of his needs and his adjustment to his environment. Social workers enter people's lives in very practical and intimate way they necessarily become involved in the issues which have an inescapable connection with the philosophy of human beings.

**The United Nations** Third International Survey on Training for Social Work sums up some of the philosophical and ethical assumptions on which the profession of Social Work has so far been built is that

1. To organize the worth of individual human being, regardless of the circumstances, status, race, religion, politics or behavior; and to foster the growth of human dignity and self-respect.
2. To respect individual, group and community differences, at the same time as seeking to harmonize them with the common welfare.
3. To encourage self-help as a means to growth in self-confidence and ability to assume responsibility.
4. To promote opportunities for satisfying living in the particular circumstance of individuals, groups and communities.
5. To accept professional responsibilities to work for the implementation of social policies consistent with social work knowledge and philosophy about human desires and needs, with the aims of affording to every individual the opportunity to make the best use of his environment and his own potentialities.
6. To safeguard the confidential nature of professional relationship
7. To use this relationship to help clients (individuals, groups or communities) to become more free and self-reliant rather than to try to manipulate them to fit a preconceived pattern

8. To make responsible use of resources and professional relationship for the purpose of promoting as objectively as possible the greatest good for the individual and the best interest of the society.

**According to Herbert Bisno**, the philosophical assumption underlying the theory of social work are

- (a) each individual, by the very fact of his existence is of worth,
- (b) human suffering is undesirable and should be prevented, or at least alleviated,
- (c) social work rejects the assumption-survival of the fittest,
- (d) public assistance should be based on the concept of need, and
- (e) all classes of persons in the community have an equal right to the social services; there is a community responsibility to relieve adequately and without discrimination all members of the community.

In the recent years some thinkers of social work profession, after careful analysis of the concept, principles, methods and experiences gained from the social work practice have formulated some basic concepts of social work philosophy that can be stated under the following points:

### **1. Belief in the worth and dignity of an individual**

Every individual no matter where he stands at the social order, what he does, what he contribute to society, how big or small qualities he possesses is of worth. Social work strongly believes that each person's life is socially desirable and every person has some dignity to hold on. Worth and dignity of individual is the central theme of social work. Some fundamental principles of social work like individualization, non-judgmental attitude, equality of opportunity, the

rights of the weaker members of society, social justice democratic values etc. manifest the importance of worth and worth of individual.

## **2. Belief on individual freedom**

One of the earliest philosophers Rousseau said, “Man is borne free but everywhere hi is in chain”. It implies that man is an eternal bondage of various needs and deficiencies in himself and in his social environment. Social work which is also known as helping profession seeks to mitigate those deficiencies and ameliorate human problems. It tries to free individuals, groups, communities and society form the clutches of various problems. Social work emphasizes on the total freedom of individuals for it realizes that freedom is indispensable for the human growth and development and ultimately human happiness. Total freedom encompasses political freedom, freedom from poverty, freedom from social disorders and freedom from chronic sickness ( physical and mental) and so on that stand on the way of development of an individual and the society.

## **3. Inter-dependency between the individual and the society**

Individuals and society have always maintained unbreakable and inseparable relationship between them since their existence. Man cannot live without society. For the fulfillment of every single need from womb to tomb, man depends on society in one or the other way. Starting from child care to education, security, employment, livelihood, love and affection everything is possible only through social relationship which is the life cell of the society. In the same way society cannot exist without individuals and no social relationship can happen without human beings. Hence, the sole priority of social work is individual and his relationship with the society. When the relation between individual and his society is disturbed, problem occurs. Social work does

nothing but attempts to make an adjustment in the relationship between the individual's need and the social environment.

#### **4. Multiplicity of the causal factors**

A human or social problem doesn't come from a single factor. Several factors are responsible for a single social problem. For instance, if we take poverty as a social problem, it is a result of not one or two factors. If you ponder about, you can find several factors responsible for poverty of a person or a society.

Similarly the problems of alcoholism, family disorganization, juvenile delinquency, beggary, crime etc have multiple of causal factors. Social work for this reason believes in holistic approach for intervention in solving social problems. Social work does not simply believe in single factor for a problem. It adapts scientific social diagnosis to find out related factors which may be contributing to a particular problem. It also works on attacking all the factors contributing to the problem at hand and tries to bring about a scientific solution.

#### **5. Collective responsibility**

Solution of a Psycho-social problem is not a single man job. It calls for collective effort from all people especially those who are directly related to a given problem. Life in the society has always demanded for collective responsibility. Even in the ancient days the people with problems were helped by family, caste panchayats and other human groupings. Social work believes in participatory approach of solving problems and making development. It attempts to involve all the possible forces to tackle problems. In the cases of individual problems social work tries to organize the people around the individual and involves them to solve his problems. In case of community/social problem social work attempts to organize the community/society to solve the problems. Thus collective responsibility forms a foundation of social work philosophy.

## **6. Recognition of the concept of welfare state**

Welfare state can be defined as “a state where well being/welfare of the people is the responsibility of the state/ government.” It implies that in a welfare state, the government takes the mandatory responsibility for the well being and welfare of its citizens. The concept of welfare state has been recognized by most of the independent countries of the world including India. Social work upholds the idea of welfare state and very often uses the popular forces to pressurize the government to plan and work for the welfare of people. The recognition of concept of welfare state has given social work a strong platform to make conscious use of state resources for the upliftment of the needy people of the society.

## **7. Belief in democratic values**

Belief in democratic values is one of the fundamental components of social work practice. It is a known fact that social work as a profession stands on the democratic footings. The humanitarian principles of democracy like equal rights, social justice, and equal opportunity are also accepted as fundamental guidelines of social work practice. Under the guidance of democratic values social work operates on the basis of humanitarian philosophy which upholds the ideals of human welfare and happiness as the highest moral of the society. In its noble mission of human happiness social work involves itself in attaining equal rights, social justice and social equilibrium in the society. It looks forward to establish a just society where every one lives a happy and comfortable life.

## **8. Positive Change**

There are serious political, economic and cultural maladjustment in our society. The co-existence of such maladjustments calls for the conscious efforts to bridge the underlying gaps for the good cause of the society. If these gaps are to meet, there is a need for social change and for a positive social change; there is

a need of social planning. Social workers, otherwise known as change agents know the intelligent direction of social change. They find the best possible ways and means to bring about social change in the society. To bring about a desirable change in the society, social work basically sets two broad objectives:

1. to enable and organize the people and use their cooperative power for the improvement of the society.
2. To work on the system to make it suitable and functional so that people can help themselves to contribute for their own development.