

Historical Development of Social Welfare in England

In the medieval Europe helping the underprivileged classes of people like the poor, the widows, the unemployed, and the physically handicapped was an activity of church. Until, the beginning of the 14th century the king and the parliament did not interfere with the works of church. But the breakdown of feudalism and the emergence of a new economic order brought about a remarkable change in the social and life of England.

King Edward III Issued the statute of laborers in 1349 compelling the able bodied laborers without means to accept employment from anybody willing to offer it.

Statute of Henry V111 in 1531 Provided that the mayors and justices of peace would be required to investigate into the applications of the aged and the poor unable to work who were maintained by the parish. It also provided that these papers were be registered and licensed to beg in some fixed areas. In 1536, the parliament adopted its first measures for poor relief under governmental care and administration that alms were collected by the church on each Sunday and that local authorities were to help the impotent and the poor. Able bodied beggars were forced to work and earn for themselves and for their families.

The Elizabethan Poor law of 1601

In 1601 Queen Elizabeth codified all the poor laws enacted by the preceding kings and parliaments and promulgated a Poor Law which is often referred as “The Elizabethan poor law of 1601).

The poor law provided that families of needy members must support them. According to the provision of this law the responsibility of the parish to help the destitute was limited only to those who could not be supported by their families and relatives The Elizabethan Poor Law of 1601 divided the poor into three categories.

- The able bodied poor
- The impotent poor
- The dependent children

The able bodied poor were the sturdy beggars. Citizens were strictly forbidden to give alms to this class of people. They were forced to work in the work house.

The impotent poor were the physically and mentally handicapped people. They were unable to work. The law provided that this class of people was to be placed in almshouses where they were to work within the limit of their capacities.

The dependent children were orphans, deserted children and children from very poor families. The law provided that these children would be placed to persons who were willing to take without any charge or with very low charge. Boys had to learn the trade of their masters and had to serve up to 24 years of age. Girls were employed as domestic servants and had to remain there till their 21st birthday.

According to this law “Overseers of the poor” appointed by the Justice of Peace or Magistrate were entrusted with the task of administering poor laws in the parish.

They had to receive applications of the poor for relief and make investigation into the socio-economic conditions of the applicants in order to decide their eligibility for public relief.

The poor law was financed mainly by poor tax which was supplemented by donations and fines for violation of the provisions of any statute.

The Poor Law of 1601 established the pattern of public relief under government care and administration in England for three hundred years. It holds the bases of all poor laws of the world.

The Settlement Act of 1662

The law or act was enacted to stop the migration of poor from rural areas to cities to get free meals. The poor, who promised not to beg, were allowed migration by Magistrate.

The Poor Law Revision of 1834

During the early part of the 19th century, England experienced a number of social problems control and power of church and dominance of commercial and industrial economy. The existing poor laws failed to solve problems satisfactorily with a view to examining and revising existing poor laws, the parliament appointed a Commission in 1833. The Commission presented its report in 1834. The six recommendations of the commission were as follows.

- To abolish partial relief introduced previously.
- To place able bodied applicants for relief in the work house.
- To grant outdoor relief only to the sick, the old, and widows and children

- To coordinate the administration of relief of several parishes into a “poor law union”
- To make the condition of poor relief recipients less desirable than those of the lowest paid workers in the community,
- To establish a Central Board of Control to be appointed by the King

These recommendations were enacted on August 14, 1834 and were as the new poor law.