



Jnanadeepa

Pune Journal of Religious Studies

ISSN P-2249-1503

www.punejournal.in

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4272085

Stable URL: <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4272085>

Jnanadeepa: Pune Journal of Religious Studies Jan-June 2013 16/1

Religion, Spirituality and Social Work Ethics: The Indian Perspective

Pankaj Kumar Das & Vijay Mane

Abstract: The phenomenon of globalization has changed Indian people's world into a place of abundance and plenty. On the one hand, unprecedented growth of the knowledge and privileges of man have been taking place, and on the other hand, restlessness and maddening tensions have also increased. The mental deformity impulse opposing ethical values and the destructive instincts are on the rise. People in general are being confronted with concerns such as trauma, illness, insomnia, stress, depression, substance abuse, aggressiveness, violence, suicide, loss or grief etc. In such situation people may likely to seek solace in spiritual and religious beliefs and support systems as it provides relief to their body and peace to their mind.

It is common observation in India that people; irrespective of intellectual or illiterate are happier discussing their personal psycho-social problems with priests, astrologers, tantrics, etc., than competent social workers. People have no hesitation in paying them. Therefore the "Religion and Spirituality" of the client in India is an important issue to be acknowledged.

Keywords: Spirituality for Social Work, Indian Perspectives, Psychological problems

Cite as: Das, Pankaj Kumar and Vijay Mane. (2013). Religion, Spirituality and Social Work Ethics: The Indian Perspective (Version 1.0). Jnanadeepa: Pune Journal of Religious Studies, Jan-June 2013 (16/1), 50-64. http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4272085

2013-01-10 | Updated on Nov 10, 2020

Religion, Spirituality and Social Work Ethics: The Indian Perspective

Pankaj Kumar Das

Yashwantrao Chavan School of Social Work, Satara,
Maharashtra {dspankaj@rediffmail.com}.

Vijay Mane

Yashwantrao Chavan School of Social Work, Satara,
Maharashtra {vijayjmane@rediffmail.com}

The phenomenon of globalization has changed Indian people's world into a place of abundance and plenty. On the one hand, unprecedented growth of the knowledge and privileges of man have been taking place, and on the other hand, restlessness and maddening tensions have also increased. The mental deformity impulse opposing ethical values and the destructive instincts are on the rise. People in general are being confronted with concerns such as trauma, illness, insomnia, stress, depression, substance abuse, aggressiveness, violence, suicide, loss or grief etc. In such situation people may likely to seek solace in spiritual and religious beliefs and support systems as it provides relief to their body and peace to their mind.

It is common observation in India that people; irrespective of intellectual or illiterate are happier discussing their personal psycho-social problems with priests, astrologers, tantrics etc, than competent social workers. People have no hesitation in paying them. Therefore the "Religion and Spirituality" of the client in India is an important issue to be acknowledged.

India, the second most populous country in the world, with over 1.21 billion people (Census, 2011),¹ is the birth place of four of the world’s major religious traditions; namely Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism (Deka 2007: 135).

Name of Religion	Percentage of Population	Sex Ratio F/M
Hindu	80.5	931
Muslim	13.4	936
Christian	2.3	1009
Sikhs	1.9	893
Buddhists	0.8	953
Jains	0.4	940
Other religions	0.6	992
India	100	933

Table 1: Distribution of Population by Religious groups and their sex ratio in India (Census 2001)

A vast majority of Indian people associate themselves with a religion. According to the 2001 census, Devotees of Hinduism, a varied grouping of philosophical and devotional traditions officially numbered 687.6 million people or 80.5% of the population of India. Buddhism and Jainism, the ancient monastic traditions, have had a major influence on Indian art, philosophy, and society and remain important minority religions in the late twentieth century. Buddhists represented 0.8 percent of the total population while Jains represented 0.4 percent in 2001 census. Significantly, the Muslim population, 13.4 per cent in India is the third largest in the world. India also has the largest population of people adhering to Zoroastrianism and Bahá’í Faith anywhere in the world (Chary 2009: 31). Throughout Indian history, religion has been an important part of the country’s culture. Religious diversity and religious tolerance have deep historical roots which are established in the country by law and custom.

This Paper makes an effort to substantiate these theoretical assumptions about Religion, Spirituality and Ethics of Social Work from Indian perspective.

Understanding Indian Religious Traditions and Systems

“Religion” refers to organized structures that centre around particular belief, behavior and traditions. In India, on a day-to-day basis, the vast majority of people engage in ritual actions that are motivated by religious systems that owe much to the past but are continuously evolving. Religion, then, is one of the most important facets of Indian history and contemporary life. The major religious traditions of India i.e. Hinduism, Sikhism and Jainism have more or less common sets of beliefs. There are four main religious beliefs that need to be referred to 1. *Karma*, 2. *Dharma*, 3. *Reincarnation* and 4. *Salvation*

1. Karma

Karma is the concept of “act” or “deed”, and that which causes the entire cycle of cause and effect (i.e., the cycle called *saCsâra*) that governs all life. This has originating in ancient India and treated in Hindu, Jain, Buddhist and Sikh philosophy (Singla 2009: 5). Karma can easily be described as for every action there is a consequence. Karma is also seen as the gateway of opportunities for deserving. If good fortune comes the way that mean the person have a good karma, and vice versa, bad fortune equal to bad karma. Karma is not punishment or retribution but simply an extended expression or consequence of natural acts. The effects experienced are also able to be mitigated by actions and are not necessarily fated. The belief of Karma does not believe to be a short term; however, it carries on from this life onto the next. Thus *Karma* is often used as an explanation for positive or negative occurrences in one’s life, thus easing the acceptance of adversities as well as disappointments in life. The law of Karma, which is the law of cause and effect, continues through lifetimes.

In Sikhism, all living beings are described as being under the influence of *maya*'s {illusion} Sanskrit roots *ma* ("not") and *ya*, generally translated as an indicative article meaning "that". Due to the influence of *maya*'s nature; *jivas* (individual beings) perform activities under the control and purview of the eternal time. These activities are called "karma". The underlying principle is that karma is the law that brings back the results of actions to the person performing them.

In Buddhism, karma (Pâli *kamma*) is strictly distinguished from *vipâka*, meaning "fruit" or "result". Most types of karmas, with good or bad results, will keep one within the wheel of *amadhi*, while others will liberate one to *nirvana* (Kuhn 2004). In Jainism, {*Tattvarthasutra*} *Karma* is described as "a mechanism that makes us thoroughly experience the themes of our life until we gained optimal knowledge from them and until our emotional attachment to these themes falls off."

2. *Dharma*

Dharma means accepting one's place in the society. In the context of Hinduism, it refers to one's personal obligations, calling and duties. A Hindu's *dharma* is affected by the person's age, caste, class, occupation, and gender (Brodd 2003). The idea of *dharma* as duty or propriety derives from an idea found in India's ancient legal and religious texts that there is a divinely instituted natural order of things and justice, social harmony and human happiness require that human beings discern and live in a manner appropriate to the requirements of that order.

According to the various Indian religious literatures, beings that live in accordance with *dharma* proceed more quickly toward *dharma yukam*, *moksha* or *nirvana* (personal liberation). In traditional Hindu society, *dharma* has historically denoted a variety of ideas, such as Vedic ritual, ethical conduct, caste rules, and civil and criminal law. It's most common meaning however pertains to two principal ideals: that social life should be structured through well-defined and well-regulated classes

(*varna*), and that an individual's life within a class should be organized into defined stages of life (*ashrama*) (Embree, Hay and Bary 1988: 215). Through the four stages of life (Brahmacharya, Grihastha, Vaanprastha, Sanyaasa), a person also seeks to fulfill the four essentials (*purucârtha-human goal*) of *kama* (sensual pleasures), *artha* (worldly gain), dharma, and *moksha* (liberation from reincarnation or rebirth). Moksha, although the ultimate goal, is emphasized more in the last two stages of life, while artha and kama are considered primary only during Grihastha. Dharma, however is essential in all four stages. As a *purucârtha* (human goal), dharma can also be considered to be a lens through which humans plan and perform their interactions with the world. Through the dharma lens, one focuses on doing what is right and avoiding what is wrong, while the *kama* perspective focuses on doing what is pleasurable (in many senses, not just sex) and avoiding pain, and the *artha* perspective focuses on doing what is profitable (in many senses, not just money) and avoiding loss. The antonym of dharma is *adharma* meaning unnatural or immoral.

With the changing times, the concept of *Dharma* is also changing, creating ample opportunity for Professional Social Work to intervene. For example, the theory of dharma elaborates that not only a person have to accept his place in the society but he have to be good at what you doing and be happy about it. What is the reward he will be getting for this? When he dies and reincarnates to the next life, he may get a better life. This theory is largely ignored by new generation. India is built on caste system and many see *Dharma* as just a technique created to prevent people from crossing the line of social statue or relationship. The concept of *Dharma* has been misused by many people in upper hierarchy to oppress the lower class. That's why Indian Govt. has brought several Social legislations i.e. The Scheduled Castes and Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, to protect the fundamental rights of people from lower strata.

3. Reincarnation

Reincarnation, or the cycle of birth and rebirth, is one of the core concepts in all the three major religious traditions in India. Hence, followers tend to view their present life as part of a long cycle of existence on earth with birth and death being markers separating each life from the next. Death is viewed as a passage to the next life. The soul (*Atman*) transmigrates from one life to the next and this journey terminates only when the soul has reached a certain level of spiritual progress. Then the soul attains salvation, which means the cycle of birth and rebirth has ended and the soul joins the Super soul (*Parmatma* or God). Hindus, Sikhs and Jains perceive the liberation of the soul as the ultimate goal (*Moksha*), and human life is seen as a precious opportunity to achieve spiritual upliftment .

4. Salvation (Moksha)

Salvation is the concept that, as part of divine providence, God saves people from biological death, by providing for them an eternal life or long-lasting afterlife. In Hinduism, Salvation {Moksha} is a process by which a person is realizing that he/she is indeed the Atman {the Immortal Soul within} and not the perishable material body. Hindu salvation is the process by which a person [individual soul] is merging with the Paramathman [or God]. In Hinduism Salvation is known as self-realization or {Moksha} (Viswanathan 2007) . Religions are mere paths and not the final goal. Salvation is a very natural process. It can be achieved in one life or the worst by many lives. The Hindu Salvation process, like Newton's laws of action is mathematical and predictable. Hindu salvation is based on the theory of reincarnation. According to Hindu scriptures, one can attain salvation by four methods i.e. i. Jnana Yoga – Path of knowledge, ii. Karma Yoga – Path of unattached, unmotivated actions and thoughts, iii. Bhakti Yoga – Path of total surrender of one's will to God and iv. Rajyoga – Path of breathing and Pranayama – eradication of evil thoughts.

According to the Buddhism, escaping from suffering in life is possible for the one who accepts and follows the four noble truths: 1) The nature of existence is suffering 2) Suffering is caused by desire, or thirst (*tanha*) to experience existence 3) The complete cessation of desire leads to the cessation of suffering and 4) In order to escape suffering and attain enlightenment, one has to follow the Noble Path, consisting of the eight practices of self-training classified in three categories: morality (*sila*), meditation (*amadhi*) and wisdom (*panna*).

The Muslim doctrine of salvation is that unbelievers (*kuffar*, literally “those who are ungrateful”) and sinners will be condemned, but genuine repentance results in Allah’s forgiveness and entrance into Paradise upon death. The Qur’an teaches the necessity of both faith and good works for salvation: He it is Who sends blessings on you, as do His angels, that He may bring you out from the depths of Darkness into Light: and He is Full of Mercy to the Believers.(33:43)

Religion and Social Work: Indian Context

Religions are the major source of ethics, morality and ideology for the society and for philanthropic work. Religion and spirituality is thought to one of the important motivation for altruistic behavior in any society. In Professional social work, the innate altruistic tendencies of Practitioners are heavily drawn from “Religions”, which in turn is shared with entire humankind.³ Hence, it is important that the studies of Religion and Spirituality should be an integral part of Social work education and intervention.

Social Work is a practice profession. While a value base is necessary for all profession, it is crucial for Social Work (Gutierrez 1988). The values and concepts of Social Work profession i.e. Compassion, recognizing the dignity and worth of an individual, welfare of needy, tolerance, self-control are clearly drawn from the various Religions of the world.

It is fact that, at the times when major Religions of the world were manifested, the concept and practice of Social Work was, as it's understood in modern times, did not exist. However, the Religious ideologies did set up many approaches and practices which clearly overlap with this "helping profession".

The significant contribution of Religion and Religious institution in development of Social Work Profession in India can be understood by the fact that, the major schools of Social Work are founded under the auspicious of Religious Institutions i.e. Christian Missionaries of American Marathi Mission particularly Dr. Manshardt established the first Social Work school in Asia – Tata Institute of Social Science (TISS) at Mumbai. Delhi School of Social Work was founded by the Young Women Christian Association. Centre of Studies in Rural development, Ahmadnagar was founded by the missionaries of American Marathi Mission. Similarly, Nirmala Niketan at Mumbai, Loyola college at Chennai and Trivandrum, Madras Christian College in Tamilnadu, Rajgiri College of Social Work in Kerala, Indore school of Social Work in Madhya Pradesh and Stella Maris College in Tamil Nadu are some of the prominent institutes of Social Work which have flourished under the umbrella of Religious institutions.

Spirituality and Social Work

The term "Spirituality" designates the human longing for a sense of meaning and fulfillment through morally responsible relationship between diverse individuals, families, communities, cultures and religions. Edwards. T. (1983) defines spirituality as, "the underlie dimension of consciousness that openly waits and searches for a transcendence fulfillment of our human nature (Saccoo 1996). Spirituality is experienced through unique and common forms that are expressed in societal myths, rituals and symbols. As such, spirituality includes and goes beyond institutional religious beliefs. Spirituality is often linked to

religion; however, some see it as a distinct concept (Carroll, 1998; Sanzenbach, Canda & Joseph, 1989).

Canda (1990) defines Spirituality it as “the person’s search for a sense of meaning and morally fulfilling relationships between oneself, other people, (and) the encompassing universe. Social work, as quoted by Strops is a process of “helping people to help themselves”. It is commonly understood that unless people discover the meaning and purpose of their life from within, they will not be able to help themselves in real sense. Discovery of “True self” is possible. This is a journey of experiencing fulfillment in life. This gives a sense of fearlessness of death which people may attain if they try to seek it. Thus, from the practical acquisition of spirituality is the attainment of tension free life. This technology being based on wisdom oriented restraint and contentment, uproots the desires and produces calmness, in the mind. It helps a person to find themselves. It assists a person in self-actualization.

Anupriyo Mallick, 2008, in his article “Spiritual Dimension in social work”, perceives that, without having a comprehensive world view, as its foundation, Social work cannot function as a holistic discipline and devise its varied roles and activities in to smooth symphony. There are so many religions in the world and man is necessarily born into one of them, that religion is no more than that the outer cell of spirituality. Spirituality germinates there and as it grows, it sets itself free from religious conditioning and limitations. Spirituality, in spite of expressional differences, carries the image of eternity and universality. That is how and why the spirituality descends on earth as age after age and disseminates the messages to mankind that impart momentum to its onward march toward divinity, the goal of self-realization. It is the dharma of social work to put man on his destined track. But it can take up this exhilarating assignment only if it is steeped in a spiritual orientation itself. To rescue human being from the snares of materiality and turn oneself towards spiritual destination is one of the most urgent tasks that social work can think of for

the present. The craze for super affluence, vulgar pleasure and beastly satisfaction is dehumanizing and de-spiritualizing. All problems individual or social lie at the roots. Unless we engage ourselves at the level of root causes, we cannot have access to abiding solutions. The human beings fundamental problem is one of a spiritual in nature. Various Social work practitioners recognize that religion and spirituality may play an important role in practice (Furman, Benson, Grimwood, & Canda, 2004; Kaut, 2002; Mattison, Jayaram, Croxton, 2000; Northcut, 2000; Sheridan, 2004, Sheridan, Bullis, Adcock, Berlin & Miller, 1992; Sherwood, Wolfer & Scales, 2002).

Ethics and Social Work

Ethics are moral philosophy, which addresses questions about morality (what is good, what is bad, concept of good and evil, right and wrong, virtue and vice, justice and crime, etc.) The Ethical responsibilities flow from all human relationships, from the personal and familial to the social and professional. Ethics is a requirement for human life. It is our means of deciding a course of action. Without it, our actions would be random and aimless. There would be no way to work towards a goal because there would be no way to pick between a limitless number of goals. Even with an ethical standard, we may be unable to pursue our goals with the possibility of success. To the degree which a rational ethical standard is taken, we are able to correctly organize our goals and actions to accomplish our most important values. Any flaw in our ethics will reduce our ability to be successful in our endeavors.

Social Work is a value based profession. In this, Social Workers ability to act ethically is an essential aspect of the quality of the service offered to clients. While Social Workers' effort to help their clients are almost motivated by good intentions, but the nature of problem and their potential solutions give rise to conflicts and contradictions that are not always easily resolved. For this reason, the Social Work code of ethics has come into

existence which guides Social Workers decision making process, when ethical issues arise. The first of such Code of Ethics was developed in 1976, and provided the basic for The Ethics of Social Work: Principles and Standards {International Federation of Social Workers, 1994}. This document had promoted ethical debate and reflection among organizations and providers in member countries. The goals included: formulating basic principles that could be adopted across cultures and settings, identifying ethical dilemmas in Social Work practice, and making recommendations for addressing them.

The 1994 document declared that “Social Work originates variously from humanitarian, religious and democratic ideals and philosophies and has universal application to meet human needs”. In 2004, this document was replaced by the current statement, Ethics in Social Work, Statement of Principles {International Federation of Social Workers and International Association of Schools of Social Work, 2004} that emerged from a joint conference with an International Association of Schools of Social Work {IASSW} held in Adelaide, Australia. The current statement retains the goals of the earlier document, while adding the acknowledgement that “some ethical challenges and problems facing Social Workers are specific to particular countries, other are common”. This acknowledgement highlights the need of contextual and cultural ethical awareness as a necessary part of the Professional practice of any Social Worker.

The Dilemma

An important component of Social Work practice is the assessment of clients’ needs. Social Work strives to “take the client from where they’re at” and utilize his or her strengths in order to improve the quality of life. We know that Social Work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Traditionally, while serving needy people, Social Work has incorporated interventions that are limited with the biological, psychological, sociological and economical aspects.

Due to the importance of Religion and Spirituality in the lives of people, it is important that Social Work practitioners, {particularly in India} develop the ability to incorporate clients' Religion and Spiritual beliefs into the process of giving assistance.

Any models of generalist practice that does not in-corporate a conception of the Social Workers roles, responsibilities and resources relative to beneficiaries Religious and Spiritual interest's does not address the totality of the beneficiary's capacity. It will inevitably fail to help the beneficiary reach the full potential.

However a large number of Social Workers, regardless of their personal religious afflictions, are trained to think that the religion has no relevance for their everyday professional practice (Cnaan 2006). The rational being given that Social Work profession operates from psycho socioeconomic perspectives, with the purpose of enhancing the interactions between people and their environment. People should not be seen as only as bio/psycho or social beings, but also as beings with the existential and Spiritual dimension.

A number of Social Work authors (Canda 1988) have expressed that the human experience of Religion and spirituality has been somewhat neglected in Social Work education and practice. The Practitioners of Social Work are increasingly recognizing Religion and Spirituality as one of the important variables to enable the lives of the beneficiaries who have to cope with the deep problems. Integrating the Religious and Spiritual aspect of Social Work has been expanding in the interest of spirituality in Social Work but remain largely on the periphery of the professions educational enterprise and ministering practice. The practitioners of Social Work recognize that building on the religious and spiritual strengths of the client may enable the client to improve their coping skills and serve as a support (Gilbert, 2000; Kaut, 2002; Northcut, 2000; Ortiz & Langer, 2002; Rose, Westefeld, Ansley, 2001; Sermabeikian, 1994).

The Way Forward

In 2002, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) in Britain has published several books on the role of Spirituality and Religion in practice, along with the development of educational tools for instructors (Scales et al., 2002). Despite this recognition and attention of importance of Religion and Spirituality in Social work Education and Practice, there has been limited initiative by various universities in India to incorporate this component in Social work curriculum although valuable contributions of Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi cannot be underestimated.

Religion and Spirituality is one of the important variables to enable the lives of the beneficiaries who have to cope with the deep problems. In a country like India, where all aspects of human life is largely influenced by Religion and Spirituality, it become significant to understand the Religious ideologies of Social work Educator/Practitioners as well that of clients, so that Social work service delivery system become effective. Keeping all these valuable concerns in mind, the authors of this paper recommends following measures to bridge the gap between Religion, Spirituality and Social Work Ethics:

1. The Indian Universities offering Social Work education at Masters and Bachelors level should design and incorporate a separate paper on “Religion, Spirituality and Social Work. This paper should explain in detail the various Religious ideologies of the world with a particular focus on Indian originated Religions
2. The Indian Universities should organize special refresher courses on “Religion, Spirituality and Social Work” for Social work educators so that they can disseminate concrete information and knowledge to Trainee Social workers.
3. The field work training curriculum should include at least 15 days of block placement in various Religious Institutions like “Temples, Churches, Monasteries,

Mosques” so that Trainee Social Worker may observe and understand the Religious and Spiritual practices of various sects.

4. University Grants Commission should organize series of conferences, seminars on importance to “Religion Spirituality and Social Work”

Conclusion

The materialism promoted by science has failed to give the real meaning to the ultimate purpose of life. The number of suicides cases is on rise. The feeling of emptiness and hopelessness is growing among Indian people’s life. As a helping profession, Social Work should take a strategic step to incorporate Religion and Spirituality in Social Work education and practice so that we can “help people to help themselves in true sense”.

Notes

1. For details see Census of India, www.censusindia.net accessed on 14.11.2011.
2. See the concise and insightful article “Purpose of Life and Salvation in Islam” Religion Facts, <http://www.religionfacts.com/islam/beliefs/salvation.htm>, . Accessed Jan 2, 2011.
3. For example, Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), 2008: Origin and development of Social work in India, traces this.

Reference

- Cnaan, R. A. (2006). *The Other Philadelphia Story : How Local Congregations Support Quality of Life in Urban America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Cnaan, R. A., Dichter, M. E., & Draine, J. (2008). *A Century of Social Work and Social Welfare at Penn*. Philadelphia, Pa.: University of Pennsylvania Press.

- Cnaan, R. A., & Milofsky, C. (2007). *Handbook of Community Movements and Local Organizations*. New York ; London: Springer.
- Canda, E., R. (1988). Conceptualizing spirituality for social work: Insights from diverse perspectives. *Social Thought*, 14(1), 30-46.
- Deka, Phani (2007). The great Indian corridor in the east. Mittal Publications. P. 135. Chary, Manish (2009). India: Nation on the Move: An Overview of India's People, Culture, History, Economy, IT Industry, & More. iUniverse. P. 31.
- Singla, Parvesh (2009). *The Manual of Life – Karma*.
- Kuhn, Hermann (2004) *Karma, the Mechanism*
- Brodd, Jefferey (2003). *World Religions*. Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press
- Sacoo, Terry (1996), "Spirituality and Social Work Students in their First Year of Study at a South African University," *Journal of Social Development in Africa* (1996).
- Viswanathan, Ed (2007) "Hindu Salvation Concepts," <http://edviswanathan.sulekha.com/blog/post/2007/01/hindu-salvation-concepts.htm>, retrieved 11.11.2011.
- Embree, Ainslie Thomas, Hay, Stephen N. and Bary, William Theodore De (1988), *Sources of Indian Tradition: Modern India and Pakistan*. Columbia University Press.
- Gutierrez, G. (1988). *A Theology of Liberation : History, Politics, and Salvation*. Maryknoll, N.Y., Orbis Books.
- Mallick, Anupriyo (2008), "Spiritual Dimension in Social Work", *Perspectives in Social Work*, January –April 2008.