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Research Article

From Indigenous Helping Traditions to Professional Social Casework in India: A Historical Analysis

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Abstract

Social Casework is a major method of professional social work concerned with helping individuals address psychosocial difficulties through a purposeful professional relationship and systematic intervention. In India, however, helping individuals and families has a much longer history than the emergence of professional social work education. Traditional Indian society developed diverse indigenous systems of care and support through family and kinship networks, community relationships, seva (service), dāna (charitable giving), religious institutions, guidance by elders and gurus, and community-based mediation. This article examines these indigenous helping traditions in relation to the historical emergence and professionalisation of Social Casework in India. Using a historical-conceptual approach and secondary literature, the article analyses the continuities and differences between traditional helping practices and professional casework. It argues that indigenous practices should not be retrospectively identified as professional Social Casework, as they generally lacked systematic assessment, professional training, ethical standards, documentation, and structured intervention. Nevertheless, they provided culturally embedded mechanisms of emotional, social and material support that constitute an important context for understanding the subsequent development and adaptation of professional Social Casework in India. The article concludes that historically informed and critically selective engagement with indigenous traditions can contribute to culturally responsive Social Casework while maintaining contemporary professional values and ethical standards.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Social Casework is one of the foundational methods of professional social work and is primarily concerned with assisting individuals in dealing with psychosocial problems and improving their social functioning through a purposeful professional relationship. Its development as a systematic method is associated with the emergence of modern social work in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly through the pioneering contribution of Mary Richmond and subsequent theorists who established principles, methods and techniques for individualised helping. In India, professional Social Casework developed within the institutional framework of social work education and practice during the twentieth century. However, the existence of professional casework should be distinguished from the much older traditions of helping individuals and families that characterised Indian social life (Gore, 1965; Mehta, 2021).

Indian society historically developed diverse informal mechanisms for responding to individual and family needs. Family and kinship networks, community relationships, guidance by elders and gurus, charitable giving (dāna), service (seva), religious institutions and community-based forms of assistance provided emotional, social, material and moral support to persons experiencing difficulties. Such practices demonstrate that helping others was embedded within social relationships, cultural values and institutional arrangements long before Social Work emerged as a recognised profession in India (Gore, 1966; Mukundarao, 1969). Nevertheless, the presence of these helping traditions does not justify describing them retrospectively as professional Social Casework.

The distinction between indigenous helping traditions and professional casework is particularly important in understanding the history of Social Work in India. Traditional helping practices generally operated through family obligations, religious values, community norms and social authority, whereas professional casework is characterised by specialised education, systematic assessment, professional relationships, planned intervention, ethical principles and professional accountability (Mehta, 2021). Moreover, historical scholarship indicates that the professionalisation of Social Work in India was a gradual process rather than an abrupt development beginning exclusively in 1936. Organised and modern forms of social service were emerging during the colonial period, while the establishment of the Sir Dorabji Tata Graduate School of Social Work in Bombay in 1936 represented a major institutional milestone in professional social work education (Mishra, 2023).

Against this background, the present article examines indigenous helping traditions as part of the historical and cultural context within which professional Social Casework subsequently developed in India. The objectives of the article are to examine the historical and cultural foundations of indigenous helping traditions and analyse their functional continuities and differences with professional Social Casework, particularly in relation to individual, family and community support. A further objective is to critically analyse the transition

from indigenous and informal helping practices to the professionalisation of Social Work and Social Casework in India, while exploring the relevance and limitations of selected indigenous cultural resources for developing culturally responsive contemporary Social Casework practice. In doing so, the article seeks to maintain a balance between cultural relevance and professional ethics and standards. Such an approach avoids both the uncritical Westernisation of Indian Social Work history and the retrospective claim that professional Social Casework existed in ancient India. Instead, it positions indigenous helping traditions as an important historical and cultural context for understanding the emergence, development and contemporary adaptation of professional Social Casework in India.

2. METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a historical-conceptual approach to examine the relationship between indigenous helping traditions and the emergence of professional Social Casework in India. The study is based exclusively on secondary sources, including scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and academic publications on the history, cultural foundations and professionalisation of Social Work in India. Particular attention is given to literature addressing indigenous cultural traditions, social welfare practices, social reform, social service and the development of professional social work education in India (Gore, 1965, 1966; Mishra, 2023; Mukundarao, 1969).

The analysis is organised thematically and historically. First, major indigenous mechanisms of helping such as family and kinship support, community assistance, seva, dāna, guidance by elders and religious or charitable institutions are examined as forms of informal social support. Second, the study analyses their functional similarities and differences with professional Social Casework. Third, the historical development of organised social service and professional Social Work education in India is traced to situate Social Casework within the broader process of professionalisation. The analysis deliberately distinguishes between historical continuity and functional similarity, avoiding the retrospective identification of traditional helping practices as professional Social Casework. This approach also enables a critical examination of both the culturally valuable aspects and the social limitations of indigenous helping traditions.

3. Indigenous Helping Traditions in India

Helping individuals in situations of need has long been embedded in Indian social life. Before Social Work emerged as a modern profession, individuals and families received assistance through familial, communal, religious and cultural mechanisms. These forms of support were rooted in everyday relationships and social institutions rather than specialised professional services. They are therefore important for understanding the cultural context of helping, but should be distinguished from professional Social Casework (Gore, 1965; Mehta, 2021).

3.1 Family and Kinship Support

The extended or joint family historically constituted a major source of social support. Individuals experiencing economic difficulties, illness, disability, widowhood, old age or other vulnerabilities could receive accommodation, food, financial assistance, childcare, emotional support and guidance from relatives. The family consequently functioned as an important mechanism of social security and interpersonal support (Gore, 1965).

Such support has a functional similarity with Social Casework's concern for understanding individuals within their social environment. However, traditional family assistance was primarily based on kinship obligations, cultural expectations and reciprocity, whereas professional casework involves a purposeful helping relationship, systematic assessment and planned intervention. Family support should therefore be viewed as an indigenous resource rather than an early form of professional casework.

3.2 Guidance by Elders, Gurus and Community Members

Elders, respected community members and gurus traditionally provided guidance concerning personal difficulties, family relationships, social responsibilities and moral conduct. The *guru-shishya* relationship represented an important form of personal guidance and learning, offering reassurance, behavioural direction and social integration.

These practices have functional similarities with helping relationships in Social Casework, particularly in listening, guidance and trust. Nevertheless, traditional guidance was generally associated with moral, educational, spiritual or social authority rather than professional training or a formally defined practitioner-client relationship (Gore, 1966; Mukundara, 1969).

3.3 Seva and Dāna as Traditions of Helping

Indian religious and philosophical traditions have historically emphasised *seva*, or service to others, and *dāna*, or charitable giving. These values encouraged assistance to persons experiencing poverty, illness, disability and other forms of vulnerability. Religious institutions, charitable individuals and community organisations consequently became sources of material and social assistance.

However, charity and professional casework differ in their orientation and method. Charity may provide immediate relief, whereas Social Casework seeks to understand individual circumstances and psychosocial needs and facilitate planned change through a professional relationship. Charitable traditions should therefore be understood as part of the historical context of organised helping rather than as equivalent to professional practice (Mehta, 2021).

3.4 Community-Based Support and Informal Problem-Solving

Community relationships also provided mechanisms for responding to individual and family problems. Neighbours, elders and respected community members could offer advice,

resolve interpersonal disputes, mobilise assistance and maintain social relationships. Such networks provided access to resources and social support.

This community orientation is relevant to Social Casework because individual difficulties are closely connected with social relationships and environments. However, traditional community intervention could also be influenced by prevailing social norms and hierarchies. Thus, community support could provide solidarity while simultaneously placing pressure on individuals to conform to accepted patterns of behaviour.

3.5 Religious and Institutional Welfare

Indian history also contains traditions of organised welfare associated with rulers, religious institutions and charitable establishments. Such initiatives extended assistance beyond family and community relationships and contributed to increasingly organised responses to social needs (Mehta, 2021). Nevertheless, organised welfare remained distinct from professional Social Casework, which developed alongside specialised knowledge, professional education, systematic methods and defined standards of practice.

Taken together, these traditions demonstrate that Indian society possessed a substantial cultural repertoire of care, assistance, guidance and social responsibility before professional Social Work emerged. Their significance lies not in establishing that Social Casework existed traditionally, but in providing an important cultural context for understanding the subsequent development and institutionalisation of professional Social Work.

4. Traditional Cultural Practices as Informal Social Education

Indigenous helping was not limited to direct assistance. Cultural practices also transmitted values, social expectations and forms of interpersonal conduct. Stories, oral traditions, proverbs, religious narratives and folk performances communicated ideas concerning responsibility, cooperation, compassion and social behaviour. These practices can therefore be understood as forms of informal social education rather than professional helping interventions.

4.1 Storytelling and Moral Learning

Storytelling historically served as a medium for transmitting knowledge and social values across generations. Traditional narratives presented situations involving conflict, decision-making, relationships, cooperation and responsibility, enabling listeners to reflect on human behaviour and social relationships. Such practices demonstrate the cultural importance of communication and reflection. However, storytelling should not be regarded as an indigenous equivalent of casework counselling. Its primary functions were generally educational, cultural and moral, whereas professional Social Casework involves individualised assessment, professional knowledge and planned intervention.

4.2 Folk Theatre as a Medium of Social Awareness

Folk theatre provided communities with a medium for representing social experiences, conflicts, values and everyday concerns. In Gujarat, *Bhavai* represents an important folk theatre tradition. Its relevance to Social Work lies in its potential to communicate social messages, stimulate collective reflection and encourage community dialogue. Such cultural forms demonstrate that communication and social learning can be strengthened through locally familiar forms of expression. However, their use in contemporary Social Work requires appropriate adaptation, ethical consideration and sensitivity to cultural diversity. They should complement, rather than replace, professional methods.

4.3 From Cultural Transmission to Professional Helping

Traditional cultural practices transmitted social values, while family, kinship and community institutions provided direct forms of assistance. Together, they created a cultural environment in which helping, guidance, responsibility and social support were integral aspects of social life.

At the same time, indigenous traditions should not be romanticised. Cultural practices could promote solidarity and cooperation but could also reproduce social hierarchies and expectations. Their contemporary relevance therefore lies in their cultural and communicative resources rather than in assuming that they were inherently egalitarian, therapeutic or professionally equivalent to casework.

The historical significance of these traditions is consequently best understood as a cultural foundation for helping and social learning, rather than evidence of professional Social Casework in pre-modern India. This distinction is essential for understanding the later transition from indigenous and informal assistance to organised social service and professional Social Work education.

5. From Indigenous Helping to Professional Social Casework in India

The emergence of professional Social Casework in India should be understood as a process of institutionalisation and professionalisation of helping, rather than as a direct transformation of traditional Indian practices into professional casework. Indigenous traditions had long provided culturally recognised forms of care, assistance, guidance and social responsibility. Professional Social Work, however, introduced specialised knowledge, formal education, systematic methods and professional ethics that distinguished it from informal helping (Gore, 1965; Mehta, 2021).

5.1 From Charity and Social Service to Professional Practice

The history of helping in India reflects a gradual movement from personal and community-based assistance towards more organised forms of social service. Religious and charitable traditions provided relief to persons experiencing poverty and vulnerability, while social reform movements addressed various social problems and inequalities. These developments

created an environment in which organised responses to social problems became increasingly significant (Gore, 1965; Mehta, 2021).

Professional Social Work, however, involved more than an expansion of charity. It introduced systematic approaches to understanding social problems and responding to individual and family difficulties. Social Casework particularly emphasised individualised understanding, the relationship between the person and the social environment, and purposeful intervention. Thus, professionalisation represented a qualitative change in the organisation and methodology of helping.

5.2 Professionalisation of Social Work in Colonial India

The professionalisation of Social Work in India developed through complex institutional and intellectual processes during the colonial period. Although Western social work knowledge and models influenced the emerging profession, its development cannot be understood simply as the transplantation of Western practices. Historical scholarship highlights the interaction of colonial institutions, Indian social reform, voluntary action and emerging professional education (Mishra, 2023).

Consequently, Social Casework in India developed through an interaction between internationally circulating professional knowledge and the country's distinctive social, cultural and institutional conditions. This interaction became important for adapting professional methods to Indian realities.

5.3 The 1936 Institutional Milestone

The establishment of the Sir Dorabji Tata Graduate School of Social Work in Bombay in 1936, now the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, was a major milestone in the institutional development of professional Social Work education in India. However, 1936 should not be interpreted as the beginning of social helping or welfare in India. Earlier traditions of social service and processes of professionalisation had already developed before this institutional milestone (Mishra, 2023).

5.4 Social Casework within the Professional Framework

Within the emerging professional framework, Social Casework became an important method for addressing individual and family problems. Its distinctive characteristics included a professional relationship, systematic assessment, planned intervention and ethical accountability. Traditional helping could provide care, guidance and support, but generally operated through kinship, community relationships, religious values or personal authority. Professional casework, in contrast, required specialised knowledge, defined professional relationships and systematic methods.

Thus, the relationship between indigenous helping and professional Social Casework is best understood as contextual continuity rather than direct institutional continuity. Indigenous traditions demonstrate the cultural presence of helping and social responsibility, while professionalisation introduced specialised knowledge, systematic methodology and formal accountability (Gore, 1966; Mukundarao, 1969).

6. Indigenous Helping Traditions and Professional Social Casework: A Comparative Analysis

The historical examination demonstrates that indigenous helping traditions and professional Social Casework share certain broad concerns, particularly the provision of support to

individuals experiencing personal, family or social difficulties. However, similarities in function should not be interpreted as evidence of historical or professional equivalence. The distinction between the two becomes clearer when their objectives, relationships, methods, knowledge base and accountability are compared.

Dimension	Indigenous Helping Traditions	Professional Social Casework
Primary basis	Family, kinship, community, religion and cultural norms	Professional knowledge, education and ethical standards
Helping relationship	Usually based on existing social or familial relationships	Deliberately established professional relationship
Identification of problems	Often based on personal knowledge, observation and community awareness	Systematic assessment of psychosocial needs and social environment
Nature of intervention	Advice, material assistance, emotional support, mediation and moral guidance	Planned and purposeful intervention based on assessment
Knowledge base	Experience, tradition, cultural values and social wisdom	Social work theories, concepts, methods and evidence-informed knowledge
Confidentiality	Generally, not formally defined	Professional confidentiality and privacy are central ethical concerns
Documentation	Generally informal or absent	Case records and professional documentation
Accountability	Primarily to family, community, religious or social authority	Professional, institutional and ethical accountability
Orientation	Often emphasised social harmony, duty and conformity	Emphasises client participation, social functioning, rights and planned change
Scope of support	Primarily embedded within existing social networks	Can extend beyond existing networks through professional and institutional resources

The comparison indicates that relationship and support constitute important areas of functional similarity. Families, elders, community members and religious institutions could listen to individuals, provide advice, mobilise resources and offer emotional or material assistance. Professional Social Casework similarly recognises the importance of a purposeful relationship and the mobilisation of social resources. The difference lies principally in the systematic and professional manner in which casework organises these functions.

A second area of continuity is the recognition that individual difficulties are connected with the person's social environment. Traditional helping frequently operated through family and community networks, meaning that an individual's circumstances were understood within relationships rather than exclusively as an individual matter. Professional Social Casework likewise examines the interaction between the person and their environment. This represents a significant conceptual point of relevance for culturally responsive practice in India (Gore, 1966; Mukundarao, 1969).

Nevertheless, professional Social Casework introduces dimensions that were generally absent from traditional helping. Systematic assessment, specialised professional education, case documentation, defined ethical responsibilities and professional accountability distinguish casework from informal assistance (Mehta, 2021). Professional casework also seeks to protect the client's individuality and participation rather than relying exclusively on community expectations or established social authority.

The comparison also reveals an important limitation of traditional helping systems. While family and community networks could provide strong social support, access to such support was not necessarily equal for everyone. Social position, gender, caste, age and conformity to established norms could

influence who received support and on what terms. Therefore, indigenous traditions should neither be dismissed as irrelevant to professional Social Work nor romanticised as inherently just or therapeutic.

The appropriate historical interpretation is consequently one of functional continuity combined with methodological discontinuity. Indigenous helping traditions supplied culturally familiar forms of care, support, guidance and social responsibility. Professional Social Casework subsequently transformed helping into a specialised practice through formal education, systematic assessment, professional methods and ethical accountability. This distinction allows Indian Social Work to acknowledge its indigenous cultural context without inaccurately projecting modern professional concepts onto pre-professional social institutions.

7. Critical Discussion

The historical analysis indicates that indigenous helping traditions provide an important cultural context for understanding Social Casework in India. However, their contemporary relevance requires a critical rather than romanticised interpretation. Traditional systems of helping valued relational support, community participation, interpersonal bonds and the mobilisation of local resources. These characteristics remain relevant to professional practice, although traditional systems were also embedded within the social structures and inequalities of their respective periods.

A major strength of indigenous helping was its relational and community-based character. Individuals experiencing difficulties were often supported through family, kinship and community networks rather than treated as isolated persons. This orientation corresponds with the contemporary Social Work emphasis on understanding individuals within their social

environments. It also highlights the importance of family relationships, social networks and community resources in addressing individual problems (Gore, 1966; Mukundarao, 1969). Similarly, informal assistance from family members, elders and community leaders could create familiarity, trust and access to local resources. Values associated with *seva* and social responsibility further encouraged assistance to persons experiencing hardship (Mehta, 2021).

Nevertheless, traditional helping systems could also reproduce social hierarchy, inequality and conformity. Access to support and the nature of assistance could be influenced by gender, caste, age, family roles and prevailing social expectations. Consequently, culturally familiar practices cannot automatically be considered appropriate for contemporary professional Social Work.

Professional Social Casework differs through its emphasis on specialised education, systematic assessment, planned intervention, confidentiality, documentation, ethical responsibilities and professional accountability (Gore, 1965; Mehta, 2021). Therefore, the relationship between indigenous traditions and professional casework is best understood through critical cultural integration. Selected indigenous resources, such as family support, community participation, service and culturally familiar communication, can strengthen culturally responsive practice when consistent with client rights and professional ethics. Conversely, practices involving discrimination, coercion, stigma or unequal power relations should not be legitimised merely because they are traditional. Thus, indigenous traditions can enrich contemporary Social Casework by providing culturally meaningful resources for relationship-building, communication and social support, while professional standards ensure dignity, autonomy, equality, confidentiality and accountability.

8. Implications for Contemporary Indian Social Casework

The historical relationship between indigenous helping traditions and professional Social Casework has important implications for contemporary practice in India. Cultural sensitivity should be recognised as an integral component of effective casework within a culturally diverse society. Understanding clients' family relationships, community networks, cultural expectations and locally meaningful support systems can enable social workers to develop a more context-sensitive understanding of individual and family problems.

First, professional caseworkers can recognise family and community networks as potential resources while safeguarding client autonomy and confidentiality. With the client's consent, casework may strengthen constructive relationships and facilitate access to appropriate community resources rather than unnecessarily replacing existing support systems. Such an approach can enhance individuals' capacity to cope with personal and social difficulties.

Second, culturally familiar values such as *seva* and collective responsibility may support participation, mutual assistance and social connectedness. However, these values should be incorporated only when consistent with professional ethics and

should not impose moral obligations or cultural expectations upon clients. Distinguishing culturally meaningful practice from culturally imposed conformity is therefore essential.

Third, storytelling and other locally familiar cultural expressions may serve as supplementary tools for social education, rapport-building and community engagement. These approaches should remain responsive to client needs and complement, rather than replace, professional assessment and intervention.

Finally, Social Casework in India requires an indigenous and culturally responsive knowledge base. Indigenous knowledge should neither be rejected as inherently unscientific nor accepted uncritically. Instead, culturally relevant resources should be systematically evaluated and integrated where compatible with human dignity, equality, self-determination, confidentiality and professional accountability. Such critical integration can enrich Indian Social Casework without compromising its professional character (Gore, 1966; Mukundarao, 1969).

9. CONCLUSION

The historical development of Social Casework in India must be understood against the broader background of indigenous traditions of helping that long preceded the emergence of professional Social Work. Family and kinship support, guidance by elders and gurus, *seva*, *dāna*, community assistance, religious welfare and culturally embedded forms of social education demonstrate the longstanding presence of helping relationships and social responsibility in Indian society. Yet, these traditions should not be retrospectively equated with professional Social Casework, as they generally lacked specialised education, systematic assessment, planned intervention, documentation and formal professional accountability.

The emergence of professional Social Casework marked a significant methodological and institutional transformation in helping practice. The professionalisation of Social Work in India was gradual, with the establishment of the Sir Dorabji Tata Graduate School of Social Work in 1936 representing an important institutional milestone rather than the origin of social helping itself (Mishra, 2023). Professional casework subsequently developed through an interaction between professional knowledge and India's distinctive social and cultural realities.

The central argument of this study is therefore that the relationship between indigenous helping and professional Social Casework is best understood as functional continuity accompanied by methodological discontinuity. Indigenous traditions contributed culturally familiar forms of relational support, family involvement, community participation and social responsibility, whereas professional casework introduced systematic knowledge, structured intervention and ethical accountability. At the same time, indigenous practices cannot be accepted uncritically because some may reproduce hierarchy, inequality, stigma or social conformity.

Thus, the future of culturally responsive Indian Social Casework lies neither in rejecting indigenous knowledge nor in romanticising traditional practices, but in critical and selective integration. Indigenous cultural resources can enrich professional practice when they are consistent with dignity, equality, self-determination, confidentiality and professional accountability. The historical lesson is consequently not that Social Casework existed in traditional India, but that professional casework emerged within a society already possessing diverse traditions of helping. Recognising this distinction provides a historically grounded, culturally responsive and professionally rigorous foundation for Social Casework in contemporary India.

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