

## Indian Knowledge System and Philosophy of Professional Social Work

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### Abstract

This paper explores the philosophical foundations of professional social work in India through the lens of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS). It examines how traditional Indian values, ethics, and worldviews shape social work practice, emphasizing concepts like Dharma (duty), Karma (action), Seva (service), and Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (the world is one family). The study highlights the relevance of indigenous knowledge in contemporary social work education and practice, offering a culturally rooted framework for ethical and effective intervention. Furthermore, the paper discussed Challenges and Opportunities IKS based practice, Case Examples of IKS in Social Work Practice, Social Work Intervention of Models Based on IKS and Key Differences between IKS-Based Social Work Model Western Social Work Model. This research presentation and discussion is based on secondary data and primary observations and expert opinions of field practioners and senior social work educators.

**Keywords:** *Indian philosophy, social work, Indian Knowledge Systems, Dharma, Seva, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam.*

### ▪ Introduction:

Social work as a profession aims to help individuals, groups, and communities enhance their well-being and social functioning. While modern social work education in India is largely influenced by Western theories and models, there is a growing need to root practice in Indian cultural and philosophical traditions. Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) offer a treasure trove of ethical, spiritual, and practical wisdom that can enrich social work practice. Concepts such as Dharma (righteous duty), Karma (action and consequence), Seva (selfless service), and Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (the world as one family) provide a unique lens to understand and address social issues in India (Chowdhry, 2018; Desai, 2020). This paper explores how these philosophical foundations can inform and strengthen professional social work in India.

### ▪ Objectives -

- To understand the core Indian philosophical concepts relevant to social work.
  - To explore how IKS can inform professional social work practice.
  - To propose a framework for culturally sensitive social work in India.
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- To highlight challenges and opportunities in integrating IKS with modern social work.

▪ **Indian Philosophical Foundations -**

**Dharma (Duty and Ethics):** In Indian thought, Dharma refers to one's moral and social obligations. For social workers, this translates into a sense of duty towards clients, communities, and society at large, emphasizing ethical responsibility and integrity (Rao, 2019).

**Karma (Action and Consequence):** The law of Karma highlights that actions have consequences. Social workers can use this principle to encourage individuals and communities to take positive actions for better outcomes, fostering empowerment and accountability (Sharma, 2021).

**Seva (Selfless Service):** Seva is central to Indian culture, seen in traditions of community kitchens (Langar), temple services, and volunteerism. Social work practice can draw from this spirit of selfless service to build trust and rapport with communities (Singh, 2017).

**Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (Universal Brotherhood):** This concept from the Maha Upanishad means "the world is one family." It encourages inclusive, non-discriminatory practice, respecting diversity and promoting social justice (Kumar, 2020).

**Ahimsa (Non-violence) and Compassion:** Rooted in Jain and Buddhist traditions, these values guide social workers to approach problems with empathy, avoiding harm and promoting peace (Gupta, 2018).

▪ **Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) and Social Work;**

**Ancient Texts and Teachings:** Texts like the Bhagavad Gita, Arthashastra, Vedas, and Upanishads offer insights into ethics, governance, and human behavior. For example, the Bhagavad Gita's emphasis on selfless action (Nishkama Karma) can inspire social workers to act without attachment to results (Rao, 2019).

**Community Practices and Folk Traditions:** Indigenous practices such as Panchayati Raj (village self-governance), Self-Help Groups (SHGs), and traditional dispute resolution mechanisms offer culturally relevant models for community organization and empowerment (Desai, 2020).

**Ayurveda and Holistic Well-being:** Ayurveda's emphasis on balance and holistic health can inform social work approaches to mental health, addiction, and family counseling (Sharma, 2021).

▪ **Framework for Culturally Sensitive Social Work in India -**

A framework for social work practice in India, informed by IKS, could include:

**Assessment through a cultural lens:** Understand client issues in the context of family, community, and cultural values.

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***Interventions rooted in Indian concepts:*** Use Dharma, Karma, Seva and community traditions to guide practice.

***Focus on holistic well-being:*** Address physical, mental, social, and spiritual aspects, drawing from Ayurveda and yoga principles.

***Collaboration with local institutions:*** Work with \_Panchayats\_, religious organizations, and community leaders to build trust and impact.

▪ **Challenges and Opportunities -**

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***Balancing tradition and modernity:*** Integrate IKS without rejecting proven Western models.

***Avoiding cultural essentialism:*** Recognize diversity within Indian culture and avoid stereotypes.

***Research and documentation:*** More studies are needed on IKS-based social work interventions (Chowdhry, 2018).

***Training and education:*** Incorporate IKS into social work curricula for culturally competent practitioners.

▪ **Case Examples of IKS in Social Work Practice -**

***Community-Based Disaster Response (CBDR):*** Using local Panchayat networks for relief and rehabilitation after disasters like floods and earthquakes (Desai, 2020).

***Elderly care through Seva traditions:*** Engaging youth volunteers to support senior citizens, drawing from Seva values, as seen in programs run by NGOs like HelpAge India (Singh, 2017).

***Mental health and yoga:*** Integrating yoga and meditation for stress management and mental wellness, with initiatives like the AYUSH Ministry's promotion of yoga for mental health (Sharma, 2021).

***Women's empowerment through Self-Help Groups (SHGs):*** SHGs in states like Tamil Nadu and Kerala use collective savings and microfinance, rooted in community cooperation and Seva to empower women economically and socially (Chowdhry, 2018).

***Rural health and Ayurveda:*** NGOs like the Foundation for Revitalization of Local Health Traditions (FRLHT) work with local healers and Ayurvedic practitioners to deliver primary health care in rural areas (Sharma, 2021).

***Child protection and community vigilance:*** Villages in Rajasthan have used traditional \_Panchayat\_ systems to monitor child labor and promote school enrollment, showing how indigenous governance can protect children's rights (Desai, 2020).

**Rehabilitation of persons with disabilities:** Organizations like Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement (SVYM) in Karnataka use community-based rehabilitation (CBR) models inspired by Seva and Dharma to integrate persons with disabilities into mainstream society (Kumar, 2020).

▪ **Social Work Intervention of Models Based on IKS -**

**1. Dharma-Based Ethical Intervention Model:**

**Concept:** Uses Dharma (duty, ethics, righteousness) as a guiding principle.

**Application:** Social workers help clients identify their svadharma (personal duty) in family, community, and work life.

**Example:** In family counseling, encourage members to reflect on their ethical responsibilities toward each other.

**2. Seva-Centered Community Model:**

**Concept:** Based on Seva (selfless service).

**Application:** Mobilize community volunteers for service activities like health camps, elderly care, and disaster relief.

**Example:** Youth groups organizing Seva activities in villages to support sanitation and education.

**3. Karma-Action Reflection Model:**

**Concept:** Uses Karma (law of action and consequence).

**Application:** Encourage clients to reflect on their actions and their impact on future outcomes.

**Example:** In de-addiction programs, help individuals understand how their actions affect their health, family, and community.

**4. Panchayat-Based Participatory Model:**

**Concept:** Draws from Panchayati Raj (local self-governance).

**Application:** Use village councils for community decision-making, conflict resolution, and resource allocation.

**Example:** In rural development projects, involve Panchayats in planning and monitoring water conservation efforts.

**5. Holistic Ayurveda-Yoga Model:**

**Concept:** Based on Ayurveda and Yoga for body-mind balance.

**Application:** Integrate Ayurvedic principles, yoga, and meditation into mental health, stress management, and rehabilitation programs.

**Example:** In mental health centers, offer yoga and lifestyle counseling alongside traditional therapy.

**6. Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam Inclusive Model:**

**Concept:** “The world is one family.”

**Application:** Promote inclusive, non-discriminatory practices, especially in work with marginalized groups.

**Example:** In urban slum projects, create community centers open to all castes, religions, and genders.

**7. Guru-Shishya Mentoring Model:**

**Concept:** Traditional teacher-disciple relationship.

**Application:** Pair clients or community members with mentors for guidance and skill-building.

**Example:** In livelihood programs, experienced artisans mentor youth in traditional crafts.

**8. Satsang and Community Dialogue Model:**

**Concept:** Collective gathering for shared learning and problem-solving.

**Application:** Organize community meetings for open dialogue, emotional support, and collective action.

**Example:** In women’s empowerment programs, hold regular Satsang for sharing experiences and planning actions.

**9. Bhagavad Gita Decision-Making Model:**

**Concept:** Uses principles from the Bhagavad Gita (like Nishkama Karma – action without attachment to results).

**Application:** Help clients make ethical decisions, act without fear or attachment, and focus on process over outcome.

**Example:** In career counseling, encourage youth to choose paths based on interest and duty, not just on salary or status.

**10. Gandhian Sarvodaya Model:**

**Concept:** Based on Gandhi’s vision of Sarvodaya (well-being of all).

**Application:** Promote community self-reliance, Swadeshi (local production), and simple living.

**Example:** In rural development, support local production and consumption, and encourage community-led initiatives for education and health.

**11. Nishkama Karma (Selfless Action) Model:**

**Concept:** Action without expectation of reward.

**Application:** Encourage clients and communities to engage in service and social action without expecting personal gain.

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**Example:** In disaster response, mobilize volunteers to help affected communities without expecting recognition or reward.

### **12. Rta and Prakriti (Eco-Spiritual) Model:**

**Concept:** Rta (cosmic order) and Prakriti (nature) emphasize harmony with nature.

**Application:** Promote environmental awareness, sustainable living, and eco-friendly practices.

**Example:** In tribal areas, support traditional water conservation and forest management practices.

### **13. Sankara (Transformation) Model:**

**Concept:** Personal and social transformation through self-awareness and action.

**Application:** Use self-reflection, group discussions, and action plans for personal and community change.

**Example:** In adolescent counseling, help youth reflect on their values and plan for positive future actions.

### **14. Lokasamgraha (Welfare of All) Model:**

**Concept:** From the Bhagavad Gita, meaning “well-being of the world.”

**Application:** Design interventions that benefit the entire community, not just individuals.

**Example:** In urban planning, advocate for public spaces, parks, and community centers that serve all residents.

### **15. Samajik Nyay (Social Justice) Model:**

**Concept:** Rooted in Indian traditions of justice and equity.

**Application:** Address issues of caste, gender, and economic inequality through advocacy and community action.

**Example:** In Dalit empowerment programs, work with local leaders to ensure access to education and employment.

#### **▪ IKS-Based Social Work Model Western Social Work Model Key Differences**

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Indian Knowledge System (IKS) Based Social Work</b>	<b>Western Social Work Models</b>
Philosophical Foundation	Rooted in Indian philosophy such as Dharma, Karma, Seva, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam	Rooted in Enlightenment thought, liberalism, human rights, and scientific rationality
View of Individual	Individual is part of family, community, and cosmic order	Individual seen as autonomous and independent unit
Goal of Social Work	Harmony, duty fulfillment, and collective wellbeing	Problem solving, empowerment, and individual rights
Approach to Helping	Service (Seva), compassion, moral responsibility	Professional intervention using scientific methods

Knowledge Source	Indigenous knowledge, scriptures, traditions, community wisdom	Research-based theories from psychology, sociology, and social sciences
Role of Social Worker	Guide, community facilitator, moral leader	Professional practitioner, therapist, case manager
Focus of Intervention	Community, family, spiritual and cultural dimensions	Individual, groups, and institutions using structured methods
View of Wellbeing	Holistic (physical, mental, spiritual, social)	Psychosocial and socio-economic wellbeing
Methods Used	Community traditions, collective action, moral education	Casework, group work, community organization, policy practice
Relationship with Nature	Human–nature harmony emphasized	Environment considered mainly in ecological or policy context
Ethical Basis	Dharma-based ethics (duty and righteousness)	Professional codes like NASW Code of Ethics
Nature of Knowledge	Experiential, spiritual, community-based	Empirical, evidence-based, theory-driven

The comparison between Indian Knowledge System (IKS)–based social work models and Western social work models highlights that both approaches aim to promote human welfare and social justice, but they differ in their philosophical foundations, perspectives on the individual, and methods of intervention. IKS-based social work emphasizes holistic wellbeing, moral duty (Dharma), community harmony, spirituality, and service (Seva), viewing individuals as interconnected with family, society, nature, and the broader cosmic order. In contrast, Western social work models focus more on individual rights, scientific methods, professional practice, and evidence-based interventions, emphasizing structured problem-solving and empowerment.

Despite these differences, both traditions share common goals such as improving quality of life, addressing social problems, and promoting social justice.

#### ▪ Conclusion

Indian philosophy and IKS offer a rich, value-based framework for professional social work. By integrating these perspectives, social work in India can become more holistic, inclusive, and culturally resonant, addressing contemporary challenges while staying rooted in indigenous ethics and wisdom.

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