The Concept of Social Welfare

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WE are at present on the threshold of the Third Five Year Plan. This is the time when we should review the progress so far made in our planned development and suggest effective steps to be taken in the future. The question is what type of evaluation is most needed and most useful? The recently issued report in the field of social welfare and welfare of backward classes represents a type of appraisal which is common, but which does not satisfy the basic need, because it does not come to terms with the real issues.

The report was prepared by a seven-member team, headed by Smt Renuka Ray. According to the terms of reference, the team was asked "to study the programme of work relating to Social Welfare included in the Plan in the Central and State sectors, with a view to economy and with particular reference to the work of the Central Social Welfare Board." It was indicated that the team should make recommendations on such topics as the modifications necessary in the content of existing programmes, the changes required in the methods of work adopted for their implementation, the quality of social workers, ways of utilising local initiative, the working of the Central Social Welfare Board, and the co-ordination of voluntary welfare agencies. It appears that the inclusion of "welfare of backward classes" in the terms of reference was brought in at a later stage when the team was asked to make similar recommendations for these classes.

Conceptual Confusion

The first serious hurdle the team had to face was the task of defining "social welfare" as a report of the United Nations says, "The field of social welfare has not settled into fixed or uniform patterns and is therefore resistant to clear-cut definition. In no country have the frontiers of social welfare or social service or social work been established beyond caviro. In no country has terminology been so standardised as to make possible the assignment of precise meaning to such terms as 'social welfare,' 'social service,' 'social work' and 'welfare work'" (Training for Social Work: An Instrumental Survey, 1950, p. 6).

Some confusion regarding these concepts is bound to occur, due mainly to the dynamic character of "social welfare" its recent emergence and importance and the existence of innumerable social problems, particularly in an underdeveloped country.

The first two plans judiciously avoid clear-cut definitions of "social services" and "social welfare." The Second Plan, while distinguishing between the two concepts, makes contradictory statements on the same page (Report, p 601). It says that "social welfare is concerned with the well-being of the entire community, not only of particular sections of the population which may be handicapped" while immediately afterwards it assures us that a comprehensive social welfare programme would include "physical and mental fitness ... and welfare of the physically and mentally handicapped." The limit of confusion is reached, when it adds "prohibition" to social welfare, in view of "the special circumstances and background in India." If this argument is stretched to its logical conclusion, almost all items of our social policy can claim inclusion in social welfare.

The Social Welfare Team no doubt realised this difficulty, but seems to have been reluctant to grapple with it. It says, "At present, there are a number of divergent opinions on the nature and scope of welfare services. The Five Year Plans drew a distinction between "social services" and 'welfare services.' In the broadest sense, social services under the Plan include the subjects of education, health, housing, labour welfare, rehabilitation of displaced persons, welfare of backward classes and social welfare. Of these, the last two together constitute the common field of welfare activities." (P. 19). According to this interpretation, social welfare is a small part of social services, whereas the Second Plan emphatically asserts that "the aims of social welfare are wider in scope".

Scope of Welfare Services

This failure in definition naturally leads to confusion about the scope of social welfare. The terms of reference given to the team obviously tempt it to divide the field of welfare services into two broad categories — (a) social welfare (for the handicapped and maladjusted individual(s); and (b) welfare of backward classes (the traditionally under-privileged or backward sections of the community). Further sub-division leads to five broad categories of underprivileged or maladjusted or handicapped. These are:

a) Socially under-privileged groups:
   (i) caste groups as scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and denotified communities;
   (ii)orphans, widows, unmarried mothers, aged and infirm;

b) Socially maladjusted: beggars, prostitutes and delinquents;

c) Physically and mentally handicapped persons: blind, deaf, permanently disabled, diseased, temporarily handicapped, and mentally ill;

d) Economically underprivileged: destitutes and unemployed.

This division appears convenient. However, it is defective in many ways. Firstly, a few classes like youth and the displaced do not find a place in the list. Secondly, some of the groups like prostitutes, beggars and the aged can claim a place in more than one category. Lastly, the bases on which the distribution is made appear to be artificial. Is there any difference between the socially under-privileged and socially maladjusted? An orphan, un cared for, may turn into a beggar or a delinquent. A prostitute may be an unmarried mother. Similarly, physically handicapped beggars are very common.
Priorities Assigned

After setting up a narrow, ill-defined field, the team lays down priorities for action. In the social welfare field the broad priorities are: child welfare (particularly preventive services); women welfare, youth welfare and rural welfare. In the case of the scheduled castes tribes the priorities are: economic development and communications education, and public health. The team has recommendations to make about an integrated and planned approach to development schemes, administrative organization democratic decentralisation, public participation, training of personnel and evaluation.

Drawbacks of the Report

A perusal of the report gives an unhappy impression. It appears that the collection of the material and the drafting have, been done in some haste. This is the drawback of a special attempt at evaluation with limited time, resources and personnel.

This reviewer is disappointed that the role of social welfare in a developing economy aiming at a socialist pattern of society has not been properly understood. The team talks about the integration of backward classes into the community. By the same reasoning, why should we not integrate social welfare or even social services into our social policy for the whole nation? If we are sincere about our slogans of economic equality and social justice, we need not have separate consideration for the various under-privileged or maladjusted groups. In fact, many of these groups like beggars, prostitutes, delinquents, etc., can ultimately be eliminated by a radical social policy. Such groups will have no existence in the new society, where the economic structure and social considerations will differ widely from ones now existing.

Traditions die hard. We still treat social work as synonymous to individual or group charity and not as professional service in a welfare state, available by right to every member of the community, irrespective of his means or status. The concept of comprehensive social security, covering all the citizens against all possible risks, is quite unknown in our country. We still travel on the bridle path of social welfare, where a few voluntary social service organisations undertake the responsibility for relieving destitution, mainly through a philanthropic motive, in addition to almsgiving and voluntary service by individuals on behalf of the indigent. The Central Social Welfare Board has been entrusted with the duty to give grants-in-aid to these voluntary organisations. In a fast developing economy, it is absolutely essential to have a radical overhauling of the economic and social machinery. BO as to remove the stigma of under-development reflected in social tyranny, beggary, prostitution, destitution, inferior status of women, unemployment, lack of medical services, high rate of illiteracy, inadequate housing, etc. It is difficult to remove these within the existing framework. If the political freedom of 1947 had been followed by social and economic freedom, the various social welfare problems, discussed by the team, would have disappeared long ago. The team has failed to view the problems in their right perspective and its recommendations are of a palliative or rehabilitative nature rather than of a preventive character aiming at the elimination of the basic evils.

Perhaps it is inevitable that a Government study team should be given terms of reference which virtuously confine it to administrative matters and force it to beg the really important questions. But surely there is no need for a report of this nature to be marred by an unprofessional tone. For example, a statement like the following smacks of unadulterated sycophancy that is unbecoming to social workers: “We cannot but utter words to define the correct policy on tribal development than used by none other than the Prime Minister himself in his succinct and pointed foreword . . .”. (P. 124).

Need of a New Concept

Our Constitution has assured us social, economic and political justice; liberty of thought and expression; equality of status and opportunity; and fraternity assuring the dignity of the individual. The directive principles inter alia place an obligation on the State to make effective provision for securing the right to work, to education and public assistance in case of unemployment, old age, sickness, disablement and other cases of undeserved want. While making its recommendations, the social welfare team should have considered these goals already laid down and should not have whittled them down, by indicating low aims. Social welfare should be an integrated part of a progressive social policy of the Welfare State and hence should not be treated in a piece-meal fashion. Social service, like political freedom, should be indivisible, ie, its benefits should be available to all the citizens of the land, on the basis of the well-known maxim—“from each according to his ability and to each according to his needs”. Viewed in this light, the report under review comes out badly. It is narrow in its scope, vague in its approach, unprofessional in its treatment and unimportant in its recommendations. While its compilation of data in itself fills a gap, the time has come for a far more revolutionary review of social welfare policy.

Jaldhaka Project

AN agreement has been concluded between India” and Bhutan on the Jaldhaka Hydro-electric project to be undertaken by the Government of West Bengal, under which Bhutan will receive 250 kw. of power free of cost. The West Bengal Government would also pay an annual royalty of Rs 8/- per kw. to the Bhutan Government for the rest of the power generated from the 1st stage of this project, and consumed by it. Jaldhaka, a small river rising from the Himalayas in Sikkim, flows alongside the river Teesta and ultimately joins the Brahmaputra. Draining a catchment of about 172 sq miles, the river constitutes the boundary between West Bengal and Bhutan for about 12 miles. The bed level of the river within this stretch drops sharply by about 810 ft, and it is proposed to install hydro-electric works in stages at two suitable places.

The firm power potential of the first stage of the project has been estimated at 18,000 kw. at 50 per cent load factor. The initial installation will comprise two generating units, 9,000 kw each. Provision would be kept for further addition of two more units of 9,000 kw, for generation of seasonal power, a good market for which appears possible from the extensive tea industry in this region.

The first stage works, costing Rs 290 lakhs on power generation, and Rs 146 lakhs on transmission equipment, are expected to be completed in about three years.