Chapter 3
Social Work Education: Fieldwork Practicum

In the scholarly world Social Work is viewed as a practice-oriented discipline. Students of Social Work are expected to apply the theories and concepts of the discipline while addressing problems at the individual, group and community levels in the field. Accordingly, the Social Work curriculum and pedagogy includes the fieldwork practicum as an essential component. Many educators and students emphasised fieldwork training as a unique feature that distinguishes Social Work from other social sciences. A pamphlet published as early as in 1957, by the Delhi School of Social Work, titled ‘Fieldwork supervision: in an Indian school of social work’, highlighted the importance of practice in Social Work:

Essentially social work skills are concerned with problem solving and as such they rest upon knowledge contained in the social and biological sciences pertaining to man and society. This knowledge is gained partly in the didactic sessions of the curriculum but it becomes meaningful only when the student has to test it in situation after situation in the field. Thus it can be seen that the practical experience must be closely integrated at every step of the way with what the student learns in the classroom (Gore, 1957: 3).

Thus, one may even assert that fieldwork practicum is the hallmark of Social Work and a substantial part of the education and training of students pursuing it is centred on it. According to Moti Ram Maurya,

Dewey’s idea of learning through doing has had a primary influence in the concept of field work . . . . It blends theory with practice. It facilitates fusion of thinking with doing. It combines philosophy with action. It integrates understanding about people and methods of helping them. Its techniques draw heavily on scientific knowledge about people and social phenomena. It is functional in nature and technical in process . . . . It is an integrated approach that goes concurrently with the classroom instructions, to turn out workers of effectiveness and maturity (1962: 10).

Senior educator, Mr Khan of the Jamia Milia Islamia, New Delhi clearly explained this by demarcating the difference between ‘knowledge for itself’ and ‘knowledge for application’, with the latter taking primacy in Social Work. According to him, developing a theoretical perspective at the academic level is only a part of the training process in Social Work. The student is expected to apply theories learnt in the classroom using different intervention strategies and methods of social work practice in the field. Depending on her/his ideology (theoretical framework) a social worker is expected to develop intervention strategies using different techniques and skills. In doing so, when the social worker engages with the field, s/he needs to capture the field dynamics and bring them back to the knowledge base of Social Work through classroom interactions, research, or individual and group conferences (discussed later in the chapter). According to Vera D. Mehta,
The functions for which field work must prepare students are:

- Rendering direct service
- Planning, policy development and administration related to service delivery.
- Engaging in evaluative research in order to improve, change and develop knowledge and skills in the delivery of services
- Supervision, training and education of personnel required for manning the programmes and services (1981: 2–3).

It is for this reason that supervised fieldwork practicum in Social Work is regarded as an essential component of the training process. The fieldwork practicum involves active engagement of both the educators and the students. Thus, the Social Work educators perform the dual role as teachers and fieldwork supervisors.

... practically all the schools of social work in India depend on the school faculty members for fieldwork supervision. With rare exceptions, the field work supervisor is a member of the school faculty, engaged in classroom teaching, thesis supervision and many other duties that fall on a member of any faculty in addition to his field of instruction (Yelaja 1969b: 14).

This chapter is intended to examine the nature of the relationship between theory and practice vis-à-vis fieldwork. Firstly, as fieldwork practicum is associated essentially with training for social work practice it discusses the different meanings attached to social work practice. Having discussed the meaning of social work practice, the chapter then highlights the difference between the meanings of fieldwork as understood in the social sciences and in Social Work before discussing the details of the fieldwork component in Social Work. Then the chapter seeks to examine the different components of fieldwork practicum in Social Work, the supervision process, and finally the evaluation of fieldwork practicum. The next section then discusses the importance of fieldwork training in Social Work including the learning of the students, the challenges that they face on the field, and the impact that it has on their development as trained social workers. A lot of challenges that students face in their fieldwork training pertain to the differences of opinions between the academicians and practitioners. Thus, the subsequent section highlights the debate between the academicians and practitioners in Social Work with respect to their roles, and how they affect the relationship between theory and practice in Social Work. Finally, the last section discusses the connections and contradictions between the classroom knowledge and the field-based knowledge in Social Work.

**Social Work Practice**

Social work practice is directed towards bringing a positive change in the society; it involves interventions at the individual, group, community, and policy levels. However, the intervention strategy of a social worker might differ depending on the ideological position
that s/he takes. For example, Payal, a student of the M.S. University, Baroda said that social work practice is about enhancing the social functioning of an individual so that s/he is able to adjust with the society. In contrast to this, Pooja of the University of Delhi expressed that social work practice involves bringing about social change by advocating for policy changes that alter the oppressive structure of the society. The two contrasting reflections of students from two different institutions of Social Work highlight the plurality in social work practice. It also highlights the fact that social work involves a range of activities such as individual counselling, generating awareness about different social issues, mobilising resources to meet the needs of a community, and participating in social movements. Senior educator Mr Dubey of TISS, Mumbai confirmed this. He said, “One cannot, at any point of time, define social work practice in a singular sense. Rather I would say that there are many social work practices; it depends upon the individual and her/his ideology as to what kind of social work s/he practises”.

Based on the reflections of educators and students we may classify social work practice at three levels. These include: (i) micro-level, (ii) meso-level, and (iii) macro-level. There are different ideologies that predominantly guide social work practice at each level. Also, at different levels there are different methods of social work practice that take primacy in the field. However, the predominance of a particular ideological position or a method of social work practice does not imply that other ideological positions or methods of social work practice are of no use at that level.

**Micro-level Social Work Practice**

At the micro-level social work practice is directed at individualistic interventions. At this level the social worker engages with individuals or with groups in addressing the problems faced by them. Her/his role is focused on a task and has a clinical orientation. In other words, the social workers address problems of individuals so as to enhance their social functioning. This highlights the tacit ontological assumption of positivism that underlies social work practice at the micro-level. It involves such activities as counselling and mobilisation of resources to meet the needs of individuals and groups. It is predominantly therapeutic.

Ms. Sukhdev of the Jamia Milia Islamia, New Delhi explained micro-level practice through an illustration. She said that individuals from the marginalised sections of the population have limited opportunities with respect to basic survival and developmental needs such as health and education. In such a situation the social worker tries to establish the connection between the individuals and requisite resources in order to make them self-sufficient and open corridors for their future development. This involves activities such as mobilisation of resources to meet the basic needs of the individuals and arranging for
vocational training to open opportunities for their employment, etc. Ms. Poddar of the Karnataka University, Dharwad shared similar views. She said that, at the micro-level, social work practice focuses on an individual, or a group having similar problems, and their immediate environment.

Thus, at the micro-level, the intention of the social worker is either clinical or philanthropic. In addition, the examples cited highlight the task-orientation at this level of practice. However, one cannot negate the fact that micro-level practice throws light upon the larger debates in the society and helps a social worker to develop an understanding of the macro-issues that trigger the problems at the micro-level. This is evident from Ms. Sukhdev’s observation about the marginalised sections of the population and their needs. She said that a social worker might be dealing with individuals in her/his practise, but the same problem is being encountered by a majority of the people within the marginalised sections and, therefore, this issue also needs to be addressed at a macro-level as the causative factors might lie outside of the individuals and their immediate environment.

Since social work practice at this level mainly focuses on individuals and groups, its methods include social casework, social group work and social welfare administration.

In casework the emphasis should be on problem-solving, preventive crisis intervention, behaviour modification, information-giving; advocacy on behalf of clients, from work with individuals to work with couples, group and other groups. In group work increasing emphasis must be given to innovation in uses of the group as a medium or context for treatment of individual psychological and inter-personal problems, for socialisation and creative self expression, for increasing human coping capacities through task oriented groups and for neighbourhood development and social action [here social action is understood differently from ‘Radical’ social work] (Mehta 1981: 5).

One can also point out a couple of theories that tacitly or explicitly guide micro-level social work practice. For example, when a social worker mobilises resources to meet the material needs of an individual, s/he is visualising the problem as it appears and is trying to intervene, in order to solve the problem, based on the objective ontological assumption that the reality is out there and one can observe a problem as it appears in reality. Social workers at this level are also, engaged in counselling an individual in trouble and the people who belong to her/his immediate environment. The method of practice that they follow is social casework in which they borrow theories from psychology. Here the underlying assumption is that the problem lies in the individual and her/his immediate environment, and one can solve the problem through counselling.

Meso-level Social Work Practice

At the meso-level, social work practice is either therapeutic or critical in nature; its focus of is on a larger collective, a community. This was explained by senior educator Ms. Das of the
Jamia Milia Islamia, New Delhi. According to her, social worker plays the role of a mediator or a facilitator at this level. For example, when the state is relocating a displaced community, there are issues of provision of basic necessities to the rehabilitated people. There is a sense of helplessness among such people with respect to accessibility of basic resources by themselves. In such a situation, social work practice involves organising people around their needs and then mediating between the state and the community.

Thus, the focus of social work practice at the meso-level is on a community. Its methods are community organisation and social welfare administration. However, social casework and social group work are also practised in the field when the social worker comes across individual cases while doing community work. According to Murray Ross,

Community organisation . . . is to mean a process by which a community identifies its needs or objectives, orders (or ranks) these needs or objectives, develops the confidence to work at these needs or objectives, finds the resources (internal and/or external) to deal with these needs or objectives, takes action in respect to them, and in so doing extends and develops cooperative and collaborative attitudes and practices in the community (1955: 40).

According to Mehta,

Community organisation should focus on the weakest and most disadvantaged and vulnerable section in the urban and rural areas. The method has a vital role to play in anti-poverty programmes and those of structural change in the country. Emphasis of this method [in social work practice] must be strong because of its greater utility and importance in the Indian context (1981: 5–6).

Although the traditional conceptualisation of community work has been more therapeutic in nature, critical thinking with respect to the political processes in the society has also found its footing in community work. Many social workers are involved in organising people of a community to fight for their rights. This critical approach to community organisation also regards macro-level work as a process-oriented approach that also provides a basis to individualistic and ameliorative work. According to P. Ramachandran, “. . . the relevance of translating this process oriented approach into the real life situation . . . may be necessary to start with the community or macro level situations which invariably are the origin and source of many problems and difficulties at the micro level” (1988: 18). This has led to the development of social action as a method of social work practice at the macro-level.

**Macro-level Social Work Practice**

At the macro-level, social work practice is predominantly critical in nature. The interventions involve social action with the aim of (a) bringing about changes in existing social policies and (b) making the existing policies implemented effectively. Thus, at this level, the interventions are macro-based rather than focussed on a particular individual, group, or community.
Social action, as a method of practice in Social Work, initially emerged as a branch of community organisation and later acquired the status of an independent method of practice. Social work practice at the macro-level applies social action as a political process of organising people against the oppressive structures of the society. This involves participation of social workers in various social movements on such issues as caste-based marginalisation, and gender-based discrimination. In addition, at this level, social work practice differs in its analysis of problems. Rather than locating the problems in individual inadequacies, it takes into consideration, the broader social and economic context. It draws inspiration from collective struggle of people that has the power to change the oppressive circumstances that exist in the society. Many students of Social Work mentioned that social action involves analysis of state policies and participation of social workers in social movements. Students from many institutions of Social Work covered by the study said that, as a part of their fieldwork training, they now participate in social movements, especially for their block fieldwork placements. However, till recently, there has not been much acceptance of social action by the social work fraternity. Meher C. Nanavatty argued:

Social Action as a method of bringing political and economic change, although known to developing countries in the region during their struggle for liberation from foreign rule, did not find commitment among the social work professionals as such. Those who believed in social action left the profession and joined the company of social activities (1993: 550).

As practice involves critical analysis of the current policies, another approach that is being practised in social work is advocating for policy changes, so that it benefits a larger section of the population rather than catering to a few individuals or groups. Practice through advocacy involves the use of social work research as a method of practice, so that it is based on reasoning and logic. Senior educator Ms. Vashi of TISS, Mumbai opined that in advocacy-based work, knowledge of theory and knowledge from field practice needs to be blended and presented through research findings to have a profound effect on policy formation. Lately, in India, this form of practice has gained prominence with the emergence of civil society organisations that focus on advocacy-based work. Mr Kumar of TISS asserted that social work practice has to be based on a critical ideology that questions the establishment and its policies.

The examination of social work practice at the three (micro, meso, and macro) levels highlights the nature of the relationship between theory and practice in social work. Whether social work practice is individualised or political, it is premised upon particular ideological frameworks. Ideological frameworks guide the intervention strategies of the social workers. For example, the participation of social workers in a social movement that aims at advocacy of the rights of Dalits is influenced by Ambedkar’s ideology on caste. A social worker who aims at mobilising resources within a community for its development bases her/his practice
on a positivistic framework, that is, observing a problem as it appears in the field. These ideologies as has been pointed out earlier, are based on theoretical assumptions (both ontological and epistemological) highlighting the intrinsic relationship between theory and practice in social work.

Having broadly analysed and classified social work practice, we may now move to the analysis of social work practice as a part of education and training process in Social Work. The practice component of Social Work is called fieldwork practicum. Before moving to the analysis of fieldwork practicum in Social Work, it is necessary to examine the difference between the meaning that fieldwork takes in Social Work and in the Social Sciences.

**Fieldwork: Social Work and Social Sciences**

Fieldwork takes different meanings in Social Work and in the Social Science disciplines such as Anthropology and Sociology. However, this does not mean that there are no similarities between fieldwork in the Social Sciences and in Social Work. One can interpret fieldwork in Social Work as an extension of fieldwork in the social sciences. What differentiates the concept of fieldwork in Social Work from social sciences is the primacy of purpose.

In Social Work, fieldwork is the training process for the students, through which they learn to develop and execute intervention strategies for bringing about a positive change in the society. In the Social Sciences, fieldwork is associated with the process of developing an understanding about the society. The purpose behind fieldwork training in Social Work is to develop practical knowledge in light of the theoretical knowledge obtained in the classroom and devise models for practice (intervention strategies). In other words, the focus of fieldwork (and also classroom teaching) in Social Work is to develop a knowledge base for application. Whereas in the social sciences, the purpose of fieldwork is to develop an understanding of the different social processes and probably stop there. Thus, it is the knowledge for itself that takes primacy in the fieldwork in social sciences than knowledge for application as it does in fieldwork in Social Work.

**Fieldwork in the Social Sciences**

In the social sciences, fieldwork is associated with research. It has predominantly to do with engagement with the field (under study) for collecting data. Fieldwork involves not merely the intellect but the entire psyche of the researcher and her/his data has no independent existence of him (Srinivas et al. 1979). The term ‘field’ in the social sciences refers to the communities of human beings who are being studied, and the fieldworker is the researcher who conducts the study. M.N. Srinivas, A.M. Shah and E.A. Ramaswamy (1979), have
highlighted that most fieldworkers in social sciences go into the field with a theoretical understanding of the discipline, especially in the sub-area of their interest with as much knowledge of the region as can be derived from secondary literature. Following this, the field takes over and the final outcome of the research depends on the interaction between the fieldworker and the field.

In intensive fieldwork, especially in anthropological studies, the researcher is expected to empathise with the people s/he is studying and feel, and think like them, and collect information on a variety of items. S/he is usually advised to observe the field unobtrusively and be aware of her/his personal biases and prejudices influencing the collection and interpretation of data.

As the focus of fieldwork in the social sciences is only on studying different aspects of a society, often what the scholar is doing may not be directly relevant for the betterment of the community that s/he is studying. The primary motive of the fieldworker is not to benefit those whom s/he studies. Therefore, not many of them initiate or participate in social action in the field for methodological, practical, and personal reasons (Srinivas et al. 1979). Nevertheless, the theoretical knowledge that the scholar develops through research has importance for practice.

**Fieldwork in Social Work**

In Social Work, fieldwork means the on-field training process that the students undergo along with classroom teaching. There are different components of the fieldwork practicum (discussed in the next section) that are continuously supervised and evaluated. In Social Work, fieldwork is not simply about understanding different aspects of the society but to develop and execute intervention strategies for on-field practise. Fieldwork gives to a Social Work curriculum the indispensable opportunity to provide supervised practice in the application of theoretical methods of the discipline so that the students are able to practise effectively with human beings in different social situations (Kapoor 1961). Thus, the focus in Social Work is more on doing rather than understanding. According to I.S. Subhedar,

Fieldwork in social work education refers to training and education . . . . It consists of accumulating knowledge in different situations. It is a dynamic process of observing, amassing and implementing creative and innovative ideas. Moreover, it fosters the development of intellectual and emotional processes and attitudes [. . . ] Fieldwork programme provides an opportunity to the students to apply their theoretical knowledge taught in the classroom appropriately in different practical situations (2001: 22–23).

Besides understanding the problem faced by the people, the students of Social Work are expected to develop insights into the intervention strategies through field observations. The methods of social work practice that are learnt in the classroom are applied in different field situations with the desire to alleviate problems that people face in the society. Students from
different institutions of Social Work said that social workers are like *social doctors* who fix the problems that people are facing in their lives.

Although students also conduct research studies as a part of their master’s programme, they differentiate between the fieldwork that they do as a part of their research and the fieldwork practicum. This explains why greater emphasis is laid on applied research in Social Work. For applied research the problems originate in the world of action, the methods and design come from the world of discipline, and results go back to the world of action (Coleman 1990). The research studies that are carried out are aimed at developing solutions to address social problems. For example, senior educator Ms. Kriplani of TISS, Mumbai expressed that she did her doctoral research on understanding the needs of deaf children and their families and then identified the possible social work interventions to address them. The aim of her research was to identify the role of a social worker in meeting the needs of deaf children and their families and later applying the knowledge so acquired in practise to test its usefulness.

Thus, in Social Work, fieldwork, both as an independent component of the curriculum and as a part of research; is task-oriented and directed towards informing on-field practise. Ms. Kriplani added that what social workers do in the field is borrow concepts from the social sciences that have been developed through research and then expand them on the basis of the experiential knowledge that is developed through field-interventions using different methods of social work. For example, in relation to casework many theories such as psycho-dynamics, functional casework, cognitive behavioural modification, and crisis management are studied. But in practice no unitary theory of casework emerged, therefore, efforts were made to adopt an eclectic approach using knowledge gathered from different theoretical orientations (Mathew 1987).

Thus, as emphasised by Nanavatty (1966), fieldwork in Social Work implies not only collection of data, but actual experience of working with people, therefore, fieldwork as understood in Social Work is different from its meaning in the social sciences. If the focus of fieldwork in the social sciences is on understanding the society, in Social Work it is on developing interventions to address social problems. However, both Social Work and the social sciences share an intrinsic relationship that is briefed by social research. Having examined how fieldwork in Social Work is differentiated from the Social Sciences, let us turn our attention towards the different components of fieldwork practicum in Social Work education and training.
Components of Fieldwork Practicum

Fieldwork practicum, as has been observed earlier, forms an integral part of the Social Work curriculum. The goal of fieldwork is to help students acquire the skills of working with people at different (micro, meso, and macro) levels besides enabling them to integrate theoretical learning of the classroom with practice in the field. Through fieldwork, students are helped to develop a holistic understanding of the issues, the problems, the situations, the causative factors, and possible strategies of intervention for solving the problems affecting the well-being of the people. According to M. Vasudeva Moorthy,

Field work is intended to give the student (1) first hand acquaintance of social and personal situations or problems of which he reads; (2) to inculcate in him the ability to apply techniques developed in each social work area for the solution of said situations and (3) to give him experience of the use of routine procedures relating to recording and administration which is incidental to the second . . . the objectives of fieldwork in social work are to enable a worker to recognise a problem, to diagnose it, to treat it and to use and maintain necessary procedures and records (1953: 145).

The fieldwork practicum that students undergo in the master’s programme includes multiple components. These include orientation programme, concurrent fieldwork, rural camps, block placements, study tours, and inter-agency meets.

Orientation Programme

In Social Work, students come from different disciplinary backgrounds and, therefore, require orientation to the field. This holds true for all the institutions of Social Work that have been covered by this study except the Department of Social Work, Assam University, Silchar where only students from Social Work background at the bachelor’s level are eligible to enter the master’s programme in Social Work.

The orientation programme is aimed at familiarising students (coming from different disciplines) with the fields of social work practice. It includes group activities and exercises, movie screenings, guest lectures from social work practitioners, and visits to voluntary organisations and open communities. Following are the broad objectives of the orientation programme that emerged from interactions with social work educators and the fieldwork manuals of different institutions of Social Work:

- To initiate students into the values of the profession, like respect for others, freedom of expression, and social responsibility.
- To help students understand and identify the processes of inter-personal and small group communication.
• To understand self in the context of structural realities.
• To develop awareness of social realities.
• To expose students to social/voluntary sector and state initiatives.
• To acquaint students to thematic issues and the range of interventions/models of practice.
• To familiarise students with organisational structure, functions, staffing patterns, programmes, and policies.
• To help students get a direct experience of field realities and issues faced by the marginalised groups and communities.
• To develop initial skills such as reporting and group discussion.

Broadly, the orientation programme is directed at developing an understanding towards practice-orientation in Social Work. The students are helped to realise the importance of experiential knowledge developed through practice in the field. After the orientation programme, the students begin with concurrent fieldwork, wherein they are placed with voluntary organisations or communities.

**Concurrent Fieldwork Placements**

Concurrent fieldwork includes placements of students with different organisations (mostly voluntary) that work on different issues in the society, or in communities directly. The institutional settings include: organisations working on human rights issues, organisations working with the homeless and street children, organisations working with the disabled, hospitals, etc. The community-based placements mostly include those where the marginalised sections of the population are settled such as urban slums and tea garden workers in tea plantations. The placement in communities (urban or rural) for concurrent fieldwork also depends upon the geographical location of the institution of Social Work.

For concurrent fieldwork, students visit the agency or the community, where they are placed, twice (or thrice) a week and spend a minimum of eight hours per visit. In most of the institutions of Social Work, concurrent fieldwork is compulsory in both the years of the master’s programme. In the institutions that follow a generic curriculum in education and training, the students are usually placed in an open community for one year and in an institutional setting for another so that they are able to develop skills of working in both the settings. In the institutions that follow a curriculum that is based on specialisations, students are placed in a setting that is different from their field of specialisation for the first year and in their specialisation field in the second year. Lately, some institutions of Social Work have
also started the practice of placing students for a continuous period of one full month in the second year of concurrent fieldwork instead of weekly visits.

The broad objectives of the concurrent fieldwork as highlighted by the educators are:

- To provide purposeful learning experiences of working in real life situations in which social work interventions may be required by individuals, groups, and communities.
- To develop attitudes and values in the students that commensurate with the requirements of social work profession, increasing self-awareness, and appreciating both the capacities and limitations of social work practice.
- To understand and make a commitment to humanistic values and principles of social work practice.
- To develop a holistic view of social work and related interventions in the community, with special emphasis on the agency’s role in human services.
- To develop an understanding of the problems and opportunities in working with diverse populations.
- To develop necessary skills in social work methods to help people in need.
- To enable students to develop and enhance the capacity to translate *theory into practice and vice-versa*.
- To develop the professional self of the students for providing leadership in developmental pursuits.

The concurrent fieldwork that students undergo is continuously supervised by the educators. Fieldwork supervision (discussed in-depth later in the chapter) is one of the essential features of the fieldwork practicum in Social Work.

**Rural Camp and Study Tours**

Most of the institutions of Social Work, especially those located in urban areas, organise one or two rural camp/s as a part of fieldwork training. The camp is usually organised for a week, in which students are taken to a village setting where they learn different skills. Students conduct outreach activities such as village mapping, *shramdan*, and participatory rural appraisal. Through the camp students get to know about the problems of the villages, the reasons behind them, the possible intervention strategies for solving them, and the role of the social worker in the intervention process.

Rural camps are useful, especially for students from urban background as they have no or a minimal exposure to village life and the problems of villages. Pankhudi, a student of the
University of Delhi, shared that, through the rural camp she not only got an exposure to a village setting, but also was able to draw a connection between the problems at the village level and those in the urban areas. For example, she observed that migration is not just an urban issue; the root cause of migration is globalisation, which is an outcome of neo-liberalism. In order to develop insights on the process of forced migration, knowledge of rural problems is important. This can help in designing holistic intervention strategies to provide effective solutions to deal with the problem of migration. She said that it was because of the rural camp that she was able to draw the connection between rural problems, urban problems, and macro-economic processes.

Apart from the rural camp, a few institutions (especially those following specialisation-based curriculum) organise study tours for the students in their areas of specialisation outside of the region where the institution is located. According to the report of Association of Schools of Social Work in India (AASWI) on fieldwork in Social Work education,

> These [study tours] also indicate moving away from the campus of the educational institution to a close or distant place to observe specific programme, services, institutions and/or administrative set-ups of organizations, governmental and non-governmental. They do not imply participation and direct involvement in the rendering of services . . . they necessarily involve the devotion of time and thought to getting knowledge of examining closely certain aspects of social work that are selected for one’s learning for a certain duration and point of time (Mehta 1981: 148).

The purpose of the study tour is to enable students to reflect upon the similarities and differences between the work that they do in their concurrent fieldwork and similar work happening outside of their region in the area of their specialisation. This provides an exposure to the students, so that when they start working after the master’s programme, they would have an idea of the diverse field situations within their respective areas of specialisation.

**Inter-Agency Meet**

Some institutions of Social Work also have the additional component of inter-agency meet as a part of the fieldwork practicum, wherein people from different agencies and communities come together in an institution for participation in cultural activities and sharing experiences with each other. It is a platform where students get wide exposure to different issues. The students learn directly from the experience of the people and other social work practitioners. However, in most cases, this component of fieldwork is not evaluated and is meant only for learning through an exchange of diverse experiences.

**Block Placement**

At the end of the master’s programme, the students are required to undergo a period of continuous fieldwork placement in an institutional or a non-institutional setting. The duration
of this block placement varies across institutions and is generally between thirty and sixty days. The block placement is seen as a part of the final training process before the students formally start working as social workers. It has been observed that many students who go for their block placement in institutional settings (mostly NGOs) end up working in the same place post-block fieldwork.

The fieldwork practicum in Social Work forms an integral part of the education and training of students. It begins with the orientation programme and ends with the block placement. The supervised concurrent fieldwork is the core component of fieldwork training and carries maximum weightage in the evaluation of the students’ performance in fieldwork practicum.

**Supervision and Evaluation of Fieldwork**

As stated earlier, the fieldwork component in Social Work is continuously supervised by Social Work educators and carries substantial weightage in the evaluation of students’ performance in the programme. Now we shall discuss the concept of fieldwork supervision with respect to the concurrent fieldwork placements of students and then follow it up with a discussion on the evaluation of fieldwork practicum.

**Supervision of Fieldwork**

Firstly, the concurrent fieldwork placement of students takes place either in an institutional (voluntary organisations/agencies) setting or in a non-institutional setting (urban and rural communities). In case of institutional placements, the supervision of the students takes place at two levels. At the first level, each student is allotted a fieldwork supervisor from the institution of Social Work (a social work educator). At the second level, the student is allotted a supervisor in the agency where s/he is placed. In case of a community setting, in most institutions of Social Work, the students are supervised only by a social work educator. In the current research, the analysis of fieldwork supervision is limited to the supervision provided by the educators. This is for two reasons: (i) external supervision is limited to institutional placements; it does not apply to the students placed in community settings, and (ii) due to financial and time limitations it was not possible to interview the agency supervisors from different settings. However, the reflections of students on the supervision provided by the agency supervisors have been included as data in the research.

In addition, we might clarify that concurrent fieldwork is largely understood within the Social Work fraternity as the weekly visits of students to the respective settings where they are placed. However, in a few institutions of Social Work, concurrent fieldwork placement in
the second year of the master’s programme is done in the form of a month-long block placement. This practice has been initiated lately in a few institutions of Social Work especially those that follow a specialisations-based curriculum.

Fieldwork supervision in Social Work occupies a vital position. It enables the student to integrate classroom content with field experience in a meaningful way, and at the same time, acquire performance skills. It serves the very purpose of Social Work education, that is, to prepare trained and competent social workers who can render services to the society.

Fieldwork supervision is an educational process that involves direct and individualised educator–learner relationship in which the supervisor judiciously and creatively assumes teaching, helping and administrative responsibilities to provide direction to the learner to promote professional growth and assume responsibilities (Department of Social Work, Visva-Bharati, Sriniketan, 2008). Thus, the role of the Social Work educator as fieldwork supervisor is crucial in the fieldwork training of the students. According to J.M. Kapoor,

The consultant [fieldwork supervisor] serves as an educator and helps student to express his (student’s) thoughts, feelings, doubts, confusions, even his anger and resentment about his experiences and work situation. Though the student himself bears a major responsibility of the task of his learning and accumulation and integration of what he has learned (sic). And what he is going to learn, the consultant often makes observations with a view to accelerate the student’s ability to gear it (ability) with the learning situation in relation of parts to the whole (1961: 119).

According to senior educator Ms. Sathe of TISS, Mumbai fieldwork supervision is the crux of the on-field training process of students, because, if the students are guided properly, it helps in their overall growth as professional social workers. It is for this reason that supervision in fieldwork needs to be continuous, and the supervisor and the student need to share a relationship based on mutual trust and respect for each other. Along with the students, the supervisors need to engage with the field in order to monitor students’ development, and to engage in practice so that they are able to link classroom transactions with the field reality. According to R. Thangavelu, ‘The relationship between the supervisor and the student provides a link between “the known and the unknown”. It must be based upon mutual respect, freedom to exchange ideas, spontaneous participation and a readiness to engage in a teaching-learning endeavour [emphasis mine]’ (1975: 359).

Senior educator Ms. Jhunjhunwala of the M.S. University, Baroda shared her views through an example:

I supervise the students who are placed in mental health settings. Fieldwork supervision helps me to keep in touch with the field and in identifying problems that students face in the field. On the one hand, it helps me to identify the contemporary developments in the field of mental health and then accordingly bring that in my pedagogy. On the other hand, it helps the students to draw a connection between theory and practice in social work.
Ms. Malhotra of the University of Delhi said that regular field visits as a supervisor helps her to track the progress of students in the field and helps in explaining the relevance of theory to them by linking it to the observations that they make in the field and the initiatives that they undertake in the field. Ms. Swamy of the Karnatak University, Dharwad highlighted that the methods of social work practice that are taught to the students in the coursework get practised effectively if the students are guided ably by the supervisor.

Students from different institutions of Social Work expressed that continuous supervision by the educators helps in coordinating their activities, and provides direction to the initiatives that they undertake in the field. Students deliberated that, because of supervision, they are able to develop an understanding about the tasks that they are required to carry out in the field rather than just technically executing them. The supervisors help the students to link the work of the agency with the theories, concepts, and methods of social work practice. According to Gauri Rani Banerjee (1975) and I.S. Subhedar (2001), fieldwork supervision teaches the students to integrate theory and practice in the field. It creates an environment in which professional skills for social work practice can be learnt.

The process of fieldwork supervision includes two important components through which the relationship between the educators and the students gets strengthened, and impacts the latter’s education and training. These are: (i) Individual Conference, and (ii) Group Conference. According to Thangavelu (1975), regularly scheduled conferences, both individual and group, are essential in the supervisory relationship with joint responsibility (of students and supervisors) for agenda and meaningful contributions to the discussions.

**Individual Conference.** The aim of the individual conference is to guide and help the students to integrate theory and practice, develop clear concepts relevant for and related to social work practice. It helps the supervisees to articulate their experiences theoretically, and the supervisors to monitor the supervisees’ performance and growth. The supervisor not only focuses on the learning needs of the student, but also identifies the problems that the student is facing in the field, and directs the supervision process accordingly. It would be insightful to highlight a couple of purposes of individual conference as laid down by Mehta,

The conference [individual] should be planned with a purpose . . . to further a student’s understanding of the client and thus contribute towards social study and assessment, [. . . ] to compensate whatever inadequacies the agencies have in terms of opportunity for developing the skills of social work by the instructor [fieldwork supervisor] . . . (1981: 35–36).

The individual conference between the fieldwork supervisor and the student is held at least once every week in all the institutions of Social Work covered by the study. The objectives of individual conference are summarised by Subhedar as follows:

The objectives of such conferences [individual conference of faculty and students] are as under:
(i) To give individual attention to the students, so as to assess the student’s ability to understand fieldwork process, for the purpose of guiding them in practicals (sic); 
(ii) To assist students in identifying their weakness during practicals (sic); 
(iii) To study the procedures and processes followed and to make use of the principles, philosophy and techniques in practice, and to inculcate in the students a scientific approach; and
(iv) To foster, develop and nurture a professional relationship between the students and faculty supervisors, and also to generate confidence in the students (2001: 34).

**Group Conference.** The group conference involves the participation of both the students and the fieldwork supervisors. They are divided into multiple groups depending upon the number of students and educators in the institution. There are three major roles that are performed by each student during the group conference: the presenter, the chairperson, and the recorder.

Group conferences are directed towards increasing the knowledge base of the students through sharing of each others’ field experiences. The students develop understanding of connections between different phenomena that are observed and experienced by them in different field situations. Apart from making written presentations, students also use other tools such as role play, simulation games, and discussions based on social issues that are relevant to the fields of practice.

Although supervision is an essential component of fieldwork, sometimes the extra focus on practice-orientation and fieldwork becomes problematic. According to Ms. Bose of the Visva-Bharati, Sriniketan, because of the over emphasis on practice and high weightage of fieldwork in the evaluation of students’ performances, fieldwork supervision tends to become task-oriented rather than focussing on the overall development of students as social workers. Students tend to look for micro-problems and temporary solutions in the field. This leads to a poor understanding of the community as a whole. Therefore, the students are often not able to connect the micro-issues with the macro-issues.

Many students also felt that task-oriented approach in fieldwork becomes problematic. They said that supervisors expect them to perform task-oriented activities such as organising health check-up camps, and blood-donation camps in the field, even if they do not feel the need to conduct such activities. Students commented that critical reflection and understanding of macro-issues is discouraged by many supervisors. Also, in the Indian context, they are not able to relate to certain methods of social work practice such as casework and group work that are more individualised in approach. But as it carries marks in the evaluation of their performance, they still practise them in the field.

Despite shortcomings, fieldwork supervision is an essential component in the training of students that helps in linking education and practice in Social Work. It helps the educators to
Fieldwork Evaluation

Fieldwork evaluation is a continuous process to assess the desired changes in the personality, knowledge, skills, and behaviour of the student. A major objective of evaluation is to help the student and the supervisor to identify the students’ strengths and weaknesses, and to decide where emphasis in teaching and learning should be placed (Khinduka 1963). The students are evaluated on the basis of their performance in the field, adherence to ethics and values of social work profession, the quality of records submitted by them, their performance in individual and group conferences, and attendance. In the area of knowledge, the focus of evaluation is on the acquisition of concepts (theoretical), principles (of Social Work), and facts (gained through field experience). The skills include, communication, fact-finding, diagnostic-assessment, problem-solving, administrative and leadership skills. Attitudinal changes are evaluated on the basis of the development of values, beliefs, and commitments appropriate to social work profession (Mehta 1981). The evaluation of students’ performance in fieldwork is important as it is a necessary component for deciding whether the student will be able to work as an independent professional social worker. According to I.S. Subhedar (2001), the objectives of evaluation of students’ performance in fieldwork include, assessment of the knowledge of theory and knowledge derived through field practice, and understanding of different fields of social work practice. Also, the assessment of individual abilities of the students to integrate theory and practice in the field, and the application of scientific methods of social work practice in the field.

Students record their observations, activities, and learning during their fieldwork. The fieldwork record is submitted to the supervisor, usually in the form of weekly reports; it also directs the individual conferences that students have with their supervisors. Fieldwork record helps in evaluating the students’ performance. Moreover, recording provides an opportunity to the students to organise and present information, observations, reflections, and actions in a systematic manner, and to reflect upon their role in interactions with people, administration and research.

The educators mentioned that the evaluation of students’ fieldwork is carried out in a continuous and interactive manner, wherein the students share with and get feedback from the supervisor about their learning from fieldwork. The student’s performance is not seen in isolation, but in the context of the agency’s limitations and strengths, both human and material, and of the student’s own efforts and capacities within that set-up as well as in the non-institutional settings. At times, some tasks might not be accomplished by the students for reasons beyond their control. A continuous and interactive evaluation process provides the
students with an opportunity to understand the limitations of their fieldwork settings and ways of overcoming them.

However, the heavy weightage (up to eight credits per semester) for fieldwork sometimes makes the students to be more focussed on task-oriented problem-solving approach. The students feel that, if they take up tasks, more so in the form of service-delivery activities, they will be able to get higher grades in fieldwork. As a result of this, many a time, they are not able to focus on their overall development as practitioners. It is only when the supervisors enkindle the students to reflect upon their practise, they think about it.

On their part the students observed that, due to the large weightage given to fieldwork in their overall evaluation for the master’s degree, they become anxious and do not express critical opinions in front of the supervisor. This is more so in agency placements, as the supervisors in the agencies do not generally accept critical remarks about the agency. The students feel that, if the agency supervisor does not give a positive feedback on their performance, their grades will be adversely affected. This has a negative influence on the students as they feel de-motivated and start visualising fieldwork as a mandatory requirement to attain their degrees, rather than as a learning process.

Having analysed the multiple components of fieldwork practicum and the process of its supervision and evaluation, we may now highlight the importance of fieldwork in the grooming of students as social workers and the development of Social Work as an academic discipline.

**Fieldwork: Its Importance and Impact**

Fieldwork gives a reality-check to the students. It is important to read about theories, but it is equally (if not more) important to use their understanding of theories with the reality outside of the institution of Social Work. The field does not always turn in the way students expect it to; field is contextual and contingent. For instance, in a crisis situation, nobody will ask the student, which model of social work practice is s/he going to follow. All that is expected of the student (by the people), is to set the situation right. How the student will do that depends on her/his knowledge, skills and ethics which might or might not be suitable in that situation.

One of the objectives of fieldwork is integration of theory and practice. According to Moti Ram Maurya,

> Not only does field work illuminate theory but, because of the many facets of specific cases it brings to light, or emphasises new aspects of theory that in the classroom have been postponed or touched upon only in a passing manner. It will be . . . unwise to think that theory is taught in classes and practice in the field only. Both are complementary and interdependent parts of the social work-whole. Theory without cases is empty and cases without theory are meaningless on the scientific level (1962: 11).
Shradha, a student of TISS, Mumbai said that many feminist theories are full of jargon and might be very western-centric, but through fieldwork she realised how these theories transcend their spatial origin and brief women’s lives in India in various contexts.

Educators from different institutions of Social Work expressed that fieldwork practicum helps the students to draw learning at all the levels of social work practice. At the micro-level, the students develop an understanding of the client system. At the meso-level, they learn to assess the needs of a community and, accordingly, learn to develop intervention strategies to fulfil them. At the macro-level, they understand the various tactics of dealing with the establishment, and to advocate the rights of people.

Senior educator Mr Khan of the Jamia Milia Islamia, New Delhi was of the opinion that fieldwork involves learning by doing; it exposes the students to different social realities, and makes them learn about the diversity and the needs of the Indian population. Mr Patrick of the Rajagiri School of Social Work, Kochi said that, apart from developing a holistic understanding of the society, fieldwork helps the students to develop certain skills, such as relationship building and documentation, which makes social work practice more concrete. Students from different institutions of Social Work said that fieldwork helps them to internalise their learning from the classroom and to identify the gaps in the pedagogy of Social Work education and the real life situation.

The students from Karve Institute of Social Service, Pune said that, through fieldwork training, they realised that practice is the broad umbrella in Social Work and theory only complements it. Fieldwork practicum highlights the difference in education between Social Work and the Social Sciences. The practice-orientation through fieldwork makes them realise that in Social Work they can never stay disconnected from the field.

The students from Karnatak University, Dharwad deliberated that through fieldwork new ideas are generated. The fieldwork supervisor gives a concrete shape to these ideas and incorporates them into the pedagogy of Social Work through examples. These examples can generate practice theories for future through research. Deliberations by educators and students indicate that fieldwork commands a lot of importance in Social Work, as it helps in integrating theory and practice by providing an exposure to real life situations in the field. At the same time the educators and the students also observed that due to the challenges that the students face in the field, they feel that there is a gap between theory and practice in Social Work.

**The Challenges**

A major challenge that students face in fieldwork is that the importance of their work is not recognised by society. Students complained that, when they go for fieldwork, the general
perception of the people is that social work can be done by anyone who is motivated to help people, and that, it does not require any specialised education and training. Students feel that, in India, social workers are not accepted as professionals and hence the importance of their work gets diminished. This is in contrast to what students are taught in the institutions of Social Work.

The students of Assam University, Silchar said, they are taught that Social Work is a professional course that develops in them an attitude to bring about social change, and provides them training in methods and skills for practising social work in an organised and scientific manner. Therefore, there is a clear distinction between social work and social service. However, when the students go for their fieldwork, people expect material benefits from them either in cash or in kind. Similar concerns were raised by students from Karnatak University, Dharwad. They said, people in the communities do not recognise social work as a professional and scientific activity and hence refuse to cooperate with them in the activities that they organise. If there is no material benefit, then people do not take interest. Thus, the students face the challenge of low societal recognition for their work and feel that there is a gap between what is taught to them and what is found in field situations.

The expectations of the institutions of Social Work and that of the agencies where students are placed for their fieldwork training are at variance. Ms. Swamy of the Karnatak University, Dharwad highlighted that the fieldwork supervisor in the institution of Social Work focuses on the application of theories, concepts, and methods of social work practice, whereas the agencies make them do desk work or use them as helping hands in their projects. This de-motivates the students, as many of them are not able to work their way out in the agencies. This affects the integration of classroom knowledge with the field.

The Principles taught in the class often do not imbue social work practice in the field work agencies. The students therefore often find themselves exposed to highly frustrating situations where classroom teaching sets standards or expectations, which are hardly ever attained in practice in the institutions (Gore cited in Yelaja 1969b: 15).

Prashant, a student of TISS, Mumbai said,

*The agency that I was placed in had its own motives and goals, they already had a project proposal in place. From TISS, our supervisors send us with an expectation that whatever theory you have been taught, needs to be applied in the field. We cannot ignore either of them, neither the supervisor nor the agency people. I was given a survey form by the agency, for three months I had to gather data for that survey. Thus, I felt that from my entire semester’s fieldwork practicum I did not learn anything substantial.*

Similarly, Shaeena of the College of Social Work, Nirmala Niketan, Mumbai said, “*I was used as unpaid labour in the agency where I was placed. Agencies have useless project based agendas where no learning takes place. Critical thinking in the agencies is not encouraged*.”
Mr Iyer of the Madras School of Social Work, Chennai raised similar concerns with respect to fieldwork. According to him, the gap between theory and practice arises because the ethics and agenda of the institutions of Social Work and the agencies where the students are placed for fieldwork are different. The agencies do not have trained social workers as employees, so they do not understand the requirements of fieldwork training of students. These situations give rise to the debate between the academicians in Social Work and the practitioners in the field (discussed in the next section). This has been a perennial problem in fieldwork. The report of the workshop on fieldwork conducted by Association of Schools of Social Work in India (AASWI) and compiled by Mehta (1981) highlights the limitations of placing students in social service agencies, such as municipal welfare departments, schools and hospital social services, correctional institutions, and family welfare agencies, for fieldwork training in comparison to the expectations of institutions of Social Work (see Table 3.1).

**Table 3.1: A Comparison between Schools of Social Work and Social Service Agencies**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Schools of Social Work [Institutions of Social Work]</th>
<th>Social Service Agencies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Emphasizes professional values and principles.</td>
<td>1. Affected by political and bureaucratic constraints liable to impede the ability to function according to professional values and ethics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The framework for creating and accumulating updated knowledge and intervention methods which are transmitted to the students.</td>
<td>2. Some of the staff of the agencies have long since terminated their professional innovations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The schools promote change, flexibility and open-mindedness.</td>
<td>3. Welfare agencies acting according to bureaucratic work patterns find it difficult to adjust to changes and innovations.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Mehta (1981: 126)*

Efforts have been made by institutions of Social Work and associations such as ASSWI to propose solutions to overcome this challenge, initiative for which needs to be taken by social work educators and supported by the institutions of Social Work. For example: developing a ‘Teaching Centre Model’ for fieldwork training of the students to resolve the disadvantages of placing students in voluntary organisations (see Table 3.2).

Another challenge that students face during their fieldwork placement is the lack of continuity in their work. Students go for fieldwork twice or thrice in a week, after which there is a gap of four to five days before they visit the field again. Students complain that if they initiate any activity in the field, they are not able to complete it in two field visits per week. This happens repeatedly in community settings, as they do not practise under an organised
setting and the rapport-building process takes a lot time. Since students are not able to engage with the field continuously, they are not able to practise what they are taught in the classroom.

The field situation is dynamic. Students often feel that, as the field reality changes rapidly, the application of theory to practice is very difficult. Theories have been developed in a certain spatial and temporal context which is at variance with the contemporary field realities. Many social work educators expressed that the dynamism of the field reality creates a gap between theory and practice in Social Work.

Table 3.2: The Disadvantages of Field Training in Social Service Agencies and their Resolution in the Teaching Centre Model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disadvantages of Field Training in Social Service Agencies</th>
<th>The Solutions of These Problems in Teaching Centre Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Lack of appropriate organisations and instructors [agency supervisors].</td>
<td>1. University teachers which are appointed by the school serve as student instructors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Some of the social service agencies do not act according to social work values and principles.</td>
<td>2. In a teaching unit controlled by the social work school the congruency with professional values and principles is guaranteed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Lack of coordination between classroom studies and learning experiences in the field.</td>
<td>3. The teaching unit can develop study experience which would fit in with the school curriculum.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The limited ability of social work schools to influence the structure &amp; work patterns of the social services.</td>
<td>4. The teaching unit enables the schools to contribute to the social services by initiating and developing new patterns of service delivery.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Mehta (1981: 134)

Mr Iyer of the Madras Schools of Social Work, Chennai said, “what we teach in the classroom has been developed a long time ago mostly in the West, and has not been revised. The society changes rapidly creating a gap between theory and practice.” Paul, a student of the same institution expressed the same concern: “Most of what we are taught in the classroom in the form of theory is all westernised which was developed in a different context therefore we see a gap in what is taught to us in the classroom and what we experience in fieldwork”.

Nazia, a student of Jamia Milia Islamia, New Delhi highlighted this concern through a field example:

In theory I was taught about the socialization process of children. For fieldwork I was placed in an organisation that works with street children in Delhi. While working with street children I was not able to relate the theoretical learning about the socialization process of children in relation to street children as they do not experience a normal childhood. Therefore, the theoretical learning about the socialization process of children seemed to be irrelevant in my work with street children. I felt that the dimension of vulnerable groups of children is absent in theory that is taught to us, whereas for fieldwork training I was placed with an organisation working with one such vulnerable group.
Prashant, a student of TISS, Mumbai said, theory can also be developed from the field. But the field situation changes rapidly and, therefore, seminars should be organised to see how theory is related to field so that there is some space to modify them.

Ms. Shinde of the Karve Institute of Social Service, Pune highlighted that the dynamism of field reality is a problematic for the students as they try to mechanically apply theory in practice. When they do not see the exact connect they feel that theory and practice are disjointed from each other. They forget that theories only provide a broad understanding of the reality and the intricacies of the field cannot be captured by a theory in changing times.

From the responses of the educators and students from different institutions of Social Work, it is evident that not only is fieldwork an important component of the overall education and training process in Social Work, but it also creates a strong impact on the development of students as social work practitioners. The students, despite the above mentioned challenges, build upon skills for social work practice, develop an empathetic and non-judgemental attitude towards the people and the society, and learn to examine the relevance of different theoretical frameworks in the context of field reality.

The reflections of students on the learning they draw from their fieldwork practicum highlight the importance and the impact of fieldwork training on their development as social workers. For instance, Michael, a student of TISS, Mumbai said,

“I learnt how to work under limitations. I learnt to interact with people across different age groups and developed a non-judgemental attitude towards the people with whom I worked in the field. For example, I was able to break my stereotypes with respect to the Muslim communities after I engaged with them in the field. I was able to identify multiple micro-problems and macro-problems in the field and discovered the complexity of different situations, and how the problems at the individual level are connected to the larger problems that the society faces on the whole. This made me face the real challenges in fieldwork. I also overcame the anxiety of engaging with authorities and learnt how to tackle their rude behaviour. In addition to this, I learnt how to pressurise the authorities using the knowledge of legal procedures as was taught to me in the institution. Besides this I learnt different skills such as preparing a community profile. I learnt the practical skills of organising people without funds for creating a pressure group and do advocacy. Finally, I learnt how to relate theoretical knowledge in different field situations.

As has been discussed in this section, students face a number of challenges in their fieldwork, especially the challenge of different expectations of the institutions of Social Work and the agencies where they are placed for fieldwork. This has given rise to a debate between academicians and practitioners engaged in social work.

The Debate between Academicians and Practitioners

In Social Work, the common understanding has always been that it is a practice-oriented discipline. It is generally assumed that whether one is an academician or a practitioner, everyone has to be engaged with on-field practice. Ideally, it is expected that a close contact
is maintained between the academicians and practitioners, both on and off the field. This would benefit the students as they will be able to integrate classroom learning with fieldwork practice through the coordinated efforts of academicians and practitioners. On the one hand, it would benefit the pedagogy of Social Work as it would be informed by contemporary field realities; on the other, it would improve social work practice as it would be informed by theories and methods that would make practice more organised. But, many students complained that this does not happen in reality. They said that, contrary to the ideal situation, academicians and practitioners are, many a time, engaged in a debate with each other. There are two limiting factors that give rise to such debates. Firstly, the degree of involvement with the field differs: the academicians are rarely involved in field practice and the practitioners are mostly involved in field practice. Secondly, in the voluntary (non-government) sector where the bulk of the students end up practising social work, social workers are in minority. These limitations result in complex situations that relegate the relationship between theory (perceived as the domain of academicians) and practice (perceived as the domain of practitioners) to the background. In addition, at the level of the agencies, there are certain limitations that create problems for the fieldwork placement of students. As highlighted by I.S. Subhedar these problems are:

(i) Well established agencies . . . do not allow students for fieldwork training in their agencies. Even if they do allow, they do not give enough time to the students.

(ii) Many social welfare agencies do not have well set programmes, qualified and experienced staff, good standards of services, etc., which otherwise provide a rich learning experience to the students in the agencies.

(iii) Many social welfare agency workers feel that students are sometimes quite critical about the workers' service towards the community, and thus create problems due to which the real practices are not demonstrated to the students. Complete or relevant information in such cases, is not divulged to the students in the agencies. This hesitation or fear is one of the major problems of the agencies (2001: 51–52).

However, the practitioners have their own version of the story. According to them, the academicians in the institutions of Social Work are sitting in ivory towers, distant from the contemporary field realities, and therefore are not able to comprehend the field situations and the interventions well. They further feel that they can teach in institutions of Social Work, provided that they have the humility to learn from the practitioners. These institutions need to throw out the dead-wood in their training, and modify their programmes to meet the needs of the time (Ramachandran 1988).

The academicians in Social Work are not full-time practitioners, and the practitioners are only involved in their respective fields of practice. The contact between them is established through students who are placed for fieldwork training in different organisations and in open communities. As the contact through the students is indirect, the nature and extent of
communication is limited. According to Mr Swaminathan of the Madras School of Social Work, Chennai efforts are made to initiate communication between academicians and practitioners by inviting practitioners for guest lectures. This helps the students to learn from the experience of practitioners and to integrate classroom learning with field reality. This practice was earlier followed at the Delhi School of Social Work (now known as the Department of Social Work, University of Delhi):

The supervisors and other personnel from the agencies are invited to give lectures to the students. These lectures have been found very popular with the students. The agency supervisors also consider it an honour to talk to the students. These lectures have helped in a better appreciation of theory and practice and serve as a good instrument to integrate the field work theory (Gangrade 1975: 356).

But such efforts are neither frequent nor continuous because of administrative limitations of the institutions and the busy schedule of the practitioners. Thus, there is a limited exchange of ideas between the academic discipline and practice fields in Social Work.

Mr Swaminathan added that, because of this, the basic premise of Social Work that it is a practice-oriented discipline did not materialise completely. According to Mr Singh of the Jamia Milia Islamia, New Delhi, all institutions of practice-oriented disciplines need to step into the field so that academicians and practitioners can interact and draw from each others’ knowledge. The institutions of Social Work have not been able to be involved in practice continuously. The field action projects and other extension activities are mostly limited to financially strong and established institutions such as TISS. The practitioners feel that theories and concepts developed by academicians are abstract as they are unaware of the field realities.

Drawing from Mr Singh’s reflections, we can see that practitioners do not attach the same importance to theory as academicians. They simply execute the set out tasks; and understanding of the larger reality on the basis of which the tasks have been designed is secondary for them. Moreover, the practical situations are full of diverse challenges. In a limited time-frame, the practitioners find it difficult to decide whether to address the micro-problems that they face every day or to understand the macro-causes behind them. For example, a practitioner working with street children highlighted that although he is able to understand that the primary supportive structure for a child is her/his family, most of the children that he works with on the streets belong to dysfunctional and non-supportive families. The reasons behind dysfunctional families are many and it is difficult for him to focus on one aspect of the problem. But due to the limitations of the organisation, where he works, he chooses to work on a small task of drug de-addiction of street children through medical help, despite knowing the fact that the success stories in such an approach would be limited and the issue will not be addressed holistically.
However, such experiences of practitioners do throw light upon the larger reality that has been explained in theories even if they have not been able to capture the complex situations at the micro-level. If these experiences are theoretically articulated they might develop into practice theories for social workers. This might help in better understanding of the problems and more efficient execution of the tasks. But, due to limitations of time and money, the practitioners are not able to theorise. Also they consider that it is not their task to theorise; it is the job of Social Work academicians. The academicians, on the other hand, feel that due to lack of engagement with the field on their part, they are not able to draw understanding from field examples in the classroom.

As Ms. Pinto, a senior educator at College of Social Work, Nirmala Niketan, Mumbai said, “It is true that practitioners work but probably they do not think that, it is their job to theorise. Similarly academicians think that their job is limited to teaching and conducting research and not practicing in the field.” According to S. H. Pathak (1975), as both academicians and practitioners find it difficult to integrate theory and practice continuously (because of different approaches towards the fieldwork training of the students), often there are bitter debates between the two, causing confusion in the minds of students who end up developing an attitude of cynicism rather than commitment towards Social Work.

To summarise, it is true that both academicians and practitioners understand the importance of both theoretical knowledge and field-based knowledge but the importance of connecting the two does not get sufficiently materialised in reality due to lack of sufficient communication between them. The practitioner is directly connected to the field and, therefore, focuses more on micro-problems. The academician is connected to the field only indirectly through the students, therefore focuses more on theorising. Both regard their role as primary resulting in a debate wherein they get distanced from each other. However, we cannot discredit the fact that there are academicians and practitioners who are performing both the tasks and are continuously trying to develop theories for practice that are based on field experiences. But such examples are few and far between.

With the growth of the voluntary sector in India, many job opportunities have opened up with various non-governmental organisations. This has created the need for educated and trained individuals who are committed to work towards addressing social issues. Mr Pandey of the University of Delhi expressed that, since independence, there has been a huge demand for educated youth who are committed to serve the society. Social work is the ideal profession that produces not only educated but also trained personnel to work in the voluntary organisations. But, the growth in the number of institutions of Social Work has not been at par with the growth in the number of organisations in the voluntary sector. As a result, people from other Social Science disciplines and lately multi-disciplinary areas of study such as development studies have taken up jobs alongside social workers in the voluntary
organisations. Most of those working with the voluntary organisations now, whether at the
glass-roots level or at the management level are not trained social workers. Even the social
activists and leaders who work on macro-issues such as displacement and environmental
inghts of people are largely committed individuals who do not have a Social Work
background.

As social work profession has not been able to match the demand for social workers in
the voluntary sector, they are in a minority there. People who are not educated and trained in
institutions of Social Work do not share the same perspective as that of trained social
workers. They work on the basis of their own experience and the education that they have
received from other disciplines. This creates a gap between classroom teaching and practice
in Social Work. Pathak links this to the creation of additional administrative workload for
social work educators:

. . . employment of relatively small number of professionally educated social workers in the
social welfare agencies has compelled the schools of social work to provide supervision in field
instruction mainly through their teachers. This has increased the work-load of the teachers in
many schools which are understaffed and affected adversely the quality of supervision (1975:
323).

The students witness a gap between theory and methods of social work practice that they
are taught in the classrooms, on the one hand, and the fieldwork that they do in the voluntary
sector during the master’s programme in Social Work, on the other. However Ms. Vashi, a
senior educator at TISS, Mumbai stated that, in order to address this problem, efforts need to
be made by academicians and practitioners to come together and write research papers and
articles on different social issues.

**Theory–Practice Congruence:**

**Implications for Fieldwork**

In the previous chapter, we discussed the implications of congruence between theory and
practice for the pedagogy of Social Work. Let us now discuss the implications of the same,
based on the reflections of educators and students, on fieldwork training. Senior educator Ms.
Vashi of TISS, Mumbai stated that congruence between theory and practice will help the
students to locate a clear space for themselves in the agencies and the communities where
they are placed for fieldwork training. The students will be able to better understand the
limitations of the settings in which they are placed. This will enable them to accept the
limitations in the beginning, and with regular visits, it will help them to overcome the
limitations. Specially, in agency settings, students will be able to carve out a clear space for
their work in a multi-disciplinary team. For this, an understanding of different theoretical
perspectives will help the students to understand their work in the field better, so that they are able to explain the importance of their work to the people of the agency where they are placed and the people of the community with whom they work. This might result in better acceptance of their work by both the voluntary sector and the people in the community. It might open up channels of communication between the voluntary sector and the institutions of Social Work. The assumption that academic activities and practical interventions are mutually exclusive in Social Work might be challenged by both the academicians and practitioners.

Senior educator Mr Khan of the Jamia Milia Islamia, New Delhi said,

*Social work practice is plural in nature. The reason behind this is that people operate with different ideologies when they engage with issues in the society, which in turn are guided by different theoretical perspectives. As there is no clear understanding of different theoretical perspectives, the plurality in social work practice is not appreciated. Also, if there is a clear understanding of the different theoretical perspectives, then students might be able to clearly understand the actions that different theoretical perspectives guide and follow the perspective that interests them. As fieldwork involves regular engagement with real life situations, the practical experience will help the students in developing requisite skills in relation to their actions (guided by the theoretical perspective that they follow). This might result in clear and organised fieldwork practice.*

Ms. Gupta of TISS, Mumbai shared a similar opinion. According to her, congruence between theory and practice will lead to improved fieldwork practice. It will help the students to understand, why s/he is doing what s/he is doing, and what might be the possible outcomes of her/his work. Thus, the fieldwork practice of the students will be clear and pre-mediated rather than being intuitive.

Ms. Wagle of the Karve Institute of Social Service, Pune said that the congruence between theory and practice will help in developing trust between the practitioners in the field and the educators as they would be able to appreciate the importance of each other’s work and the complementary role that it can play to improve both academics and practice of social work. This would result in a more accommodative environment for the students in their fieldwork placement. Ms. Wankhede from the same institution opined that, if students develop a better understanding of theories and concepts, it would help them to explain their work to the people in the community (in case of open community fieldwork placements) and their work will gain better recognition among them.

The students from different institutions reflected more on how practice connects to theory in Social Work. Sonal, a student of TISS, Mumbai said that practice makes her realise that field engagement is a continuous process because, the field situations are dynamic and change continuously. Since, in Social Work, students are expected to apply theory in practice, the engagement with the field informs the *extent* to which theories and concepts can be applied in contemporary situation.
Puneet, a student from the same institution highlighted that fieldwork helps in understanding the political alignments among people and how they lead to everyday conflicts in the communities. To understand the reasons behind that is important, but firstly one needs to control that conflict at the micro-level before getting to the larger political interventions. But needless to say, the immediacy of addressing the problems at the micro-level is temporary and social action at the macro-level needs to complement it for preventive solutions. Social action, whether in the form of organising people to fight for their rights or in the form of creating pressure groups to advocate for policy changes, demand understanding of different theoretical perspectives. But, these theories and concepts need to be supported with contemporary examples from the field. Thus, the conscious recognition of the congruence between theory and practice becomes important not only for organising the activities of the students during fieldwork, but also in recognising the importance of substantial knowledge that is gained through fieldwork training.

**Summary**

As Social Work is viewed as a practice-oriented discipline, the fieldwork practicum constitutes as an essential and unique component of its curriculum and pedagogy. Fieldwork training is based upon practice in Social Work. Social work practice includes a wide range of activities such as individual counselling, generating awareness about social issues, mobilising resources to meet the needs of a community, and participation in social movements.

These wide ranging social work activities can be classified at three levels, namely; (i) micro-level, (ii) meso-level, and (iii) macro-level. Different ideologies predominantly guide social work practice at these levels. Subsequently, the ideology guides the choice of the method of social work practice. But, the predominance of a particular ideology and method of social work practice at a particular level does not imply that other ideologies and methods of practice are irrelevant at that level.

Micro-level social work practice is individualistic in orientation and therapeutic in nature. At this level, the social worker deals with individuals or groups, comprising of individuals, facing similar problems. But, at the same time individualistic practice highlights causative economic, political, and social factors that give rise to problems at the micro-level.

At the meso-level, social work practice is focussed on a larger collective, namely, community. Predominantly, the social worker applies community organisation (a method of social work practice) to address the concerns raised by people in the community. While engaging in community work, the social worker also develops knowledge about the rights of
people and deliberates on the macro-interventions to realise these rights. Thus, at this level, the practice is either therapeutic or critical in nature or both.

At the macro-level, social work practice is predominantly, critical in nature and involves the application of social action and social work research as methods of social work practice. The social worker is engaged in a political process of organising people to alter the oppressive structures in the society. The aim is to bring about a social change by empowering people.

The concept of fieldwork carries different meanings in Social Work, and in the social sciences. The focus of fieldwork in the Social Sciences is on studying and understanding different aspects of a society. The focus of fieldwork in Social Work is more on doing (interventions) rather than understanding.

The fieldwork training process is called fieldwork practicum in Social Work. It comprises of different parts. Broadly, these include: orientation programme, concurrent fieldwork placements, rural camps, study tours, inter-agency meets, and block placement. The most prominent and continuous of all the components is the concurrent fieldwork placement. The students are placed in two different, institutional (voluntary/agency organisation) and non-institutional (community) settings during the two years of the master’s programme. The fieldwork placements are continuously supervised by an educator who also plays the role of a fieldwork supervisor in Social Work.

Fieldwork supervision includes two important components, namely, (i) individual conference, and (ii) group conference. Individual conferences facilitate in developing a one to one relationship between the fieldwork supervisor and the supervisee/student. It helps the students to express the learning and the challenges faced by them in the field. Consequently, it helps in integrating classroom learning with field practice and vice-versa.

As fieldwork constitutes an essential part of the curriculum, it carries high weightage in the evaluation of students’ performance in the master’s programme. The students are evaluated on the basis of their development as social workers in three broad areas – knowledge, skills, and attitude. But, the high weightage of fieldwork in evaluation acts as a hindrance in students’ development as they become anxious of their performance in field activities. They tend to indulge in technical execution of task-oriented activities than developing intervention strategies based on a thorough understanding of the field reality and choosing appropriate methods of social work practice in different situations.

As stated earlier, owing to the understanding that Social Work is practice-oriented, fieldwork carries a lot of importance. Both knowledge of theories and methods learnt in the classroom, and knowledge developed through field practice are equally important in Social Work. Through fieldwork, students develop understanding about intervention activities such as client-system, community, and advocacy-based work. Moreover, students develop skills such as rapport building and documentation. Students were of the opinion that through
fieldwork training, they are able to generate new ideas for developing effective intervention strategies. If the supervisor is proactive then these ideas can be concretised and can be used as examples in teaching. Moreover, if followed by research, these can be developed into practice theories.

The students face numerous challenges during their fieldwork placements. Students complain that their work is not sufficiently recognised by the people with whom they engage in the field especially in community settings. In the agency settings, the students face the challenge of different expectations of institutions of Social Work and the agencies where they are placed. Institutions expect the students to apply the theories and methods learnt in the classroom to field practice, whereas the agencies have their own agenda lined for students.

Then, a lot of what is taught to the students in Social Work is outdated and has been borrowed from western literature. Students are not able to relate the western literature to the contemporary field situations in the Indian context. Educators were of the opinion that students are not able to integrate theory and practice as they attempt mechanical application of theory in practice. They need to understand that theories only provide broad understanding about the social reality, not everything that is taught in theory is relevant in different and dynamic field situations. The students need to observe different field situations and discriminate between different theories in practice.

The challenge that institutions of Social Work have different expectations from the students as compared to the agencies where they are placed for fieldwork has a serious bearing on the theory–practice relationship in Social Work. The reason behind different expectations is explained by the debate that exists between academicians and practitioners in Social Work.

Whether it is – the academicians, the practitioners, or the students – everyone is expected to have some engagement with the field reality. Ideally, the academicians and practitioners are expected to maintain close contact with each other to benefit both education and training, and practice in social work.

Moreover, the voluntary organisations, where students are placed for fieldwork comprise of individuals from different academic backgrounds (especially at the management level). Therefore, practitioners, many a time, do not understand the relevance of education and training in Social Work. This leads to a debate between the academicians and practitioners and creates a gap between education and training on the one hand, and fieldwork, on the other, in Social Work. The students end up perceiving this gap as the gap between theory and practice in Social Work.

Finally, congruence between theory and practice has important implications for fieldwork training of the student of Social Work. As deliberated by many educators, congruence between theory and practice can help the students to create a clear space for their work in
different field settings. The students, rather than getting de-motivated because of lack of appreciation of their work in the field, would be able to understand the limitations with which they need to work and subsequently would be able to devise strategies to overcome these limitations. In addition, the understanding of different theoretical perspectives will enable the students to recognise the plural and diverse nature of social work practice, and the extent of their applicability in different field situations. Also, a better understanding of theories and concepts would help the students to convince the people in the communities to recognise the importance of their work leading to the acceptance of social work as different from service-delivery. Lastly, the understanding of different theoretical perspectives will help the students to understand the economic, political, and social fabric of the different spaces, in both institutional and non-institutional settings, where they are placed for their fieldwork training.

The analysis of the theory–practice relationship in Social Work vis-à-vis the curriculum, the pedagogy, the evaluation process, and the fieldwork practicum, reveals the central role that ideology plays in influencing this relationship. The ideological position of the people in the social work fraternity also affects the development of social work as a profession. There are people in the Social Work fraternity who view social work as a profession. At the same time, there are people who oppose this view. The different purposes as understood by different people in social work fraternity and their outlook towards social work (as a profession or not) has led to changes in the development of social work profession over the past seventy-five years in India. Some of these changes have been accepted and some have been resisted. Thus in the next chapter, we shall focus on these factors and their impact on the theory–practice relationship in Social Work.