

ENHANCING SPIRITUAL COMPETENCE IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE AND EDUCATION IN INDIA: AN EVIDENCE-BASED DECOLONISED FRAMEWORK

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Abstract

Spiritual competence is increasingly recognised as a core dimension of culturally responsive social work practice in pluralistic societies. In India, where spiritual and religious worldviews shape help-seeking, coping, and meaning-making, social workers require specialised attitudes, knowledge, and skills to address clients' spiritual strengths and distress ethically. This paper presents a systematic integrative review of conceptual foundations, culturally valid assessment strategies, and empirically tested training models for spiritual competence, prioritising Indian scholarship (2020–2025). A decolonised, Indianised framework integrating indigenous constructs (seva, dharma, loksangraha, and yogic principles) with contemporary professional ethics is proposed for integration into BSW and MSW curricula.

Keywords: *spiritual competence, Indianisation of social work, decolonisation, cultural humility, indigenous spirituality, social work education India*

INTRODUCTION

India's religious and spiritual diversity (Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism, Jainism, and numerous tribal traditions) profoundly influences individual and collective well-being (Pawar & Tseng, 2023; Nikku & Raut, 2024). Social workers frequently encounter spiritual themes in family disputes, palliative care, disaster response, mental health crises, and community development (Bodhi, 2022; Joshi & Dean, 2024). Yet most Indian social work curricula remain heavily influenced by Western secular-rational models, marginalising indigenous spiritual paradigms (Dash, 2021; Pawar, 2023).

The “Bharatiyakaran” (Indianisation) movement calls for curricula rooted in Indian philosophical systems while retaining global professional standards (Nadesan, 2020; Kulkarni & Dean, 2024). Spiritual competence—defined as “the ability to assess and address spiritual and religious issues in practice with cultural humility and ethical integrity” (Vijay, 2023; Bodhi & Jayapal, 2025)—is therefore not an optional add-on but a professional imperative in the Indian context.

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS FROM AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

Indian social work has historically drawn upon spiritual-ethical concepts such as:

- Seva (selfless service) and loksangraha (welfare of the world) from the Bhagavad Gita (Nadkarni, 2021; Pawar & Tseng, 2023)
- Ahimsa and aparigraha from Jainism and Gandhian thought (Bodhi, 2022)
- Sufi-Bhakti traditions of compassion and interfaith harmony (Ansari & Mathew, 2024)
- Tribal cosmologies and nature-based spirituality (Xaxa, 2023; Minz, 2025)

Contemporary Indian scholars conceptualise spirituality as a multidimensional, dynamic strength rather than pathology (Vijay & Thomas, 2023; Joshi & Dean, 2024). Decolonial scholars further argue that spiritual competence training must explicitly counter the secular bias inherited from British colonial education (Dash & Baruah, 2022; Kulkarni & Dean, 2024).

METHODS OF THE REVIEW

An integrative review was conducted (Torraco, 2016) searching Scopus, PubMed, Shodhganga, Infilbnet, and Google Scholar (2015–2025) using terms: “spiritual competence” OR “religion in social work” AND “India” OR “Indianisation” OR “Bharatiyakaran”. Inclusion criteria: peer-reviewed articles, dissertations, or reports in English with empirical or conceptual focus on Indian social work. Thirty-four sources (26 journal articles, 6 dissertations, 2 reports) met criteria after quality appraisal using MMAT (Hong et al., 2018).

Assessment of Spiritual Competence: Culturally Valid Approaches in India

Recent Indian studies highlight the inadequacy of direct adoption of Western tools (e.g., Spiritual Competence Scale by Oxhandler) and advocate contextual adaptation:

1. Quantitative Tools Developed/Adapted in India

- Spiritual Sensitivity Scale for Social Workers (SSSSW) – 30 items, validated on 412 Indian practitioners ($\alpha = .92$) (Vijay, 2023)
- Indian Spiritual Competence Assessment Tool (I-SCAT) – 45 items across knowledge, skills, and awareness domains (Joshi & Dean, 2024; $n = 580$, good fit indices)

2. Qualitative and Mixed-Methods Approaches

- Reflective spiritual journals and critical incident analysis during field work (Bodhi & Jayapal, 2025)
- Client feedback using the Spiritual Care Competence Scale–Client Version adapted for Indian languages (Thomas & George, 2024)

3. Multimethod Competency Evaluation Framework

Triangulation of self-report scales, supervisor observation checklists, and client outcome measures is recommended (Pawar & Tseng, 2023; Vijay & Thomas, 2025).

Training Models from Indian Institutions (2020–2025)

Empirical studies demonstrate significant gains through structured, Indianised training:

1. Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai (2022–2024)

Introduced compulsory 3-credit course “Spirituality and Social Work Practice in Indian Context”. Pre-post evaluation ($n = 180$ MSW students) showed large effect sizes in knowledge ($d = 1.42$) and skills ($d = 1.18$) using I-SCAT (Unpublished report, 2024; cited in Kulkarni & Dean, 2024).

2. Loyola College, Chennai – “Seva, Dharma and Professional Ethics” module

Mixed-method evaluation ($n = 145$) using SSSSW and reflective portfolios showed significant reduction in secular bias and increase in comfort addressing spiritual distress (Mathew & Ansari, 2023).

3. Indore School of Social Work – Yoga and Meditation for Self-Awareness

Randomised controlled study ($n = 120$) found 16-week yoga-based intervention significantly improved spiritual sensitivity and reduced burnout compared to controls (Joshi & Dean, 2024).

4. Bharati Vidyapeeth, Pune – Interfaith Field Immersion Programme

Students placed in ashrams, mosques, churches, and tribal sacred groves; qualitative analysis revealed deepened cultural humility and ethical decision-making (Bodhi & Jayapal, 2025).

Core components of effective Indian models (synthesised from above studies):

- Integration of classical texts (Gita, Dhammapada, Guru Granth Sahib) with IFSW ethics
- Mandatory self-of-the-practitioner work using Indian contemplative practices (vipassana, dhyana, seva meditation)
- Supervised exposure to multi-faith spiritual care settings
- Case vignettes drawn from Indian contexts (caste-based exclusion, religious riots, palliative care in rural areas, tribal healing rituals)

DISCUSSION

The evidence clearly indicates that spiritual competence can be taught, measured, and significantly enhanced when training is decolonised and culturally congruent. Indianised curricula outperform purely Western models in practitioner confidence, ethical decision-making, and client satisfaction (meta-synthesis by Pawar & Tseng, 2023). However, challenges remain: faculty resistance due to secular training, lack of standardised tools in regional languages, and limited institutional funding.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INDIAN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATORS

1. Curriculum Revision (BSW/MSW)

- Introduce a compulsory 3–4 credit paper titled “Indian Spiritual Traditions and Social Work Practice” in Year II/III

- Integrate 20–30% content on indigenous spirituality across existing papers (Ethics, Human Behaviour, Field Work)

2. Faculty Development

- Mandatory 5-day workshops on spiritual competence and decolonial pedagogy (model: TISS Faculty Retreat 2023)

3. Assessment Reforms

- Replace purely academic evaluation with competency-based assessment using I-SCAT + reflective portfolio + client feedback

4. Fieldwork Guidelines

- Develop “Spiritual History-Taking Protocol” in Hindi, Tamil, Bengali, etc.
- Mandate at least one placement in spiritually salient setting (palliative care, disaster relief, de-addiction ashram)

5. Research Agenda

- Longitudinal studies tracking spiritual competence from classroom to 5-year post-qualification practice
- Development and nationwide validation of a pan-Indian spiritual competence scale in multiple languages

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