

Social Group Work as a Method of Social Work: A Review Essay on Theory and Practice in Indian Society

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Abstract

Social group work holds a unique position among traditional social work methodologies, complementing casework (engaging with individuals) and community organisation (working with communities) as a strategy for leveraging small-group dynamics to foster personal development, mutual support, and collective empowerment. Since its inception in the west in the late 1800s, the methodology has disseminated broadly, embracing notions of identity, transparency, and therapeutic transformation that appear to be shaped within Euro-American frameworks. This review essay commences by re-examining the foundational definitions of the method, its key historical and modern manifestations, and the opportunities it provides for application in health, education, correctional social work and in the contexts of disasters. This essay presents a comprehensive critical analysis of *Theory and Practice of Social Group Work in Indian Society* (Balgopal et al., 2024), a seminal work that reinterprets group work theory by incorporating India's cultural, familial, and spiritual heritage rather than relying solely on external influences. The essay outlines the book's exploration of ecological theory, role theory, Gestalt therapy, Raja Yoga, and the notion of allogenic conflict, drawing on empirical case studies from family courts, disaster relief efforts, teenage groups, and rural addiction rehabilitation. The essay concludes by revisiting the overarching assertions presented at the outset, contending that the book not only exhibits but also expands the potential of social group work as a truly global approach to social work practice.

Keywords: Social Group Work; Social Work Methods; Mutual Aid; Indian Society; Ecological Perspective; Allogenic Conflict; Culturally Responsive Practice; Social Work Education; Sustainable Practices

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Theory and Practice of Social Group Work in Indian Society

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Introduction: Social Group Work as a Method

Social group work occupies a unique position among the traditional methodologies employed in professional social work (Cohen & Olshever, 2013), distinguishing itself from casework and community organisation. Casework focuses on the individual in connection with their surroundings via a personal assistance relationship, while community organisation operates at the level of neighbourhoods, institutions, and policy; social group work exists in the intermediary space, utilising small, intentionally formed groups and the relationships that develop within them as the primary means of support. The approach rests on a fundamental yet significant principle: individuals are influenced, supported, and transformed as much by their interactions with others as by personal interventions; thus, a well-facilitated group can serve as a catalyst for development that individual therapy struggles to match.

Reaching a single, widely acknowledged definition of social group work is neither simple nor particularly advantageous, as the approach has consistently evolved to suit the contexts and demographics it addresses. Over time, a functional agreement has developed to define the methodology for group work. Initial theories, notably those linked to Grace Coyle (1930) and subsequently expanded by Gisela Konopka (1963), characterised social group work as a technique that aids individuals in improving their social capabilities via intentional group interactions, while also assisting groups in addressing their members' requirements and the challenges they face, a formulation echoed in later syntheses of the method's guiding principles and practices (Trecker, 1972). William Schwartz's influential mediating model reconceptualised the worker's role as a facilitator between the individual and the group, and between the group and the broader social systems it relies on, rather than viewing either the individual or the collective as the exclusive source of transformation (Schwartz, 1961). Recent definitions, such as those presented by Toseland and Rivas (2017) in their prominent

work on group work practice, characterise the method in a more functional manner: a goal-oriented endeavour involving small groups, designed to address the socio-emotional requirements of participants while achieving specified objectives, conducted with individuals facing analogous issues or united by a shared aim. Throughout these various formulations, a shared framework emerges: a skilled labourer, a constrained and intentionally assembled team, a specified timeframe, and a reliance on interactions among members, rather than solely on individual proficiency, as the main catalyst for transformation. The reliance on reciprocal assistance, in which members support one another rather than solely relying on a helping expert, is what most distinctly differentiates group work from other therapeutic and educational group applications.

The advantages of social group work as a methodology, evaluated on its own merits and irrespective of any specific cultural context, are rather easy to articulate. The approach provides what individual therapy inherently lacks: the immediate realisation, for someone in turmoil, that others bear a comparable load, a phenomenon long acknowledged in group work literature as a remedy for the solitude frequently associated with personal struggles. It distributes the assistance workload among a group of peers rather than centralising it within a single expert relationship, thereby broadening the availability of limited professional resources and giving participants a degree of autonomy as both providers and recipients of aid, which traditional casework relationships may not consistently offer. For the same rationale, it is relatively economical, a significant factor in resource-limited environments where the ratio of qualified practitioners to individuals requiring assistance is sometimes highly unfavourable. As a social construct rather than a rigid technical process, the group readily adapts; its core structure of intentional group dynamics can integrate culturally specific elements, rituals, and modes of expression while maintaining its central methodology, which is the focus of this essay.

That flexibility also delineates the scope of the method's prospective opportunities. Collaborative efforts are increasingly infiltrating areas that the originators could hardly have foreseen: organised collectives for victims of calamity and widespread violence, telehealth and virtual support networks that broaden access to remote populations, rehabilitative and reintegrative assemblies in correctional environments, and psychoeducational cohorts tackling chronic ailments, caregiving stress, and climate-induced relocation. Each of these extensions examines the identical fundamental enquiry, specifically whether a methodology, whose lexicon and theoretical framework were predominantly developed in Chicago, London, and Boston, and subsequently disseminated globally largely unchanged, can be reinterpreted from within alternative cultural, familial, and spiritual contexts rather than merely being translated into them post hoc. India's approximately 550 social work institutions have imparted social group work education for many years, predominantly utilising literature crafted for an alternate society, targeting a distinct familial configuration, and based on a different dynamic between the individual and the community than that experienced by the majority of Indian clients. The investigation by Balgopal et al. (2024) elucidates the theory and application of social group work within Indian society with significant seriousness, providing a detailed examination through pedagogy and rural community engagement, and it is dedicated to the late Shyamala Balgopal, a tribute that subtly conveys the personal significance of the endeavour. The three co-authors write from their own vantage points Pallassana R. Balgopal, Emeritus Professor of Social Work at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, whose sixty-five years of teaching, research, and practice span Tulane University and the Universities of Michigan, Maryland, and Houston, together with visiting professorships at Delhi University, Jamia Millia Islamia, Madras University, Visva-Bharati, the National University of Singapore, Fachhochschule Bielefeld in Germany, and the Russian State Social Institute in Moscow; Suresh Pathare, a Pune-based social

work educator and practitioner of thirty years' standing who directs the Centre for Studies in Rural Development at the Institute of Social Work and Research, Ahmednagar, under Savitribai Phule Pune University, and who earlier held posts at the Indira Gandhi National Open University, the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, and the University of Delhi; and Meena M. Balgopal, a science-pedagogy scholar and University Distinguished Teaching Scholar at Colorado State University, whose discourse-analytic research into pedagogical interventions underwrites the volume's markedly strong classroom apparatus. The foundation of this study is a 1983 publication, *Groups in Social Work: An Ecological Perspective* (Balgopal & Vassil, 1983), which, according to the authors, has become essential or suggested reading in about 75% of social work institutions in India in recent times. Instead of merely reissuing the framework, this volume revisits it after four decades, incorporates Indigenous philosophical concepts as formal theoretical categories, and grounds each chapter in case studies from Indian contexts rather than external examples. The current attempt reconstructs group work theory and practice from India's cultural, familial, spiritual, and institutional realities rather than translating it into them.

Grounding a Western Method in Indian Realities

The Balgopal et al. (2024) chapters undertake the work of diagnosis before attempting prescription. The contemporary Indian society is always in a flux of rapid rural-to-urban migration, the steady replacement of joint families by nuclear ones, rising middle-class divorce, sharpening parent-child conflict, alcohol and substance misuse, domestic violence, and the isolation of older adults left behind as extended family structures thin out. It is in this context that social group work is revisited as a method suited precisely to the above pressures, but the authors insist that it be grounded in the specific cultural and institutional conditions under which Indian social work practitioners actually work.

That grounding begins with a working definition of social group work tailored to traditional

societies: planned, time-limited intervention built on task-centred and strengths-based principles, an orientation the senior author had already argued for as an intervention strategy suited to India (Ramakrishnan & Balgopal, 1985), aimed at improving members' psychosocial functioning through an empowering group process facilitated by a trained worker. The definition is deliberately present-centred and modest in scope, and this is a strategic rather than a merely theoretical choice. It responds to the stigma that still attaches to help-seeking in much of India, to clients' preference for brief, clearly goal-directed intervention over open-ended therapy, and to the chronic resource constraints under which most Indian social service organisations operate.

The historical chapter that follows traces the development of group work from the early settlement-house era to the present, situating Indian developments, such as the Nagpada Neighbourhood House within the broader international settlement movement. It does not shy away from contemporary political economy either: citing World Bank figures on global poverty for 2020 (World Bank, 2020), the authors note that India accounted for a disproportionate share of the population that fell below the two-dollar poverty line that year, even as middle-class incomes improved. This willingness to name structural inequality without softening it runs throughout the book's social justice orientation. The chapter closes on a smaller, more intimate note: the Sanskrit invocation *lokah samastah sukhino bhavantu*, a wish for the freedom and happiness of all beings, used to close group sessions as members stand in a circle with hands joined. It is a small ritual gesture, but it condenses much of what the book is trying to do, folding a contemplative, collectivist spiritual idiom into the practical architecture of a Western clinical method.

Role Theory and the Weight of Expectation

The chapter on role theory extends a framework that Pallassana R. Balgopal, the senior author, had developed decades earlier, applying familiar constructs, role expectation, role strain, role conflict, role ambiguity, and role transition,

developed originally to describe the worker-client relationship (Munson & Balgopal, 1978), to conditions that are distinctly Indian. The chapter grounds these constructs in the wider role-theory literature — Bruce Biddle's (1986, 2013) synthesis of the field, and the symbolic-interactionist line running from Herbert Blumer (1969) through Erving Goffman's (1961, 1975) work on role distance and role embracement — and, in its critical turn, draws on R. W. Connell's (1983, 2005) account of hegemonic masculinity and Amartya Sen's (2005) retelling of Gargi and Draupadi to complicate the theory's assumptions about gender. Roles here are not simply functional descriptions of who does what; they are woven into normative structures defined by age, caste, gender, family position, and community standing. Within the joint family in particular, role expectations operate simultaneously as obligations of care and as instruments of control, so that a daughter-in-law's caregiving duties, for instance, can be both an expression of belonging and a mechanism of constraint.

The practical tools offered are unglamorous but sound: role-mapping exercises that surface expectations members may not have named even to themselves, role play and behavioural rehearsal of alternative ways of enacting a role, an approach adapted from earlier work on role exchange as a teaching and learning strategy (Vassil & Balgopal, 1982), and facilitated negotiation aimed at redefining roles within the group rather than outside it. The authors are careful, too, to insist that roles must not be treated as immutable facts of nature. Where role strain stems from unjust structural arrangements rather than personal failing, they argue, ecological and strengths-based thinking must complement role analysis, so that group work does not end up quietly pathologising people for conditions imposed on them.

That same ecological framing carries into the chapter that revisits, forty years on, the perspective the senior author first advanced in 1983 (Balgopal & Vassil, 1983), threading together Max Siporin's (1975, 1980) ecological-systems model, Carel Germain's (1973, 1979)

concept of the ecosystem, and — for its ‘goodness-of-fit’ formulation — Germain and Gitterman’s (1980) life model. The revisitation is explicit and, in its way, generous toward the earlier work: rather than discarding the ecological model, the authors return to it with the confidence of practitioners who have tested it over decades and across several societies. Its central ethical move is to refuse the language of adequacy and inadequacy altogether. Following Rappaport’s (1977) argument that individuals may simply be in relative accord or discord with their environment, the authors reposition the group worker’s task as one of restoring fit between person and environment, rather than correcting a deficient individual. Applied to India in the 2020s, this means attending to the psychological toll of rural-to-urban migration, the erosion of extended-family support, the friction between collectivist values and the individualising pull of urban market life, and recurrent public-health disruptions such as COVID-19, cyclones, and floods. The pandemic receives careful treatment in these terms: India’s initial success in securing collective compliance with public-health measures was real, the authors note, but population density in urban slums made physical distancing structurally impossible for large numbers of people, an ecological mismatch rather than a failure of individual discipline. The chapter is candid, too, about the limits of its own method, cautioning that time-limited group work cannot bear the full weight of structural change and needs advocacy and community mobilisation as companions rather than substitutes.

A Practitioner’s Return: Gestalt Therapy and Raja Yoga

The book’s most distinctive chapter is also its most personal. Where most of the volume proceeds by theoretical exposition supported by illustration, the chapter on Gestalt therapy inverts the order: it is built around a sustained first-person account of professional formation, out of which the theory is then drawn. This is unusual in academic social work writing, and it succeeds because the personal material

performs genuine conceptual labour rather than merely sitting alongside it.

The narrative begins with a young man leaving India at twenty-two, arriving in Boston to study at the Boston University School of Social Work, and finding his way, through a research assistantship secured somewhat by chance under Dr. Eric Lindemann, the chairman of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, and a WHO-funded internship at Massachusetts General Hospital, into psychoanalytic training. That training proved unsatisfying: a non-directive therapist with little sense of his cultural background left him working through months of free association that felt increasingly unproductive, until he ended the therapy against his analyst’s advice. What followed was a self-directed discovery of Gestalt therapy through reading, workshops, and personal counselling, culminating in the co-founding of a Gestalt therapy centre in Houston.

Even that, by his own account, was not enough. On the recommendation of Swami Bhasyananda, head of the Chicago Ramakrishna Mission and Vedanta Society,, he travelled to Mumbai in the summer of 1976 to study for nine weeks at the Khar branch of the Ramakrishna Mission. The resulting account of his time there is the most affecting passage in the book: a room above the ambulance garage in a coconut grove, a teacher, Swami Nirmoyananda, who offered nothing beyond the daily schedule of prayer and meals, monks who met his attempts at conversation with silence and a pleasant smile, and several days of recorded frustration in his diary before anything shifted. What shifted, eventually, was an evening walk beside his teacher, taken largely in silence, after which he was told simply that a person truly belongs to themselves only once left alone. The line stayed with him, and the ashram stay became the foundation for a synthesis he would spend the rest of his career elaborating: Gestalt’s insistence on present-moment encounter, read alongside the contemplative discipline of Raja Yoga as taught by Swami Vivekananda, and both set against the collectivist grain of Indian family life, a mind-body integration he later formalised as a holistic

framework for practice (Balgopal, 2012). He draws out the analogy directly: much as Krishna's counsel moves Arjuna from paralysis to reflective ownership of his situation in the Bhagavad Gita, Gestalt practice moves an anxious client toward accepting responsibility for the present moment as a route back to balance.

The chapter's adaptations of classical Gestalt technique for Indian conditions are practical rather than ornamental. Because direct emotional disclosure carries real risk of loss of face in collectivist settings, and can trigger the kind of group resistance long documented in clinical practice (Balgopal & Hull, 1973), group sessions often open with drawing rather than speech, using paper, crayons, and quiet classical or Indian instrumental music, so that members introduce themselves through image before being asked to say anything aloud, and control how much of themselves they reveal. The empty-chair technique, drawn from classical Gestalt practice (Perls, 1969), is repurposed to help clients externalise the layered guilt, unexpressed anger, and structural obligation that characterise unfinished business within joint families.

Amartya Sen's (2005) notion of the argumentative Indian is invoked to explain why a culture capable of vigorous public debate can still be reticent about private emotional disclosure, and the chapter addresses a more mundane but persistent obstacle: the sheer difficulty, in densely populated Indian settings, of finding a private and consistent venue for group meetings.

A case illustration involving a semi-rural woman in a marital group is instructive here: what she initially presents as her husband's financial control turns out, once the group process does its work, to be a fear of losing custody of her children, and the group's support becomes the bridge to her pursuing employment and eventual independence.

Two field accounts extend this practice into disaster response, a domain the Indian social work literature has addressed only thinly (Balgopal et al., 2024, pp. 107–109). Following

the 2004 tsunami, Balgopal worked directly with people in two coastal villages near Chennai, organising medical camps to build trust before running separate men's and women's support groups himself; the women's group worked through a belief that the disaster had been caused by the community's having angered a local deity, using Gestalt's characteristic preference for how and what questions over why questions to let members arrive at their own reappraisal, while the men's group processed accumulated grief over past fishing accidents through collective recall. A second account, again Balagopal's own initiative, from the Kerala floods of 2018, describes a rapid two-day training for social work students and faculty followed by a household survey of a badly affected community, from which nineteen families were identified for direct group-based support.

The companion chapter on Raja Yoga is shorter but no less grounded in lived practice. Drawing directly on Vivekananda's (1973) own writing for its account of Patanjali's eight-limbed path, and explicit that it did not wish to dilute the depth of that source material through paraphrase, the chapter presents the eightfold discipline as a secular, non-sectarian resource for attention regulation and group cohesion. It offers a detailed thirteen-step breathing protocol suited to group practice and marshals a modest but relevant body of contemporary research on meditation's physiological and psychological effects, including studies on depression and anxiety (Bhomavat M, 2015), physiological effects of short- and long-term practice (Sukhsohale & Phatak, 2012), cortisol reduction in pre-surgical patients (Kiran et al., 2017), and outcomes for cancer patients (Singh et al., 2021). Its authority arrives as a practitioner perspective.

The Concept of Allogenic Conflict

One of the volume's more original theoretical contributions is the concept of allogenic conflict, first advanced at a conference in the late 1970s (Balgopal, 1977), and developed further in the 1983 volume (Balgopal & Vassil, 1979, 1983), and here given its fullest application to Indian

conditions (Balgopal et al., 2024, pp. 162–168). Drawn from the Greek for different, the concept names the friction that arises in groups not from individual pathology or interpersonal failure but from the social weight of difference itself, differences of caste, religion, ethnicity, class, gender, or sexuality that unsettle a group's tempo the moment they surface, in ways qualitatively unlike the processing of an ordinary interpersonal dispute. The concept was built from clinical observation across four countries: whenever such differences entered a group's conversation, in the United States, India, Singapore, or the Netherlands alike, members tended to grow uneasy, restless, and silent in a recognisably consistent pattern.

Applied to India, the framework has real explanatory reach. Therapy groups that have reached a stage of genuine intimacy can fracture abruptly when communal tension erupts outside the room, with minority members withdrawing from a space that no longer feels safe. A small but telling illustration: a mother in a Tamil Nadu market threatening a crying child that she will hand him over to an outsider if he does not settle is offered as an example of how prejudice against difference is transmitted almost incidentally, long before it ever becomes a subject of formal discussion. The practice principles that follow are correspondingly concrete: building deliberate heterogeneity into group composition, requiring co-facilitators to be transparent about their own positions on these fault lines before a group begins, using the group contract to set explicit ground rules for engaging difference respectfully, and resisting the temptation to smooth over allogenic tension simply because it is uncomfortable, since avoidance tends to do more harm than the discomfort itself.

A short but instructive vignette on co-leadership makes a related point about practitioners' self-awareness. Two colleagues who wished to co-facilitate a group and assumed their existing personal familiarity was sufficient preparation were asked to spend at least 10 hours together beforehand discussing their positions on race, religion, gender, caste, and related fault lines.

Within two hours of that exercise, they discovered how far apart they stood on most of these questions and abandoned the plan rather than risk doing their prospective clients a disservice. The episode is presented not as a failure but as a demonstration that this kind of self-knowledge between co-leaders is not optional groundwork; it is an ethical precondition for the work.

Case Studies from the Field

The book's case material is where its theoretical claims are tested against practice, and three cases in particular carry the weight of this demonstration. Part IV assembles seven case studies in total, authored by Bipin Jojo and Deepak Kumar Nanda on, Mumbai tribal migrant women's case; C. P. Anto with the Peace Channel conflict-transformation case, and Jaimon Varghese with two further cases, on group work with speech and hearing-impaired boys and with senior citizens affected by Hansen's disease. The three cases (Case 5, pp. 236–239), written by Balgopal together with Vaishali Pathare, Lecturer, at CSRD. Balgopal in his Six-weeks Fulbright placement at the CSRD Maharashtra social work institute offered suggestions to use group work processes to assist with couples awaiting divorce proceedings rather than approaching adjudication as an immediate step. This initiative was gladly accepted by the district judicial administration. And is in vogue since then. There were total of nine weekly sessions. After the third session the group was down to three couples and one single woman. A young wife caught between her passive-aggressive husband and her controlling mother-in-law; a couple saved from divorce by the facilitators' apparent willingness to suggest divorce; a woman whose mother-in-law's ritual cursing had made her unable to sleep; and a mother forced to leave her home by her husband's mistress who used the strengths perspective and empty-chair work to recognise her own passivity and look for work and housing on her own, were some of the fascinating results of the group therapy in the context of couples looking towards divorce.

After the third of nine weekly sessions, the group was down to three couples and one single woman. The case studies are varied: a young wife caught between her passive-aggressive husband and her controlling mother-in-law; a couple saved from divorce by the facilitators' apparent willingness to suggest divorce; a woman whose mother-in-law's ritual cursing had made her unable to sleep; and a mother forced to leave her home by her husband's mistress who used the strengths perspective and empty-chair work to recognise her own passivity and look for work and housing on her own.

The third case (Case 7, pp. 245–254), is jointly contributed by Pallassana Balgopal and Meena Balgopal builds on the Gestalt-informed model of early intervention with substance abusers the senior author had helped develop decades earlier (Clifton & Balgopal, 1982), ten men between their late thirties and mid-fifties, recruited through non-governmental organisations and the local family court for a group addressing chronic alcohol use, were each visited individually at home before the group began, a recruitment method the authors note carries particular weight in rural India, where a professional's visit to a family's home is experienced as an honour that all but obliges attendance. Two of the ten were attending under a court mandate related to prior domestic violence. Sessions opened with the same closing invocation used elsewhere in the book, followed by a period of silent reflection before any discussion began, and the group's goals were framed around realistic, self-defined reductions in drinking rather than the immediate total abstinence expected by conventional recovery models. Across twelve sessions, the group moved from acknowledging dependency, notably without the denial the authors report as typical of this population, through medical and anger-management input from outside professionals, to a closing format in which members offered each other direct, candid feedback on their progress. A two-year follow-up found a mixed but not discouraging picture: one member had died in a fight, one was imprisoned, one had moved away, and of the seven who remained, two had stopped drinking entirely,

four continued but with evident self-consciousness about it, and one reported drinking only rarely, alongside markedly improved family relationships.

Claims and Counterclaims

Taken together, these theoretical chapters and case studies make a genuine case for the volume's founding claim: that group work in India can be at once methodologically rigorous and authentically rooted in Indian cultural and spiritual life, rather than a foreign method merely translated into local vocabulary. For a field that has relied on Global North texts for the better part of a century, this is not a small achievement. The current book under review appears to be the first book in the Asian context to treat concepts such as *dharma*, (righteousness), *karma*, (cause and effect), *izzat*, (honour or personal dignity), *lajja*, (shame or modesty) and *vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (the world as one family) under formal theoretical categories in social group work, rather than as decorative cultural colour layered over an otherwise unchanged Western framework.

What holds the volume together across its very different registers, ecological theory, role analysis, Gestalt and Raja Yoga practice, disaster response, family-court mediation, adolescent work, and rural addiction treatment, is a consistent underlying commitment: that effective group work stays present-centred, works from client strengths rather than deficits, remains ecologically attentive to structural conditions, and draws deliberately on whatever cultural and spiritual resources a client population already possesses. The field accounts scattered through the book are what make this more than an assertion; they show the synthesis surviving contact with a coastal tsunami, a flooded district, a rural family court, and a group of men whose drinking had already cost two of their number their liberty or their lives. Pedagogically, too, the volume is unusually well built for classroom use, with chapter summaries, practice principles, and teaching applications throughout, alongside a dedicated pedagogy chapter for using the case material in social work education, features that make it a plausible core

text for undergraduate and postgraduate social work curricula rather than only a work of scholarly reference.

Set against these strengths, the book's limitations are mostly matters of proportion rather than substance. The chapter on Raja Yoga, for instance, is markedly shorter than the treatment given to Gestalt therapy, and the moral foundations of the eight-limbed path, the ethical precepts of *yama* and *niyama*, (restraints and observances) which bear directly on how a group worker ought to conduct themselves, receive only passing attention where a fuller treatment would have served practitioners well. Caste, similarly, is present throughout the allogenic conflict framework but is not given the sustained, focused analysis that its role in shaping access to group resources, patterns of deference within a group, and the risks of self-disclosure would seem to warrant; the role-theory and ecological chapters gesture toward these dynamics without fully accounting for them. And the book leans overall toward synthesis and advocacy rather than dialogue with rival positions: postcolonial critiques of social work, feminist social work theory, and structural approaches are largely absent, and a more explicit engagement with these traditions, even where the authors ultimately disagreed with them, would have given the theoretical architecture a sturdier footing.

None of these limitations displaces the book's central contribution, which is to demonstrate, through argument and through a genuinely diverse set of field accounts, that group work can be practised in India on India's own cultural terms without sacrificing methodological discipline. The volume's insistence on present-centred, time-limited, task-oriented models is not merely a theoretical preference; it is a realistic response to the economic constraints under which most Indian clients and most Indian social service organisations operate, where open-ended, long-term therapeutic engagement is simply not available to the great majority of people who might benefit from it. The case material carries much of the book's persuasive force precisely because it resists tidiness. The

rural alcoholics' group does not end in uniform sobriety; the marital reconciliation group produces both restored partnerships and supported separations; the adolescent group finds its real subject only by accident, several sessions in. This candour about mixed and partial outcomes is more useful to a practitioner than a set of success stories, because it models the kind of judgement group work actually requires in the field.

Conclusion: Returning to the Promise of Social Group Work

This essay opened with a broader claim about social group work as a method: that its founding definitions, from Coyle through Konopka and Schwartz to Toseland and Rivas, converge on a common commitment to mutual aid, purposeful group process, and the belief that people help one another change more effectively than they can be changed by an expert acting alone; that its historical and contemporary forms range from settlement houses and youth clubs to hospital-based psychoeducation, self-help fellowships, and disaster-response groups; and that its central merit lies in an adaptability that allows the same underlying architecture to absorb radically different cultural content without losing its methodological identity. *Theory and Practice of Social Group Work in Indian Society* earns its place as a case study in exactly this possibility. It succeeds in the project it sets for itself: producing a group work text that can stand alongside the established Western canon while remaining genuinely rooted in India's philosophical, cultural, and institutional life. Its theoretical chapters extend and update a body of work developed over more than four decades: the ecological perspective, role theory, and the concept of allogenic conflict, while its practice chapters on Gestalt therapy and Raja Yoga bring an unusual degree of first-person candour to a professional literature that is not often written this way. Its field accounts, spanning tsunami relief on the Tamil Nadu coast, flood response in Kerala, a family court in Maharashtra, and a rural alcoholics' group in the same state, function not as illustrations

appended to theory after the fact but as the theory itself, worked out under field conditions.

The volume's dedication to the late Shyamala Balgopal is fitting for a book of this kind. Work that draws on six decades of practice across two continents, Asia and North America, on a single transformative summer in a Mumbai ashram, on disaster relief in a flooded district and a tsunami-hit coastline, and on a Fulbright placement inside a rural family court, is not the product of scholarship alone. It reads, throughout, as the product of a working life spent trying to understand how people help one another change, and it is on that basis, more than any other, that it earns a place in the required reading of Indian social work education. More broadly, it stands as evidence that social group work, for all the specificity of its Chicago, London, and Boston origins, remains genuinely capable of being reconstructed rather than merely translated, and that this capacity is not incidental to the method but constitutive of it. The task facing the wider field, on the evidence of this volume, is not to defend group work's universality in the abstract but to keep doing, in other cultural settings, the patient work of reconstruction that this book has undertaken for India.

Recommendation

The current book (see Appendix) is appropriate as essential or suggested literature for undergraduate and postgraduate social work curricula, doctorate candidates in social work, field supervisors, and professionals in India and other collectivist cultures. The amalgamation of established practice models with Indigenous Indian philosophical and cultural paradigms signifies one of the most enduring and practically relevant contributions to the Asian social work literature, serving as a significant reference for scholars exploring the cross-cultural reconfiguration of social group work. The work predominantly fulfils its main objective of producing a methodologically rigorous and culturally informed text, however it recognises significant shortcomings in its treatment of caste and its restricted interaction with postcolonial and feminist critiques.

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Conflict of Interest and Ethical Approval

Neither author has contributed to the current volume of articles in this book titled *Theory and Practice of Social Group Work in Indian Society*, published by Springer Nature. There has been no pecuniary interest in undertaking the review.

Expanded Transparency AI Use Statement.

This is a book review commentary. Microsoft Copilot was used for only for language refinement.

Author Contribution Statement

Venkat Pulla and Subash Sharma jointly prepared the article in its current form.

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Appendix

Reconstructing Social Group Work for Indian Society

A Review Essay by Venkat Rao Pulla & Subash Sharma

Reviewing: Balgopal, P. R., Pathare, S., & Balgopal, M. M. (2024). *Theory and Practice of Social Group Work in Indian Society*. Springer.



Ecological & Role Theory

Restores person–environment fit rather than pathologising the individual; reframes role strain within caste, gender, and joint-family expectation.



Gestalt Therapy & Raja Yoga

Present-moment Gestalt work paired with Vivekananda's Raja Yoga drawing, silence, and breath work suited to collectivist emotional norms.



Allogenic Conflict

Names the friction that caste, religion, and gender difference itself creates in a group not a symptom of individual pathology.



Field-Tested Across India

Tsunami relief in Chennai, Kerala flood response, a Maharashtra family court, and a rural men's alcohol-recovery group.

VERDICT

First Asian text to formalise **dharma, karma, izzat, lajja, and vasudhaiva kutumbakam** as social-group-work theory, essential reading for undergraduate and postgraduate social work curricula across India and other collectivist cultures.

Pulla, V. R., & Sharma, S. (2026). *Social Group Work as a Method of Social Work: A Review Essay on Theory and Practice in Indian Society*, *Space and Culture, India*, 14(2), pp. 191–204. doi:10.20896/jz7j2v38. Brisbane Institute of Strengths-Based Practice