

Research Article

Social Work in India: Present Scenario and Future Perspectives

Mohd. Husain

Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, Dr. Bhimrao Aambedkar University, Agra, Uttar Pradesh, India

Email id: husainmsw@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Eight decades of professional social work in India, marked by few achievements and too many struggles, warrants a serious discussion on what the future holds for a 'profession' beleaguered by several internal and external constraints and considerations. Although the pace of progress has been generally considered satisfactory, a large number of veteran social work educators, however, feel uneasy on a number counts. The issue today is not only to recount the old predilections of the profession on conventional lines but to think of the perils and the pressing problems of the profession, which, if allowed to go unattended, will herald the decay and even the eventual demise of the profession. The culture of silence for reasons of indifference or usefulness would cause further degeneration and may well prove to be suicidal. The most pressing issue today is to seriously consider how the wrong can be righted. This article is an attempt to journey through the past of the profession and probes into the present to foresee the future.

Keywords: Culture of silence, Perils, Predilections, Professional social work, Struggle

INTRODUCTION

In India, social work as a 'service' has had a long tradition wrapped and rooted in the country's socio-religious ethos. In 1936 a dramatic development took place and the first school of social work (then known as Sir Dorabji Tata Graduate School of social work, now Tata Institute of Social Sciences) was established by an American missionary, Dr. Clifford Manhardt with the help of Dr. J.M. Kumarappa, who later became the first director of the School. The purpose of starting the school was to promote

professional education in social work with a view to equipping social service workers with the knowledge-base and the methods and techniques of doing 'social work' in a professional manner. Since then, social work education has extended to different parts of the country.

Any profession in any society has to be socially relevant and must provide its services with professional competence through the satisfaction of its clients. Kulkarni (1994) has observed: that "no education, particularly no professional education is autonomous. The sub-system cannot or should not decide upon its objectives, contents and methods, without reference to the milieu-the system as a whole, within which it is expected to function and deliver. It has to be responsive and responsible to the broader perspective". Whitemain (1994) has also pointed out that social work must reflect a "sharpening recognition of these social needs, dimensions and complexities which demand from social work profession, in concert with other service professions and occupations; new perspectives, new knowledge and new understanding of these compelling societal forces". Unfortunately, despite expiry of eight decades since its birth in India, social work is still branded as a 'new and emerging profession' (Prasad, 1987), and even as 'incomplete profession' (Kulkarni, 1994), simply because it could not make itself socially relevant and failed to provide effective services with professional competence to its clients. Prasad (2000) again observed that "social work emerged as an occupation only recently in India and it is still struggling to achieve a professional status.

Social work profession that evolved from the tradition of charity and concern for others long ago still continues to struggle for acceptance of its professional status. As Nair (1981) observed that the profession continues to be in search of an identity. Social work profession is perhaps one of the most confused professions (Siddiqui, 1999). England (1986) captures the situation rightly: "if I imagine social work as an entity I see it as a curiously puzzled and confused body." The profession which initially focused on individual, group and community as the major clients could not make much of an impact particularly in less developed and developing societies due to mass poverty, unemployment and illiteracy. As a result, even after more than eight decades of its existence in India, the profession continues to grapple with the problems that confronted it right from its beginning. Even today it is difficult to demonstrate the exclusive domain and distinct contribution of the profession. All other developed professions share this characteristic. Social work profession claims to be an expert in managing human relationships at the individual, group and community levels, service delivery, social planning and policy formulation and such other wider roles.

It has been observed that in its quest for enlarging the scope of the profession, social work continues to search new areas for intervention without even retaining its traditional

stronghold of remedial, rehabilitative or service delivery practice base. The unprecedented growth of the non-government sector particularly during the last three decades has attracted many other professionals such as health educators, extension educationists, nutritionists and child development professionals etc. as a result the jobs offered by organizations in this sector which were being managed by trained social workers are now shared with professionals from other related fields. It may also be due to the fact that these professions are more focused and realistic and hence address those objectives which are achievable. Introduction to postgraduate programmes in applied psychology in many Indian universities, with strong field training inputs on the pattern of field work in social work education but with a greater accuracy in terms of interventions and clearly identified practice areas is another recent development indicating strong challenge to the social work profession on its own familiar turf.

The pattern of social work education that emerged during the last eighty years also reflects these dilemmas. A profession prepares its members for practice that is clearly defined. In case of social work, it remains difficult to identify the kind of practice for which a person is being prepared. Even a cursory glance at the social work curricula followed in most schools of social work in India would reveal that too much is aimed to be achieved within a short duration of two years at Master's level. The breadth of the professional practice makes compromise with its depth. The vast canvas makes it difficult to provide adequate knowledge and skill base required for effective practice in a given area.

The issue today is not only to recount the old weaknesses of the profession on conventional lines but to think of the jeopardies and the pressing problems of the profession, which followed to go unattended, will herald the decay and even the eventual demise of the profession. The culture of silence for reasons of indifference would cause further degeneration and may well prove to be suicidal. The most pressing issue today is to seriously consider how the wrong can be righted. The discussion meant to simply explore the problematic areas concerning the future of the profession. It is an attempt to take a broad look at the retrospect of social work education in India since 1936.

AFFLICTION AND BURDEN OF AMERICANISM

Professional social work came to India via West-USA and the UK (mainly USA). The complaint is not so much about its alien character but about its indigenized nurturing. While gloating or rejoicing about the 'gift' at that time we did not realize that social work education in the west emerged as a response to the needs of the western urban industrial and capitalist societies which were undergoing rapid institutional breakdowns

with all their old-order values and norms thrown out of gear. There, it emerged as an instrument to absorb the social and cultural shocks of a society in crisis. Understandably, rehabilitating the individuals and groups who disengaged from the traditional institution was its primary goal. There, social work was filling in a new space, an institutional vacuum, created by the emerging industrial society, and hence was institutionally welcomed (Oommen, 1987).

In India, we welcomed it without having considered its western bias. While nothing was wrong with the new idea, with this new profession and an altogether new orientation to our tradition of social service. What was wrong, its uncritical and whole hog acceptance- a kind of belief that it was a panacea for peculiar problems of our individual and collective distress. Overjoyed, as we were then, we continued to build our bases on it without little or no indigenization. We failed to contextualize in terms of Indian social milieu and failed to make it adequate relevant and rooted (Oommen, 1987).

Now we regret it western heritage without thinking as to who stopped us from undertaking the task which everybody thought was central to making the discipline relevant. The irony of the situation, as Singh (1994) says, is that even today social work education in India evidences the profound influence of American ideas. Our curricula, as all of us know, are largely structured on American pattern of education, as it initially began there. The American hangover still continues to dominate our thinking and colours of vision. As a consequence, our social work education, by and large, continues to remain out of context with our social realities, and the rise of social work institutions has made no substantial difference to the situation (Singh, 1994). We hardly have any evidence to suggest that professional social work has responded to any of the critical social problems in a visible manner. The profession has rarely faced the challenges or attended to its ailments, and, the status quo continues (Oommen, 1987). The compulsive attachment to the American model of social work education is, to a large extent, responsible for the undersized growth of the profession in the country (Gangrade, 1976). The indigenization of teaching and training material and methodology is still being debated on most occasions in the available professional fora without much worthwhile action.

THE PROFESSIONALIZATION PRIDE

Our professionalization pride is closely linked with the American influence on social work education in the country. Our trained social workers routinely press the claim of being professional in order to establish their superiority over an army of conventional (non-trained) social workers. This is being done in full knowledge of the fact that there is little recognition of social work as a full-blown profession in the country. Social work has not been able to establish its identity in India amongst the generally acknowledged

professions (Thomas, 1967 and Desai and Narayan, 1998). As such, the notion of social work being a profession hardly has many takers in India.

The professionalization question has attracted much attention from India's social work educators. The available writings suggest that whilst social work as an occupation is known, social work as a profession sounds unbelievable to many people in the country. They held the view that social work is a discipline and an approach, but not a profession. However, since the label of a profession adds to the prestige of trained social workers, most of them press the claim of being professionals. They use the term 'professional' in a very narrow and a loose sense to distinguish the trained social workers from other types of social workers who have had no formal education in any School / Department of social work and do not hold a degree or diploma.

THE UNINDIGENISED KNOWLEDGE BASE

The major shortcoming of social work education in India is its inability to sufficiently indigenize its knowledge-base. The basic teaching material in respect of interventionist methods is still primarily American. The challenge, as said before, has not been met and there is often a lingering doubt in the mind of many social work educators and trained social workers whether social work in India can afford to be only concerned with specific individuals, groups and communities when the problems are really the problems of large masses of people (Gore and Khandekar, 1985). Many of the problems that are identified as problems of socially oppressed and economically deprived sections cannot be called adjustment problems. The social and cultural context of these problems is well beyond the reach of the moral-ethical and / or psycho-social paradigm of intervention.

The unfortunate part is that while everyone agrees on the irrelevance and potentially dysfunctional nature of American heritage, especially on methods' course, little has been done to reverse this legacy. For lack of indigenous teaching material India's social work educators have only to blame themselves. They have not taken note of the plenty of indigenous material which could be effectively utilized for teaching purposes (Mazumdar, 1994). Had they been serious about the issue they could have indigenized western concepts by supplementing their knowledge-base with relevant illustrations from their field experiences. As they could not do this to a desired extent their dependence on American text continues. Desai's (1987) comment is worth reproducing: 'Indigenization of literature can only follow indigenization of our practice. As long as our approaches remain western in their orientation, we cannot hope to indigenize our knowledge, skills or even values'. In the same connection, Ranade (1975) regrets another problem which he says that social work education in India has not developed any intellectual tradition of its own. Most of us agree and often feel that many of us in the

schools and departments of social work have not kept abreast or well informed with the work done by fellow social scientists in the Indian universities. The result is that the educational apparatus of social work training in India does not have a strong group of core thinkers who can guide its future course of action and shape up its destiny.

PUBLIC RECOGNITION OF PROFESSIONAL SOCIAL WORK

Lack of public recognition of social work profession is another critical shortcoming that has a lot to do with its future prospects in India. The notion of professional social work in the people's mind is in contradiction to an idealized image of a conventional social service worker who possesses the real qualities of heart rather than of mind. The idea of paid social professional workers is still an anathema or curse to most people in India who even stick to the notion that doing social work is essentially a voluntary activity of selfless kind. Under Indian conditions 'service' and 'sacrifice' which is selfless and without any remuneration is looked upon as difficult. A paid social worker however good, efficient and capable is more likely to be looked down upon by the people whom he serves as a professional. With no self-sacrifice to his credit, many people would not regard the professional social worker as a social worker at all. They would regard him / her as an 'officer' or a 'para-professional'.

The State Social Welfare sector which is the biggest employer of trained social workers also shows uncertainty in granting statutory recognition to social work as a professional activity. At present there are no well-defined categories of welfare personnel, except labour welfare officers, for which social work training is considered essential. In this regard, an interesting finding emerges from study (Ramchandran and Padmnabha, 1969) which clearly indicates that a large majority of those who have entered the field of labour welfare via schools of social work do not feel that they perform any social work function.

The fact of the matter is that neither the state sector of social welfare nor the voluntary sector attaches any special importance to hiring trained social workers. Both the sectors feel that there is not much difference between the so-called trained social workers and those without any specialized training. This blurs the distinction between trained social workers and non-trained social workers. Meanwhile the message has gone to the people that non-trained voluntary workers are doing a better job. This marked lack of public recognition as a professional creates a feeling of insecurity in the minds of trained social work graduates. While they regard themselves as being scientific in their approach, the society denies them the status of a professional. For this state of affairs, the society and the government are not to be wholly blamed. Much of the loudly talked about scientist

of professional social work training has no relevance in a country where around one fourth of the population is struggling to meet its survival needs.

INABILITY OF REACHING THE UNREACHED

In a society like India where nearly three-fourth population live in the rural areas, the urban location of the schools of social work, and also of the city based social work networks have little meaning. Trained social workers, unlike other voluntary social workers, are not inclined to move to rural areas where the heat is and where people really need help. This raises a basic question, namely, to what extent the present pattern of social work education is suited to the needs of the country where large sections of needy people remain unreached by trained social workers?

The profession's disengagement with the impoverished depressed and down trodden sections of society is due to its low visibility and poor credibility. In pursuit of excessive concern with their self-interest, the profession's trained angels have neglected the larger issues of mass welfare in India. Their reluctant engagement with the poor carries the legacy of the elitist urban middle class western paradigm (Desai and Narayan, 1998). In the case of underprivileged groups, where larger numbers and whole communities are involved, as in the case of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, they have failed to identify and gain acceptance for the specialized contribution of professional social work (Gore, 1981). Writing about the professional social worker's neglect of Dalit issues Ramaiah (1998) adds that the issues relating to caste in general and the problems of Dalits in particular have hardly been the concern of professional social workers.

OBSOLESCENCE OF CURRICULA

The obsolescence of curricula is another ailment of social work education in India. There have been some efforts to cast a hard look on what we teach and how we teach in our class-rooms. Two reports of the University Grants Commission (1965 and 1980) have attempted to grapple with the issue. However, it is indeed dismaying that the system of social work education has not responded well to making effective curricular changes to respond to the problems and situations. The reluctance to change social work curricula could be because of many reasons, such as lack of commitment to social change by schools of social work; a strong middle class bias of the majority of the faculty; and the sensitivity towards the conditions of the poor and the oppressed. Saxena (1994) seems confused and finds it difficult to ascertain so as to what the schools of social work in India are trying to achieve through their curriculum. Much of the curriculum in the respective schools of social work is based on western models unrelated to the field situation and unsuitable to social and cultural ethos of the country. Despite superficial changes the western legacy continues to have its hold.

MAJOR CHALLENGE

Social work education in India faces the challenge of making the profession relevant to contemporary situations. The challenge, wrote Ranade (1994) is that of restoring and recognizing the image of social work education. How relevant has remained this education is a question that social work educators in India must address. Kulkarni (1994) recognized the need for carrying out rigorous evaluation. He sees a clear signal of social work education becoming gradually obsolete, or, at least, less and less relevant. In view of the weak and ineffective response to the challenges confronting the profession, Kulkarni (1994) hazards a guess: “if schools of social work remain resistant to changing needs of the field, they would soon run the risk of becoming static and stagnant”. Ranade (1994) feels disillusioned and says: “social work educators have not shown much interest in this direction”.

These observations of experienced and senior social work educators make a compelling case of reorienting social work education so as to save it from further marginalization. The vital issue, therefore, is to look afresh at the roots where the problems apparently lie. The question that social work has a specific professional contribution to make in the solution of social problems that people face in an in-egalitarian society where the Constitutional pledge of providing justice-social, economic and political- rest in the realm of rhetoric regardless of the realities of oppression and exploitation of the millions of dispossessed and disadvantaged persons.

THE FUTURISTIC PERSPECTIVE

The futuristic agenda emphasizes the need to understand both the historical and ideological framework from which social work grew, and more importantly, the need to evolve concepts, methods, policies and priorities which are more suited to Indian situations. The quest, feeble or weak though, aims at evolving a more culture-bound theory of social work and to reorient the educational apparatus in the context of emerging needs of the country. In the same vein it is also stressed that social work will have to redefine its role, demarcate its areas of work and improvise its tools and techniques of action. Social work has to come up with the new reality, integrate its efforts with others, and develop a perspective that could join multiplicity of efforts into a large movement for changes in social welfare / social development. This underlines the need to understand the lessons of the last eight decades of social work education in the country and the need to evolve an integrated perspective on methods and strategies.

Currently, there is a growing opinion that professional workers and their educators should address themselves to developmental actions and work for the welfare of the oppressed and down-trodden sections of society not as individuals in distress but as

collective in trouble. They are called upon to take up preventive and developmental functions rather than remaining solely engaged in clinical and curative functions. In terms of strategy, the first and foremost requirement is to sharpen the tools of social action in social work education. There is a feeling that if social workers are to become effective they will have to turn to systematic and well-planned social action endeavours to strike at the root causes of the problems and expedite the process of evolutionary social transformation, if not revolutionary change.

CONCLUSION

The progress of social work education in India is far from being satisfactory. Our traditions have arrested social work growth to some extent. Our present socio-economic milieu is another culprit in this regard. Though, we cannot state that social work as a discipline has failed in achieving its objectives. Social work is neither obsolete nor ineffective in nature; it has only been a little misdirected in India.

The above discussion on the suggested future directions for restoring the professional social work education in the country suggest that the profession of social work stands at a confusing cross-road, not knowing where to go and how? The profession is still uncertain about formulating a coherent and comprehensive framework which could assist in meeting the challenges that lie ahead. However, certain issues needs clear thinking and action, and these issues are developing strategies and approaches to suit to the new socio-economic reality, changing the teaching and practice-oriented from an individualized clinical and therapeutic perspective to an organizational perspective, meeting the paucity of indigenous text-books and teaching materials, developing a culture-bound theory of social work and social work philosophy for India, and reorganizing curriculum, field work system and methods of teaching and research.

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