HISTORY OF SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION IN INDIA: KEY TO GLORIOUS FUTURE

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ABSTRACT

Indian Higher Education is the second largest in the world. Education carves the future of a nation and thus it becomes imperative to understand its evolution and the direction of its movement. The paper presents the history of higher education and attempts to understand Historical evolution of Social Work in India with a special emphasis on education. It focuses on the journey of Social Work education in India and associates it with the present challenges. It is based on secondary sources and utilizes systematic literature review for meeting the objective. There are functional problems in Social Work practice and education which are pointed in the paper. Also, the complex interplay of various factors that act as impediments in Social Work Education and Practice are identified and presented. The systematic review can be utilized for the purpose of enhancement of the education and practice of social work and policy level interventions can be made. The paper also provokes the thinkers in social work to work on alternative and effective means for practical components of social work.

Keywords. *Social Work Education, Evolution, Challenges, Opportunities*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Education is the key element shaping the citizens of tomorrow. Plato considered education as a life-long process starting from the initial years of childhood to the very end of one's life in order to pursue the ideal perfection of citizenship, he furthers that education teaches how rightly to rule and how to obey. Indian perspective of education emphasizes on spirituality. In the words of the philosopher Shankaracharya, "Education is the realization of the self and it leads to salvation". Rabindra Nath Tagore explains education as, that which empowers the mind to search that ultimate truth which liberates us from the bondage of dust and gives us the wealth; not of possessions but of inner light, not of dominion but of love, constructing this truth its own and gives expression to. Every definition somewhere tries to justify the objectives of education.

In order to comprehend social work education, it is first essential to know the concept of Social Work as a defined by scholars so as to develop an understanding of it as a discipline and as a practice profession.

According to Friedlander (1964), "Social work seeks to assist individuals, groups and communities to reach the highest possible degree of social, mental, and psychological well-being. Its function requires awareness of the dynamic interplay of personal, biological, and psychological elements within the socio-economic forces of the environment of human beings [1]."

Right from the very beginning field work has been of prime importance in social work. It is the core strength of social work curriculum.

2. SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION AND PRACTICE IN INDIA: THE PAST

From philanthropy to profession, Social Work in India has evolved gradually over years. Though the notion of Social Work is as old as mankind, most historians believe that as a professional concept Social Work got recognition only in the 19th century. Social Work being a faculty of recent origin is reported of specific challenges as well. Social Work Practice in India was introduced by the Americans in 1930s, where they were eager to share their new fruitful treatment methods and Indians started adopting the American model of Social Work Education. With time, this model has been to a certain extent customized to Indian needs, where regular students in India are exposed to field via concurrent field work practice (normally 2 days a week) and other practical components that are also taught in theory classes. This combined model is the ideal approach [2].

2.1 Social Work in Ancient India

Nature of social service was charity. Social welfare activities were performed by means of Yagnas; most popular mass-rituals known in Vedic times. Privileged class had the duty to serve the poor, not to show superiority but in order to get Moksha. The duties were only defined as per religion in the Vedic times, there was no provision of adjudication. However, caste system that sprung towards late Vedic era posed serious threat to the state of welfare. Buddhism also accepted the karma theory and promoted giving 'bhiksha' to the 'bhikshus' residing in 'sangha'. It was Ashoka who developed a comprehensive system of social welfare, including women's welfare, rural development, rehabilitation of poor, and regulation of prostitution and provision of public utilities [3].

2.2 Social Welfare during the Sultanate

The sultanate was an Islamic state. The King had to maintain peace, protect the kingdom against external attacks, levy and realize taxes and provide justice to the masses. Certain towns like Delhi, Lahore, Panipat, Kol etc. became the loci of welfare. Hospitals, Madarsas, Mosques, Granaries, jamaitkhanas etc, were well established in these centres. Caste cities got

developed as cosmopolitan urban centres. This era is also pointed with stagnation of science, growth of orthodoxy, deep hierarchical order. The social mobility among different groups was yet prohibited, and important roles were confined to certain castes and classes [4].

2.3 Social Welfare during the Mughal Rule

Humayun despite a muslim ruler, made a bold attempt to prohibit Sati system. The most notable ruler of Mughal kingdom was Akbar who abolished slavery in 1583 and introduced equality including freedom of religion to his subjects. 4 categories – 1. Seekers of true knowledge, 2. Devout persons, 3. Destitutes, 4. Person of noble lineage who would not 'out of ignorance' take employment were eligible claimants for availing grants. However, the institutions responsible for redistribution of wealth downwards soon got corrupted and the only means of relief got limited to free kitchens – langars [5].

2.4 Modern Social Work

The modern era can be further understood in three time zones - Pre-British, British and Post-British times. In Pre-British times Indians followed the system of joint family, village community and village temple. British rule inspired social reform and Christian missionaries worked for education, equality, health etc. which later became the grounds of emancipation and social evils and practices were attacked. The foundation of modern social work was laid by Christian Missionaries in 19th century. Orphanages, Hospitals, and Schools were established, and certain legislative measures were also adopted by British rulers. However, the year 1936 marks the golden beginning of Social Work Education in India when Sir Dorabji Tata Graduate School of Social Work got established in Bombay and formal training began.

After Independence, social welfare provisions were well defined in Indian constitution. However, as the practice of social work got adopted from the west, indigenous literature, superstitious cultural ethos, multiplying responsibilities, varied a dynamic normative and pragmatic dimension, close ties with welfare state and missing ethical framework pose serious challenge to social work education and practice. The old social movements that are primarily economic in nature and the new social movements focusing on cultural creativity, autonomy and capacity to act on all aspects of human experience, are connected to the changes in social work. It becomes imperative to understand that social work in India has not grown in isolation but within a complex, diverse and dynamic framework which poses challenges as well as opportunities [6].

3. SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION AND PRACTICE: THE PRESENT

Though quantitatively expanded well, research suggests that the Higher Education system in India itself suffers from certain lacunas irrespective of the disciplines concerned.

Research studies have reported that higher education in India had expanded only in quantity and not quality [7], [8], [9]. India's higher education is bureaucratically inflexible, governed by poor structures and uneven and modest quality at best. Even the regulatory and accreditation mechanisms and processes to assure quality are highly perplexing [10].

It was inferred that the problems of Indian Higher Education are deep rooted and arise out of a range of dilemmas like historical constitution of Indian higher education, organizational culture and attitudes that people hold due to the nature and functions in society itself [11]. The accreditation process of colleges and universities must shift from inputs and processes to outcomes and results for quality assurance. It was furthered that the best and brightest must be attracted to the teaching profession to assure best quality education [12]. There is a felt urge to establish an accountable system of quality in higher education where every stakeholder needs to be recognized, studied, employed and supported to the full extent [13].

Shri M. Venkaiah Naidu in his address acknowledged that professional education suffers from shortage of qualified staff, insufficient infrastructure, and is not aligned as per global demands. Also, there is no system to ensure accountability and performance of teachers. He also expressed his concern on tapping 65% of the population which is below 35 years of age [14].

The flaws in Indian higher education are also reflected in Social Work education. Where on one hand the discipline is of recent origin and adopted from the west, the current framework also poses numerous challenges in front of social workers.

Social work education needs to be a perfect blend of theory and practice. However, when it comes to the Indian context, limited indigenous social work literature and non-involvement of practice teachers in the process of grading pose serious limitations to social work education [15]. It has also been pointed that the major shortcoming of social work education in India is its inability to sufficiently indigenize its knowledge base. The basic teaching material with respect to interventionist methods (the holy trinity of social case work, social group work and community organisation) is still primarily American [16].

Apart from this, it was pointed that the student teacher ratio in most programmes of social work is ideal which helps the students to interact with the faculties well, however, the quality of faculty, and the missing link between industry demands and academic curriculum is a major obstacle in developing social work. It was suggested that there should be strong link between alumni and educational institutions. Also, alumni from their practice environment should contribute in updating the teaching curriculum focusing on the skills and knowledge aimed for in the employment market. One year specialization is yet a mockery of the course and absolutely specialized courses should be started by the schools of social work and degree in social work should be more generic in nature with a strong focus on social work theory and practice. The programmes in social work that offer certain specializations don't guarantee that upon employment the learner will specifically enter into the same field. Also, it was

pointed that most programmes are shifting towards the business orientation and money making avenues and soon it would be education that would take the shape of business. His observations and predictions are somewhat turning true today [17].

Society expects that social workers should be dedicated to the pursuit of social justice, the enrichment of the quality of life, and the development of the full potential of each individual, group, and community in the society. Yet, it is important to realize that the term 'Professional Social Worker' is applied only to full time experts who have had received their training at recognized higher educational institutions and have qualified themselves through examinations. It has been an obvious observation that with the numerous organizations recruiting Non-MSWs as Social Workers and at other allied positions and other challenges of educating, recognition, and the like, professionalization in Social Work has time and again put to question. Today, Social Work is not just a regular full-time course but is also offered at distance mode through open and distance learning, and in a way is coming within the reach of all aspirants. However, the aspirations of the students studying in the urban areas mostly get curtailed to finding a job in the urban areas [18].

Today, Social Work is essentially in a real challenging and ambiguous position. It must move beyond the restrictions to rediscover ambiguity and uncertainty in terms of set of factors (including risk factors), which drive human cognition, motivation and behaviour. For a better future, focus on removing impediments and improving higher education is a must. There had also been dilemma about what would be the exact form and purpose of Code of Ethics in a heterogeneous society like India, which remains unresolved [19]. Research suggests that better resources, networking, exposure and inclination towards experiential learning will enhance the quality of education in social work. Also, continuous monitoring and enhancement is needed to improve quality which will also result in changed perception of social work as a discipline and profession [20].

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has posed yet other serious threats to the practice-based disciplines. On one hand, minimal Government interventions do imply the need for social work in contemporary times, yet, on the other, training social workers in a blended mode with field work practices and other practical components happening in online mode marks a serious question to the understanding of practical aspects itself.

The road to excellence is often difficult but definitely full of opportunities. It is true that social work in modern times has many challenges ahead, yet, like Thomas S. Monson rightly said, 'Our most significant opportunities will be found in times of greatest challenges', these challenges do present significant opportunities for growth and change.

4. EXEMPLIFYING SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

Despite of the challenges Social Work Education has materialised in concrete form. Though limited in count, the work of some of the social workers is significantly noted.

TISS is the pioneer institution in social work and has produced alumni like – Ms. Medha Patkar, a social activist who need no introduction. Her work in Narmada Bachao Andolan and interventions in the issues of tribals, dalits, farmers, labours speak for itself. She founded National Alliance of People's Movement. She also was a commissioner to World Commission on Dams. Another person of significance from the school of social work is Ms. Poornima Mane, an expert on sexual and reproductive health, former President and CEO, Pathfinder International. She has also been associated with UN in the capacity of United Nations Assistant Secretary-General and UNFPA Deputy Executive Director (Programme); World Heath Organization and UNAIDS.

The second school of social work – School of Social Work, Delhi University, has to its credit famous personalities like Mr. Feisal Alkazi, Founder of Ankur, a society for alternatives in education, is also an educationist teaching students at Jamia. He is also a theatre director and activist, with over 20 books to his credit and over 200 plays directed by his group 'Ruchika'.

Professor Manoj Jha, another notable product of School of Social Work, Delhi University, has been rendering his services as Professor, Social Work, Delhi University and is also a member of Rajya Sabha. Also, he is the spokesperson of the Rashtriya Janta Dal.

Not just in practice and activism, social workers have also contributed to social work education. Prof. Gracious Thomas, B.A., M.A., Ph.D. and D. Litt in Social Work is the founder Director of School of Social Work at IGNOU, New Delhi. Highly experienced in academics and research he has made valuable contributions to Higher Education (Open and Distant Learning (ODL)) particularly in Indian context.

However gloomy it may appear, prominent social workers have always proved that nothing is impossible and where there is a will, there certainly will be a way.

5. CONCLUSION

Social work as a discipline though is of recent origin and has a long journey ahead suffers from the basic impediments of Indian higher education and other specific issues. Some of them are imposed by structures and functions of the society itself, while there are others that have developed with time. Definitely some factors are beyond control, like the recent effects of COVID-19 on education, yet alternatives need to be meticulously and uniformly worked on in order to cope up with the challenges posed by time.

In order to write the glorious future of social work education and practice, subsequent revisions and changes are needed in the discipline as well as in higher education system itself, which though worked upon are miniscule. Also, a robust selection of qualified teaching staff and training of the faculties, provision of licensing of practitioners, and integration of practice into theory for building knowledge base will promote better social work education and practice.

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