

Professional Social Work: Revisiting the Past and Envisioning the Future in India

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Abstract

Unlike law, medicine and nursing, social work in India neither enjoys professional recognition nor has a professional council to regulate and popularize the profession. The reason for this is explained through the following analysis which reveals the contestations that exists between divergent camps dealing with social work. The author urges the social workers to shed their ideological differences and come to a mutual consensus to promote social work within the human rights and development paradigm. It is acknowledged that both micro and macro social work methods are relevant within the emerging paradigm. A four-point proposal that can build an acceptable consensus between the competing camps is proposed. This article is expected to help these young professionals and educators to identify the pertinent issues that are important for social work in India.

Keywords

social welfare, social work education, distance education, India

Founding of a 'Helping' Profession

Social work is closely related to social welfare. In England, dislocation of people due to the allocation of separate land for sheep farming resulted in poverty and impoverishment. This resulted in civil disturbances. The English Poor Laws were enacted during 1563 in order to assist the poor and clarify the role of the government and local authorities in the provision of aid (de Schweinitz, 1943). The 1601 version of the Poor Law became popular. The local authorities in the parishes (counties) determined the eligibility of those people who were to be supported under the poor laws (Titmuss, 1958). The poor laws became the cornerstone of modern social welfare planning and administration.

In 1800s, industrialization set in and became a major phenomenon that shook the world. This meant transformation of the predominant rural population into an urban milieu. This resulted in migration of people from the rural areas to urban industrial centers. These urban centers created

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problems related to living conditions, working conditions and even in the social structure which lead to the growth of private social welfare agencies.

The private social welfare agencies which developed in the mid 1800s attempted to meet the needs of people living in these urban areas (Zastrow, 1996). These agencies were primarily initiated by religious groups. Until 1900s the services (food and shelter, for instance) provided by them were very minimal. It existed primarily as projects of the clergy and wealthy philanthropists, who had no formal training and had little understanding of human behaviour. The focus of the groups were to meet the basic physical needs such as food, shelter and similar other requirements. They also attempted to cure emotional and personal differences with religious admonitions.

One of the foremost social welfare agencies in the early 1800s was the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism, founded by John Griscon in 1820 (Zastrow, 1996). The work undertaken by this agency involved investigating the habits and existing conditions of the poor and suggesting plans by which the poor could help themselves. By the end of 1800s, a large number of relief agencies were formed to help the unemployed, poor, physically and mentally disabled people and orphans. But most of the services provided by these agencies were poorly coordinated and often overlapping in several areas. It was in this context the Charity Organization Society (COS) caught the interest of everyone in 1877. COS provided direct services to the individuals and their families as well as coordinated the efforts of private agencies to meet as well as solve the pressing problems. The success of COS lay in its ability to find the needs of the client and in maintaining a central system to avoid duplication. They also used friendly visitors (volunteers) to work with the people.

Concurrent to the COS movement was the establishment of several settlement houses in the late 1800s. The Tonybee Hall became the first settlement house in London in 1884 (Woodroffe, 1971). The workers of these houses were daughters of ministers who in contrast to the friendly visitors (volunteers), lived in the same impoverished neighbourhood and used the missionary approach of teaching residents how to live a moral life and improve their living conditions (Barker, 1999).

The settlement houses used techniques which are now referred as social group work, social action and community organization. Settlement houses emphasized environmental reforms on one hand but on the other continued to teach the poor the prevailing middle class values of work, thrift and abstinence as a key to success. One prominent leader of this movement was Jane Adams.

In the late 1890s, COS found several problems in administering the aid efficiently. The relief funds received by COS had to reach the people effectively. But due to the lack of professional training, friendly volunteers could not effectively manage book keeping effectively. The friendly visitors had to be trained in book keeping skills and thus began the first training of its kind that took place in 1898. It was organized by the New York Charity Organization Society. By 1904, a one year certificate programme was offered by the New York School of Philanthropy (Zastrow, 1996). This became the first formal social work education programme in the whole world.

Gradually a number of schools for social work rose and social workers began to get employed in all kinds of professional settings such as schools, courts, child guidance clinics and urban neighbourhood centers. In 1917, Mary Richmond published *Social Diagnosis*, a text which presented for the first time the theory and methodology of social work (Mathew, 1992). It

was also during this time the concepts of Sigmund Freud became popular. The concepts of Freud was found to be appropriate to social work and thus the social workers switched their emphasis from “reform” to “therapy” for the next three decades (Ronald, 2013).

However, until the end of World War I, social work was never considered as a distinguished and definite profession. The depression of 1930s and the enactment of social security act in 1935 brought social work to the lime light (Younghusband, 1964). Since 1940s, social work has become a prominent field in the area of social welfare and development.

Emergence of Competing Camps in Social Work (1940-1970)

COS, in analyzing the causes of poverty, originally emphasized on a theory of personal failure, but later extended their analysis to include a lack of appropriate social policies that led to social problems. Meanwhile the writings of Sigmund Freud altered the direction of social work towards a more conformist field of practice and knowledge. The development of business-sponsored community chests, philanthropic foundations and the arrival of technology also influenced the social workers to focus their concerns on finding solutions to individual dysfunctions. This emphasis was heightened by the acceptance of the psychoanalytical theory (Ronald, 2013).

The next four decades, the profession of social work witnessed clear ideological and organizational disarray. The devastating polarization between clinical practitioners and the advocates of social policy and action, led to both sides identifying their own functions as that of the social workers. It was during this time in 1970, a variety of practice approaches namely, radical, structural, feminist, anti-racist emerged to challenge the existing social work practices as elite and hegemonic. These practices had differences in their analysis, but were quite united for the cause of social justice. They came under the umbrella of Anti-Oppressive Social Work (Ronald, 2013).

One of the approaches, namely, radical social work, was rooted in the Marxist theory. It introduced a class analysis of the role of the welfare state and the provision of social work services. Radical theorists identified the ‘individualization’ of client problems as a political ideology that could be challenged and replaced with an ideology that located problems within the capitalist social structure (Bailey and Blake, 1975).

Structural social work saw human relationships being influenced by power and privileges based on race, class, gender, sexual orientation or age embedded within the capitalist societies. Structural social work was a key development in the articulation of an anti-oppression stance, which was heavily influenced by the work of both Marx and Freire (Mullaly, 1993).

Feminist theorists began critiquing the structural approach, claiming that the theoretical analysis of the structural social workers and their resultant practices had not adequately integrated the issues of gender. Feminist social workers believed that the live experiences taken from women’s lives could be developed as a feminist analysis of practice (Langan and Day, 1992).

The anti racist social workers criticized both the structural and feminist social work theories for the lack of attention paid to the impact of racism, both at the institutional and interpersonal levels. Anti-racists place race analysis at the centre, thereby challenging the Euro-centric bias of social work. Thus during the last three decades, social workers have witnessed an unprecedented development of an anti-oppressive approach as an alternative to the traditional social work models of personal rehabilitation (Ronald, 2013). Anti oppressive social work

practices offers strong analytical perspectives for social workers. However it has found no place in the curriculum of most of the prominent schools dealing with social work.

Professionalizing Social Work

Right from the 1900s, social workers who worked in state institutions, such as in the prisons and the hospitals felt the need for a professional status for the social work done in these institutions. In the US, the National Conference of Charities and Corrections was established in 1915. Following that, the Association of Medical Social Workers was established in 1918 in the US. Later with the support from practitioners and social work educators, the National Association of Social Workers and the Council for Social Work Education was established. Thus the USA became a frontrunner in professional social work education and practice (Laavanya, 2013).

In the United Kingdom, various associations rose in the 1920s. Some of the prominent associations were the Association of Child Care Officers, the Association of Family Case Workers, and the Association of Psychiatric Social Workers. In 1962, these associations came under the banner of the Standing Conference of Organizations of Social Workers (SCOSW). Later, the SCOSW reemerged as the British Association of Social Workers in 1970. At present, the Health and Care Professions Council regulate social work education in the UK (Laavanya, 2013).

The Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) is the sole association in Canada with a national voice and an international reach. The association was established in 1926. Currently the CASW is a federated organization having partners in each province of the country. On the education front, the Council on Social Work Education founded in 1952 was given the responsibility of accreditation of social work education programmes in the country (Laavanya, 2013).

In Australia, the Australian Association of Social Workers was established as a professional representative body of social workers in 1947. On the education front, the Australian Council of Heads of Schools of Social Work (ACHSSW) and the Australian Association for Social Work and Welfare Education (AASWWE) provided the much needed leadership. In the international level, the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) established in 1956 in Munich and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) provided an overall leadership to the professional associations and educational councils worldwide. These associations along with the local professional associations and social work education councils have tried to regulate both the social work profession and education as well (Laavanya, 2013). The International Federation of Social Workers and International Association of Schools of Social Work have identified four major areas of work for all the social workers across the globe. The areas are as follows:

- Tackling human rights violations
- Creating a just economic system
- Strengthening affirmative policies for aboriginal and historically excluded groups
- Building effective public systems for the well-being of the people

Thus from a pure clinical and service providing centered orientation, the social work profession is moving towards a human rights and development paradigm. The International

Federation of Social Workers and International Association of Schools of Social Work endorse such a stance.

Professional Social Work in India

Clifford Manshardt, an American missionary in Mumbai was the first person to articulate the importance of professional social work in India. He later became the Founder-Director of the Sir Dorabji Tata Graduate School of Social Work (later renamed as Tata Institute of Social Sciences). He recognized that the social conditions in India differ vastly from those of the West and therefore social work has to be context specific (Desai, 1985). But when the social work education programmes developed in India, the cultural, economic and social differences were not adequately taken in to consideration (Thomas, 1976).

The social work educators in India developed a curriculum which was largely copied from the West. In fact, all the specializations which evolved in the country were developed by the American social work educators who had no training what so ever about the Indian social economic issues (Mandal, 1989). Thus the curative model of social work based on the West was over emphasized, resulting in the limitation of social sciences content necessary for understanding the Indian socio-economic structures (Mandal, 1989). This ultimately led to the neglect of various social reforms (Pathak, 1975).

Nanavatty (1985:315) gives a clear picture of the fact in the following manner:

“Social work education in India began as an adaptation of the educational programme of USA, where social work services were meant to assist the people in their adjustment to an industrial, urban and metropolis dominated social milieu. In contrast, India has millions of people whose basic needs are unmet, rights infringed and mobility restricted. Hence social work had to primarily relate to social justice rather than promoting adjustments.”

Desai (1985:44) also reflects the same point:

“In a country where the majority of people are rural, where exploitation and injustice leave the majority in a state of poverty, social work has remained to a large extent peripheral to the root causes of the problems of a non-industrial and rural society.”

Unfortunately, the voice of the conscience keepers was not heeded by the curriculum developers. This resulted in the absence of a indigenous and context specific literature in social work. On the other hand, colleagues in the other sister subjects like sociology and anthropology developed concepts and ideas based on an Indian reality. These subjects have gained popularity and acceptance among the scientific community.

The social work educators have tried quite a number of times to promote social work and gain recognition akin to other practice professions like law, medicine and nursing. However due to the lack of support from their sister subjects and the infighting within the social work fraternity social work has not received its due recognition.

The first effort for professionalization of social work in India came in 1947 with the Indian Conference of Social Work (ICSW), which acted as a forum for the development of public opinion on social work and welfare. Later in the 1960s, two important associations came to the forefront, namely, the Association of/for Schools of Social Work in India (ASSWI) in 1960 and the Indian Association of Trained Social Workers (IATSW) in 1964. Since 1970s, an array of regional level associations such as Bombay Association of Trained Social Workers (BATSW), Maharashtra Association of Social Work Educators (MATSW), Karnataka Association of

Professional Social Workers (KAPSW), and Professional Social Workers Forum, Chennai (PSWFC) have emerged.

At the national level, the Indian Society of Professional Social Work (ISPSW), Associations of Schools of Social Work in India (ASSWI) and the National Association of Professional Social Workers in India (NAPSWI) emerged as the major players. Various legislative attempts have been made through the efforts of these professional associations at the regional and national levels. The National Council of Professional Social Work in India Bill (1993), the National Council of Professional Social Work in India Bill (2007), and the Maharashtra Social Work Council Bill are examples of some of the efforts taken by these associations at the legislative front.

However, due to the infighting between clinical social workers and social action / developmental social workers, a united face has never been shown by the social work associations. This has left the entire profession in deep slumber and inactivity. Therefore for the future efforts to be successful, as witnessed elsewhere, it is important for the both camps to come together. The proposal by Mizra Ahmad provided new directions in social work education (Laavanya, 2013). The five point proposal is as follows:

- Shifting from welfare to developmental and social rights orientation.
- Shifting focus from pathology to addressing the needs of development and promoting the empowerment of the vulnerable.
- Reducing the emphasis on micro level intervention strategies and more attention to be given to issues at the macro level.
- Reducing dependence on western models and evolving indigenous models of social work.
- Keeping constant watch on the changing social, economic and political realities at the local, national and international level so that professionals can respond to the changing needs of the clientele and the society in general.

Thirty four years have passed since Mizra Ahmad gave this suggestion. But the social work practitioners and social work educators are not keen in implementing the five-point proposal (Laavanya, 2013). One major reason for this was the lack of consensus among social work educators to the proposal. Most of the social workers from the clinical stream find the proposal of Mizra Ahmad to be biased towards macro practice. This is a compelling contention as the third point was for reducing the emphasis of micro interventions and the clinicians find it as a biased proposal which undermines the mental health challenges in the country.

To set the differences right, the national level associations of the schools of social work should have taken a lead. Due to the disintegration of the ASSWI, there is no clear national voice nor a mutual consensus making body of social work educators till today. In 2012, the School of Social Work in the Tata Institute of Social Sciences along with many other schools and departments of social work in India came together and floated the National Network of Schools of Social Work (NNSSW) for quality enhancement of social work education in India. The key objectives of the network were to suggest strategies for developing minimum standards in social work education, developing modalities for supporting new departments of social work, and formulation of the national council on professional social work bill. The social work educators who attended the national network consultation resolved to make social work emancipatory, participatory and liberating (Nadkarni and Desai, 2012). However one has to wait and see the impact of the consultation.

Conclusion

The divide between the clinical and developmental social workers is an area of concern for the majority of the social work educators and practitioners. The apprehension raised by developmental social workers holds true as the state control over professional council of social work would mean the death knell to those social workers involved in social action, and a direct confrontation with the state. For example, the people in power would not appreciate the use of demonstrations/ rallies to pressurize the state.

On the other hand, working with the state is absolutely necessary to make sure that the social welfare services reach the poor and the marginalized. In some of the agency settings, such as prisons and the hospitals, the role of a clinical / case worker is vital. Professional recognition of the qualification and services of the social worker within these systems is important for them to do their tasks successfully and without stress.

However, excessive stress on professionalism will create an elite and top-down approach. In the recent past, there has been a feeling that only students from the elite institutes are competent for professional social work. The rest of the students doing social work are looked down upon as being incompetent and unprofessional. This notion does not have any merit. In fact it further divides the social work fraternity.

Another major point of conflict is on the distant / correspondence form of education Bachelors in Social Work and Masters in Social Work programmes offered by some of the universities like Indira Gandhi National Open University. Most of the social workers who uphold professionalism are against the distance education programmes as they feel that these programmes lack academic rigour. But they fail to understand that distance education is a rigorous and equitable medium of education which promotes social inclusion (Saumya, 2013). Most of the middle and lower middle class aspirants tend to look at distance education as a feasible option to continue their studies. Anti-distance education stance will result in elitism. Social workers have to keep a vigil on this.

The social workers who summarily reject distance education mode should in fact look at the models from Canada, Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere before making premature dismissal of distance education systems. Distance education programmes give opportunity to our own diploma and bachelors level social workers to complete masters degree and have career progression. We should encourage such career advancement options.

In this context, a dialogue between the two camps is necessary. The International Federation of Social Workers and the International Association of Schools of Social Work have developed documents that pave the way for seeing social work as a field of study and practice which is concerned about the human rights of the individuals, groups and communities. Social workers in both camps in India can come together to discuss these matters. Based on the current situation, we can decide to adopt the following resolution:

- To see social welfare services, social action, and social policy interventions as strategies within the developmental and human rights perspective for the holistic development of the individuals, groups as well as communities.
- To reduce the dependency on the pure biomedical models and develop indigenous and rural/ tribal community sensitive bio-psycho-social models of intervention.
- To appreciate both micro and macro social work methods as they are complementary to each other.

- To align with the regional and international professional associations and councils while developing a model curriculum and other professional and academic suggestions and regulations.

Agreeing on these points can bring both the camps together to deliberate on the other finer issues affecting both the social work education and profession. In a few years time, we will be celebrating 80 years of social work education in the country. We should therefore resolve the contentious issues quickly and move towards a golden age of social work in India.

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