Social Work Practice: Emerging Trends and Challenges*

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INTRODUCTION

I recall vividly the first time I visited the Central Institute of Psychiatry, Ranchi, formerly it was part of Bihar now it is the capital of the state of Jharkhand. The Department, therefore, has to play a lead role, like others, in the field of mental health and social work. Diversity of population of the new state provides a rich context which is indeed challenging. Science and tradition, therefore, have to meet and work together to achieve the goal of enhancing mental health. Field demonstration and social and institutional networking may facilitate new programmes, consolidate earlier ones, and also change policies and streamline programmes of mental health by securing citizen participation.

Mary Richmond in the 19th century began to pay attention to the social aspects of medicine, law, psychology and education to relieve social suffering and enhance social functioning through individualisation which was later called social casework. Victims of social ills needed material relief and psychosocial intervention to adjust in the society and also make their contribution. Her two publications 'What is Social Casework? and 'Social Diagnosis' clearly show the various dimensions of social maladjustment and organised efforts to deal with them. Over the years, it was realised that people's (client's) participation and their families' social and collateral resources can be harnessed to make the adjustment and change smooth and effective. Subsequently, other books on social casework to provide individualised help were published. The emergence of social group work showed the group as a resource for effective socialization within groups and communities. Study of the power structure, dynamics of leadership and change expanded the horizons of social work encompassing social policy, law and social action. However, individualisation remained the 'core' of social work practice.

After the Earth Summit (1991), World Summit on Social Development (1995), Millennium Development Goals (2000) and Sustainable Social Development, the area of social work and human service professions, among others, has expanded. This implies that social work has to shift from clinical and institutional to the developmental approach regardless of specialization in order to achieve sustainable development Goals (N=17). Health for all should now include mental health for all and be addressed by all the specialities. Now professions face the challenge of taking services to the communities, discharge their social responsibilities, build and sustain bonds with people, especially marginalised groups by adopting Inter-disciplinary and differential approaches to prove their relevance. Large scale migration during Corona Pandemic has shown the failure of socio-economic, state and professional support systems and has driven people to fate due to the wide gap between promise and performance. It is in this changing context that I propose to share my thoughts with you. Perception of the times of Mary Richmond has now changed beyond measure in terms of goals, approaches and new

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perspectives. Dimensions of methods of social work and their blending and usage in different situations thus demand plurality of methods.

While going through the Souvenir (2020) I came across messages of important personages. An article 'Time to Introspect in Psychiatric Social Work Education' by I. A. Shariff and N. Janardan (pp.20-32) highlights psycho-social service, research in psycho-social intervention, collaboration and cooperation with schools of social work, study, diagnosis and treatment, history of medical and psychiatric social work at TISS and process of evaluation of cognition and emotion for action. I would, however, like to add such aspects also as social, economic and ecological which is quite clear during the times of Corona. In my assessment, the contribution of medical and life sciences is about one fifth or so in this case. But that of social, psychological, economic, policy and ecology is much more. Service delivery through trial and error or measures based on law and innovations are being applied in tandem. Under the revised course content of the article, there is a reference to group work in psychiatric social work, community work, and family studies. These have been recognized in the course content. Unit 5 however mentions about social casework. I would like to draw attention to the prefix 'social' before work, particularly which should be seriously examined as a concept distinct from its general meaning. The authors however have stated: "casework is a general social work and as such it has nothing to do with any area of psychiatric social work". If it is so, will 'social' be dropped to reconceptualise "psychiatric work"? I believe that the social history of social work and its evolution in several inter-dependent branches and fields cannot be ignored. It will be a travesty of history. In my view, therefore "psycho" or "social" includes the person (persons), relationships, society, beliefs, culture, entity (unit), group, family, neighbourhood, community and environment. Also, there are different kinds of care: terminal and community care, halfway or daycare, aftercare and occupational placement in society as also charity and organ donation. There is even a reputed journal: Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry. This shows that any discipline which claims itself as a profession, has to serve society and deleting 'social' will be a threat to its existence. It may even be contested through public interest litigation by professionals or social activists. This article refers even to the UGC's Second Review Committee Report on Social Work Education, 1980. Contradictions abound in this article. This Association, therefore, needs to clarify its position for all concerned. In fact, all professional work (even laboratory work) is individualized before it reaches the stage of trial, validation and application. This is the core of social work. During Corona pandemic, the interested professionals, lay, donors, scouts and guides, NSS, institutes of mental health and medical sciences, multiple administrative departments, support groups i.e. Self-Help Groups, Mahila Mandals/Panchayats etc. are being roped in to contain the infection. The WHO has defined health broadly in terms of physical, mental and social (even spiritual) well-being. It would therefore be better to trace the evolution of psychiatric social work retrospectively through the background papers of the last 50 years from the pages of the Souvenirs. The Corona pandemic has only broadened the field of social work practice.

FIELD, FIELD PRACTICE AND FIELDWORK

Field practice encompasses both the traditional and new areas as indicated in the Introduction. The reason why I wish to make the distinction between the three terms is important because, from a 'social' point of view, they are understood differently. The field is an imagined or proven area of practice chosen by a profession to apply its theory into practice and develop and refine its approach to achieve a desirable outcome. Fieldwork however is

interpreted by the institutions of social work education according to their convenience rather than professional rigour. It may range from visits, observation to action, participatory action with specific outcome and review thereof. Day and full-day residential camps, participation in the annual or fortnightly programmes of the NGO's, State/Central Governments and civil society or corporate groups are part of this engagement.

Field practice seeks to validate theory in action and participatory research. It is practice-led to enhance professionalization and integration. It may cover social activism, and even symbolic participation in social movements to achieve goals as defined by the profession. It has been said that definition of social work should be revised every ten years because societal changes are ongoing which make new demands, give rise to sub-fields or disciplines, new perspectives, and approaches to the participation of citizens. In the history of social work, one can see the emergence of charity, its organization, relief work by friendly visitors and caseworkers, group and community workers, settlement movements, neighbourhood houses, welfare policies, laws, and programmes. With the demise of welfare states, the focus has changed now towards citizens, groups, families and society as main actors.

Social work practice implies living social work to serve society rather than to live off society. The dimensions of the field practice are geographical, psychosocial, individual, familial, communal (in the technical sense), economic, and ecological etc. It is to envision, an area for planned immersion, emergence, re-vision, innovation and action. In order to strengthen the learning process, the institutions of social work may experiment with Practice sabbaticals either alone by faculty, student-faculty or faculty-NGO-students. Several perspectives may be adopted through the process of reflection. i.e. human rights, social justice, developmental, curative, preventive, rehabilitative, eclectic, solution-finding, and ecological. In The Times of India (February 26, 2020) there is a report on a proposed partnership between India and the USA on mental health where social work can play an effective role to enable and empower people by adopting an interprofessional and interdisciplinary approach.

The global upheaval caused by the Corona Pandemic cannot be dealt with by any field of specialization in social work. The WHO has sounded an alarm about its further spread. States are re-clamping partial or full lockdowns. If social work does not join to make a difference, people will anyway find ways to survive. It is estimated that 80% mentally ill do not seek treatment. Why? The question leads to why social work, and for that matter, any allied profession exists then? This is indeed a challenge for social work. Will social casework through the process of individualization remain unconcerned? Has this pandemic only a psychiatric dimension? Do clinical Psychology and Counselling have no role? In my view, any seeking, receiving or providing of service through personal attention i.e. individualization, is a rudimentary form of social casework to help people to help them themselves.

LATEST PUBLICATIONS ON SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Four books have been published during 2019-20 which are relevant in the discussion on social work practice. Fifty educators have shared their experiences. Ratna Verma in Manan (2019) has recounted her experience of working in different organisations or situations, including Child Guidance Clinics, and Resident Welfare Association. Her contribution in such fields as counselling, single motherhood, rehabilitation, suicide prevention, family court, domestic violence, consultant to Jawahar Lal Nehru University to run a diploma course on

counselling, consultancy to State Welfare Advisory Board, National and State Commissions for Women, etc. Other contributors have shared their experiences from diverse fields which are still relevant. Field practice in Social Work in Verma's work includes spirituality also.

Roshni Nair, et al has emphasized social development, human rights, universalized and contextualized social work practice. Vishnu Mohan Das, et, al have highlighted rights-based, evidence-based practice, and network analysis. But it is more oriented to instruction than practice.

Murli Desai et al (2020) have followed the life journey approach. Sixteen social work educators have recounted their engagement in social work practice. Their journey covers childhood, professional education, practice, research, pre and post-retirement engagements and so on. These include diverse areas as establishing schools in slums, concurrent fieldwork as block fieldwork, psychological development centre, HIV-AIDS, T.B, camps for Juvenile delinquents, and mentally ill, schools for children in the orthopaedic ward, field action projects, leprosy eradication work, sponsorship, child labour, slums, transgender work, Narmada Bachao Andolan, youth movement, migrants, adoption and foster care, peace work, dowery related violence, Anganwadis, relief camps, family social work, disaster management, rape survivors and so on. An innovative form of social work practice is more evident in this book and Manan than the other two. It will be interesting to examine how social, mental (psychiatric), economic and ecological aspects are interlinked and inclusive, rather than isolated. Social casework, therefore, has much to do rather than 'nothing' in psychiatric social work practice. Both institutional, and non-institutional domains are inter-disciplinary. But there is more emphasis on procedure and instruction in the two publications than on practice which is striking in the work of Ratna Verma and Murli Desai.

In the context of corona pandemic, isolation, quarantine, shelters, the addition of wards, community tracing, blood and plasma donation, use of masks, physical distancing, closures and unblocking, sanitization, suicide, evasions, migration, joblessness, depression, etc. show the need for social intervention and the limitations of epidemiology, serology, medicine and psychiatry. The importance and use of social work need to be re-examined for containment along with co-morbidities and variance in data etc. during corona emergency. New addictions like narcissism, WhatsApp, selfies, Facebook, and porn etc. are as much social as pathological.

SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Social change is ubiquitous and gives rise to new needs. This is why occupations develop into professions which are born, grow, differentiate and decline. Therefore they have to prove their relevance. Inequities also persist and call for global, state and citizen's action. Inequalities take different forms. For example, economic becomes social, infotech-digital and developmental. The Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the United Nations provide a framework to build an equitable global society. Professions must contribute through their knowledge and experience to achieve these goals for building an equal, just, and secure world for people, planet and posterity. These are to be achieved through global partnership. In the context of social work and mental health, poverty, hunger, inequality, disease, inequity, water security and climate change may be treated as stressors to be dealt with through local and global action. First eight goals can be grouped as human rights and the rest as ecological or environmental rights. These encompass all the disciplines and professions and their special

fields. As far as social sciences are concerned, all these stressors are fields of intervention along with the concerned state departments, NGO's, corporates, and citizen groups. A new and holistic approach is called for because no entity can achieve them alone. The time frame for the achievement of these goals is fifteen years. The NITI Ayog has published at least two Status Reports covering the different sectors. There is therefore a need to establish liaison with them. Each human service profession should also bring out their own status reports along with their engagements and outcome. It may be noted that we have entered the phase of de-globalization the impact of which needs to be assessed in order to reorient their action by the concerned professions.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As far as social work is concerned, these goals provide a blueprint for innovative practice by imagining, exploring, and conceptualizing new fields for action, Inter-professional practice will benefit all. Practice retreats or sabbaticals may be used for inter-professional updates. Social work practice thus is not a subject to write only books or pass an examination; it is a change in feeling, thinking and behaviour, it is a living experience and a merger of the head, heart and action; and development of an integrated self to serve society. It is a change in lifestyle to change those of others by removing blockages for effective social functioning, social enrichment and social empowerment is a change in perspective which spurs creativity and innovation through citizen participation. During the International Year of Family (1994) celebration, the UN brought out nineteen papers which open up new dimensions for practice. So is the case with other Celebrations organised by the UN on different themes. They may be used as guidelines for practice as also other reports of the United Nations along with Country reports. They will help to carve out new areas for professional intervention.

Corona has defied all specialisms. Therefore "casework has nothing to do" is an absolutist view. Can it not do even referral to mental health institutions or psychiatric social work departments? Human service professions address human needs and distress and ameliorate them to enhance social development and bring about a desirable change in the human condition. Professional practice, social work included, is determined by needs. Therefore it should shift where the need is most. Inter-professional, collaboration can strengthen social resources for a larger benefit. Corona is the latest example. During floods, famines or droughts, cyclones and earthquakes, evacuation and resettlements leading to rehabilitation, normalcy, peace and security all the professions join handset different stages. A reductionist view has been rejected a long time ago. Changing needs, the intensity of distress, concentration of services, level of infrastructure, degree of people's participation, availability of social and economic resources, blending of people's perception with those of professions demand differential practice and even if a uniform policy programme and law: exist for the urban, rural, hilly, tribal and coastal area, they call for differential and innovative approach. These factors impact social work practice to which is ever-changing according to the context, gravity of the situation and emerging challenges and opportunities. Seizure of opportunities will strengthen people and professions. Change in perspective guides practice. Therefore making a list of practice areas is futile. Needs determine the form, breadth, depth, and dynamics of practice by focussing on people fist and professions latter. Engagement with social, political, Judicial, and administrative entities at all levels is part of the practice.

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