

## Who is a Psychiatric Social Worker anyway? A burning debate in India

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### ABSTRACT

The Mental Healthcare Act 2017 defined various mental health professional which including "Psychiatric Social Worker" which hasten an ongoing debate on the qualification of a Psychiatric Social Worker. This write up will critically discuss some of the issues related to this debate. Since it is deemed necessary to have an open and inclusive perspective for the profession to practice efficiently and effectively in a very competitive contemporary era; where many other disciplines are competing not only to excel in the field practice but also on the ground of grabbing opportunities like employment, getting prominence, having policies in their favour, consuming maximum share of available resources and getting remuneration other.

**Keywords:** Psychiatric social work, India, Mental Health Act

### BACKGROUND

This a golden jubilee year for the department of psychiatric social worker at Central Institute of Psychiatry, last year the department of psychiatric social worker at National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Science completed 50 years. Psychiatric Social Work (PSW) teaching has completed seven decades in India which was started with a master degree with a specialization in medical and psychiatric social work at Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai in 1948 followed by in various places.<sup>[1]</sup> Long-standing in the field of mental health is pride and privilege for the PSW as a profession and practising professional in India but the Mental Healthcare Act 2017 (MHA) brought a new debate by defining psychiatric social worker.

#### Psychiatric social worker defined in MHA

As per the Mental Healthcare Act 2017<sup>[1]</sup> "psychiatric social worker means a person having a post-graduate degree in Social Work and a Master of Philosophy in Psychiatric Social Work obtained after completion of a full-time course of two years which

includes supervised clinical training from any University recognised by the University Grants Commission established under the University Grants Commission Act, 1956 or such recognised qualifications, as may be prescribed" most of the people are debating about the initial part of this definition but totally ignorant about the last part of the definition " ... the University Grants Commission Act, 1956 or such recognised qualifications, as may be prescribed".

Here 'recognised qualifications' can be defined as Master/postgraduate degree in Sociology or Psychology or Social/Medical Anthology obviously keeping in view of the current practice in the field. Since the inception to till the current academic year i.e. 2016-17 the eligibility criteria for taking admission in Master of Philosophy in Psychiatric Social Work (PSW) course was master of arts in either Sociology or Social Work in many pioneer institutions like Central Institute of Psychiatry (CIP), Ranchi, Ranchi Institute of Neuro-Psychiatry & Allied

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Sciences (RINPAS), Ranchi and various upcoming intuitions where this course was started under centre of excellence scheme<sup>[3]</sup> like Institute of Psychiatry, Kolkata, Government Medical College and Hospital, Chandigarh, Pt. B.D. Sharma, PGIMS, Rohtak, Mental Health Institute, Cuttack, Gwalior Mansik Arogyashala etc. few private institutions like JSS Medical College, Mysore. So, substantially a good number of Psychiatric Social Workers are having a master degree in Sociology with a Master of Philosophy in Psychiatric Social Work. Initially at National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Science also master degree in Psychology was an eligibility criteria for taking admission in Master of Philosophy in Psychiatric Social Work and in various other places as enlisted Psychology was considered; Social/Medical Anthology and some other disciplines were also considered in someplace.

### **The ground reality in India**

All debate is about 'post-graduate degree' there is no confusion/debate about "...Master of Philosophy in Psychiatric Social Work obtained after completion of a full-time course of two years which includes supervised clinical training..." though profession without M. Phil PSW degree is serving the field and even in this year, new recruitment made for teaching faculty position which is overlooked. It will be unethical to name the institution or the recruiting agencies; there were unsuccessful attempts to recruit people with M.Phil PSW qualification.

Various schools of social work across the country conducting Master of Social Work or Master of Arts in Social Work but unfortunately even after two-year full time or part-time course they are not counted as a mental health professional; still they need two more years of specialized training in mental health and need to undertake Master of Philosophy in Psychiatric Social Work (M.Phil. PSW) course which was offered in just a few institutions until very recently.<sup>[3]</sup> Though, a substantial number of people working as a psychiatric social worker are not having only a master degree in Social Work no and M.Phil. PSW similarly a substantial number of people working as a psychiatric social worker is not having master degree in Social Work but in other disciplines e.g.

Sociology, Psychology and sometimes totally unrelated subjects like nursing and any other social sciences.

One can take an enquiry that, why and how this discrepancy in practice with regards to the eligibility criteria for taking admission in M.Phil PSW? Now, there is a good number of institutions running MSW so it's an obvious question that why still the same practice should continue? Obviously, there could be various reasons such as:

- Master of Social Work (MSW) is not available in various states even now so those who run the course need students. Here the point to be considered is all most all Government institutions central and state both.
- Psychiatric Social Work is considered an applied part of Sociology and larger part of theory and knowledge base is from Sociology and Psychology so it is considered. Many of those who are in the field realize that PSW having such background are doing good in the practice. Various eminent faculties have contributed significantly to the PSW field and still various professionals (Psychiatric Social Workers) as a clinician (PSW) and faculties in the field of mental health/mental hospitals/ general hospitals psychiatric units both in government and Non-government Sectors.
- Further, if we look into the current structure of higher education in India one can find out that for getting higher degree in any subject one have to take the same subject in the intermediate (+2) level and compile it with good marks and based on that they can that subject in degree or graduation as an Honors or major subject and those who cleared honours or major with minimum 55% are eligible for admission in master degree. For example, if anyone wants to make career in Clinical psychology he must decide at +2 and must keep Psychology as a subject and if he gets good marks will get a chance to study Psychology Honours and on successful completion of it will allow him to join master of Psychology and then only he will be eligible for M.Phil in Clinical Psychology. The more or less same pattern is followed is other disciplines. Exceptions are there like masters in women studies,

disability studies, human right etc. where eligibility for admission is a bachelor degree in Sociology and many other subjects since it's considered a related discipline and also because bachelor degree courses are not available in the majority of the universities. One more example we can bring here is a master in Business Administration (MBA) for which eligibility for admission is a bachelor degree in any subject. Here the logic is – its a course which gives certain skills to practice anyone having the minimum education can pursue it and also because bachelor degree courses are not available in the majority of the universities. Two year period of training is considered sufficient enough to learn and master minimum skills and expectancies to practice in the field.

We can compare M.Phil PSW course with these examples. If one can pursue a master degree in Social Work without having any bachelor degree in Social Work or pursue a bachelor degree without studying social work at +2 level then what is the issue in pursuing M.Phil PSW without MSW and having masters in Sociology or Psychology or any such subjects.

Still, MSW is not available in few states like Jharkhand and a bachelor degree in social work is limited to very few institutions and there is no social work in +2 level. Those who are having MSW are against including people with sociology background and those who are not having are pro Sociology which illogical and based on prejudices.

- Now MSW is available in distance mode and must be considered equivalent to MSW with regular mode as per the University Grant Commission of India and other regulatory bodies but there are lots of debate about the quality of skills and expectancies acquired in distance mode of professional courses. Now they are eligible to pursue M.Phil. PSW. So, here again, question aired why not Sociology and Psychology.

There are no doubts if one person has more year of education in any subject will have better skills and expectancies than who is having less but it must be seen in view of the above mention points.

And what about the inter-disciplinary studies and learning> if we confined our self in the

conventional educational pattern how it will become into the existence? There is a number of examples where the pioneer of discipline is not having the formal qualification on the same discipline.

### Who is a psychiatric social worker anyway?

Again, the answer could not be single and debate can be on various issues:

- Educational qualification vs. skills and expectancies
- Contribution vs. claim
- model vs. reality orientation
- Need of an hour vs. dream to excel in future

Thus, "psychiatric social worker means a person having a post-graduate degree in Social Work or Sociology/Psychology and a Master of Philosophy in Psychiatric Social Work obtained after completion of a full-time course of two years which includes supervised clinical training from any University recognised by the University Grants Commission established under the University Grants Commission Act, 1956 post-graduate degree in Social Work or Sociology/Psychology is only applicable anyone enrolled before enactment of the MHA 2017 or such recognised qualifications, as may be prescribed".

Logically any law or act cannot be enacted retrospectively so obviously it is not applicable on a person who acquired a post-graduate degree in Sociology or Psychology and subsequently done M.Phil PSW filling eligibility existing criteria by state or central institutions.

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