

A Renewed Face, Imperative For Enhancing The Quality of Social Work Education in India

Ramesh Chandran NS¹

ABSTRACT

Social work education in India requires a significant facelift in the wake of quality erosion which has adversely impacted against professional interests. The very nomenclature “Social Work” in the award of University Degrees, the deficits in practice methods, want of a licensing system, denial of recognizing BSW/MSW/MA (Social Work) as professional courses, and the like are obvious triggering factors that add fuel to the fire. The general public has a misconstrued version of social work education, having a feeling that the course is too redundant and insignificant to be identified as a discipline for university learning. People by and large take social work as social service like charity, voluntarism or altruism and obviously they ask, what is there to be seriously studied in social work. A simple and psychological approach, rather than complex exercises for building up academic credibility, is to change the coinage from social work to social empowerment in the award of University Degrees, such as BSE – Bachelor of Social Empowerment / MSE – Master of Social Empowerment / MA – Social Empowerment. The art of naming of an academic course reflects the science of phraseology, a factor that should never be compromised in showcasing the productiveness of a profession. A homogenized schooling, envisioning uniformity in theory & practice learning and generation of a databank-based knowledge pool for accessing indigenous information is the next desirable step. Public demand is the litmus test of the effectiveness of social work profession, which cannot be expected to surface impulsively. A concerted effort is necessary on the part of social work pundits to standardize social work education and improve practice strategies whereby benefits reach out to people through and through.

Keywords: Voluntarism, Altruism, Social empowerment, Homogenized schooling

1 N.S.Ramesh Chandran, Assistant Professor, Christ College, Vizhinjam, Thiruvananthapuram

INTRODUCTION

Social work education in India requires a significant facelift in the wake of quality erosion which has adversely impacted against professional interests. The very nomenclature “Social Work” in the award of University Degrees, deficits in practice methods, want of a licensing system under the control of an authenticated agency, denial of recognizing BSW/MSW/MA (Social Work) as professional courses, and the like are obvious triggering factors that add fuel to the fire.

In fact, social work has hardly grown qualitatively in India after 1990s; before that the profession was evolving sequentially, culminating in the evolvement of community organization as a fully developed macro-level method. But somehow the schools of social work and professional organizations, independently or jointly, since then did n’t take the growth forward. Calling a spade a spade, professional organizations which ought to play a key role in addressing placement and credibility issues, conveniently turn a blind eye; rather they seem to focus on popularizing or eulogizing the profession by limiting the activities to barely academic exercises like seminars, webinars, workshops, conferences, congresses, conclaves and so on and so forth, sans serving any concrete output. Had the outcome of these programmes improved educational standards by way of augmenting literature, supplementing indigenous knowledge, strengthening interventions, generating a good knowledge pool or at least creating a visibility hype, such efforts would have become instrumental in upholding academic standards. Sadly, that is not taking place!

It’s a fact that an emerging super power like India intensely needs professional services like counselling, advocacy, reform activities, rehabilitation, liaison, community empowerment, environmental management, meaningful research and such others, for the welfare of people, particularly at a time of frequent disasters and growing social issues like farmer suicides, dowry killings, women atrocities, child abuse, cyber-crimes, value erosion and so forth. Naturally, our country cannot afford to ignore the potential of social work profession in the efforts to address sensitive social problems. It is, therefore, imperative that the University Grants Commission (UGC) should take the initiative of constituting forthwith a committee of experts, senior academics, and practitioners for revamping social work education appropriately.

“Social Work education in India is going through an interregnum crisis. Traditional dominant discourses have become irrelevant and are nearing demise, yet comprehensive progressive alternative discourses are still to acquire any concrete content. In such a process, an understanding is dawning among many critical social work educators, that it is only in

countering worldview of ‘dominants’, generally accepted as the norm in social work education, will the opportunity of developing alternative liberatory discourses and concomitant practice paradigms be possible” (Bodhi S.R, 2011).

COINAGE OF SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT IN PLACE OF SOCIAL WORK

The stark reality is that Social Work as a profession fails to earn an impressive or a serious perception like any other academic discipline, owing to its semblance to social service. Not only the general public, but also the academic fraternity for that matter, do have a misconstrued version of social work education, having a feeling that the course is too redundant and insignificant to be identified as a discipline for university learning. People by and large take social work as social service like charity, voluntarism or altruism and obviously they ask, what is there to be seriously studied in social work. The bottom line is that even career gurus are ignorant of the academic knowledge, practice strategies, methodical training, rigorous internship, skill development and professional orientation, contemplated in curriculum; all because of the title “social work”, which is the fact of the matter. Ever since the induction of regular BSW in the affiliated Colleges of the University of Kerala, a large number of students from other disciplines, vie with each other to opt for open course in social work (a curricular requirement, with a view to giving students from other programmes an opportunity to study a different course) on the presumption that the course is a hotchpotch of frivolous elements, and hence too easy to get through without any efforts. These kinds of misunderstandings and misgivings do inflict fatal damage on social work education, quintessential to be addressed convincingly. A simple and psychological approach, rather than complex exercises for building up academic credibility, is to change the coinage from social work to social empowerment in the award of University Degrees, such as BSE – Bachelor of Social Empowerment / MSE – Master of Social Empowerment / MA – Social Empowerment. Needless to say, the said move will give a modern look to the profession for earning a lot of distinction and public demand. The art of naming an academic programme reflects the science of phraseology, a strong factor that should never be compromised in showcasing the productiveness of a profession, howsoever noble it is. Figure 1 presents an image of the transformation expected from name change (Advantages) and how it outweighs the current adverse growth (Disadvantages).

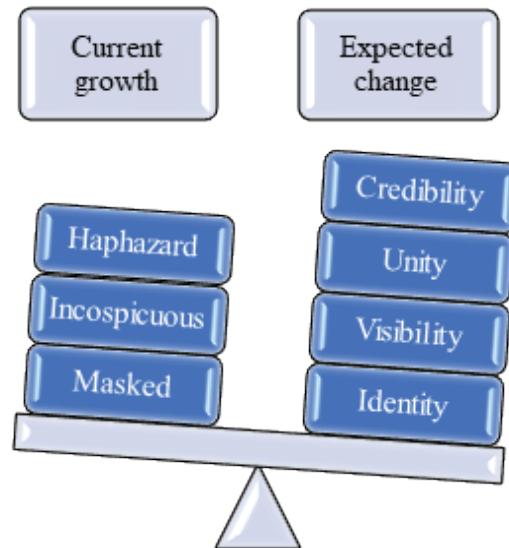


Figure 1 : Advantages outweighing disadvantages due to name change

“A united social work force is one that is powerful. And developing a professional identity is a key part of that coming together. By having a clear identity that is easy to get across to potential students, new recruits and the wider world, social work as an industry could start to turn the corner and become something people aspire to.

By showcasing the values – both professional and personal – that people in the sector already have, more people will start to recognise those values within themselves” (System C, 2023).

REORGANIZE AND REBRAND THE CURRICULUM

Social work like any other profession is not free from the onslaught of changes, which means, it has to discern a new design, direction, disposition and development for pedagogical revision. We need to bear in mind that educational standards are ever uncompromising because they set a benchmark for a profession. Improved versions of courses and training will stand out as being more important than conventional curricular components by virtue of the fact that they are capable of maintaining a cutting edge in sophisticated practice strategies. Figure 2 projects some of the key elements which constitute the quintessence of contemporary social work practice.

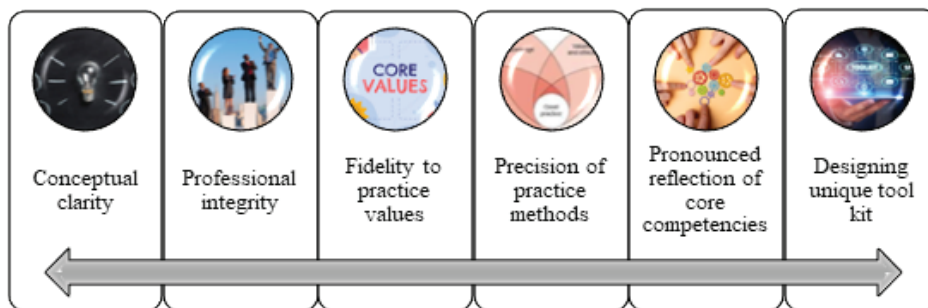


Figure 2 : Renewed face for curriculum

Social work as a practise-based profession, has the freedom to augment knowledge-base, by incorporating more and more domains to deliver multiple benefits to all sections of people. But outcomes become receptive to clients only if academic orientation is empowered to develop successful professionals which demand reorganizing curriculum, practice learning, skill development and course outcomes judiciously and pragmatically.

Conceptual clarity

The foundations of social work education become reinforced only if conceptual dimensions of basic terminologies like social work, social welfare, social advocacy, empowerment, client, client system, clientele, and the like are perfectly comprehended. Quite often, even students who take the final exams, grope in the dark for real insights into the fundamental concepts, indicative of the flaw in curriculum design. These deficits, seemingly trivial, are capable of inflicting huge damage on social work education, profession and practice.

Professional integrity

The visibility of social work as a profession depends on the integrity, excellence and impact of practice, which contemplates six elements, forming a configuration, portrayed in Figure 3.



Figure: 3 : Configuration of professional excellence

Fidelity to practice values

“The topic of fidelity and adaptations of EBIs is increasingly in focus in social work studies, particularly studies targeting parental training programmes” (Helena Strehlenert, Emma Hedberg Rundgren, My Sjunnestrand, Henna Hasson, 2024). Social workers should be clear about practice boundaries, pivotal in evidence-based interventions. Clarity, specificity, holistic perspectives and outcome constitute the bedrock of EBIs.

Precision of practice methods

Precision of practice methods rests on the kind of outcome generated; in other words, the SMARTER (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound, Evaluate, Re-adjust) the outcome, the greater reliability of the interventions at micro, mezzo and macro levels. “Re-adjusting doesn’t mean throw away the goals and get new ones, it’s a means to an end, a way of getting around your problems” (Garvey Joseph, 2019).

Pronounced reflection of core competencies

“When competence is conceptualized via the integrated approach in terms of knowledge, abilities, skills and attitudes displayed in the context of realistic professional tasks, the scope for assisting educational providers is greatly enhanced. Rather than recommending the adoption of narrow forms of competency-based training, the integrated approach, by also emphasizing requisite knowledge, abilities, skills and attitudes, offers powerful guidance for improvement of traditional courses in respect of content, teaching strategies and assessment procedures” (Hager Paul & Gonczi Andrew, 2009). What is needed is the exploration of various permutations and combinations of knowledge, abilities, skills, talents and attitudes for making the best use of core competencies. In social work practice what matters eventually is how core competencies are translated into tangible action.

Designing unique toolkit

An effective approach to step up practice strategies is to devise a unique tool kit, imperative for employing social work methods. Table 1 elucidates an appropriate tool kit that helps practitioners pursue evidence-based interventions.

Table: 1 : Tool kit

Sl. No	Variables	Yardstick	Impact
1.	Assessment	Determining factor	Clear findings
2.	Data mobilization	Digital gadgetry	Creation of digital database
3.	Documentation	Electronic paraphernalia	Easily retrievable
4.	Outcome	SMARTER goals	Net result discernible
5.	Evaluation	Norms	Whether objectives have been achieved

Tools like SPARK (Self-reflection Prevention Assessment Resilience Kindness) and SOAP (Subjective Objective Assessment Plan) may be included in skill development programmes for fruitful interventions. “The SPARK tool is a self-reflective evaluation tool for practitioners working in child protection, supporting them to develop a tailored self-care plan. It aims to prevent excessive stress and burnout by encouraging practitioners to reflect on distinct areas in their personal and professional lives. Using evidence-informed prompts, practitioners can assess, what, if any, changes are necessary to improve their welfare. This tool aims to build personal resilience in practitioners as an ongoing process” (Burns Kenneth, 2018).

“In social work, SOAP notes are essential for recording client sessions, assessing progress, and strategizing future interventions. They provide a clear and concise record, ensuring consistent client care and effective communication among care teams” (TextExpander, 2024)

CONSTRUCTION OF A DATABANK-BASED KNOWLEDGE POOL FOR HOMOGENIZED SCHOOLING

A social work portal under the control of senior academics, experts, veteran practitioners, experienced social work administrators and university educators, formed at national level is of vital importance today. Portal access would be able to provide students and social work educators from any part of our country with appropriate literature, a facility now unavailable which adversely affects quality education. Figure 4 demonstrates an image of homogenized schooling which may be insisted for ensuring unrelenting standards.

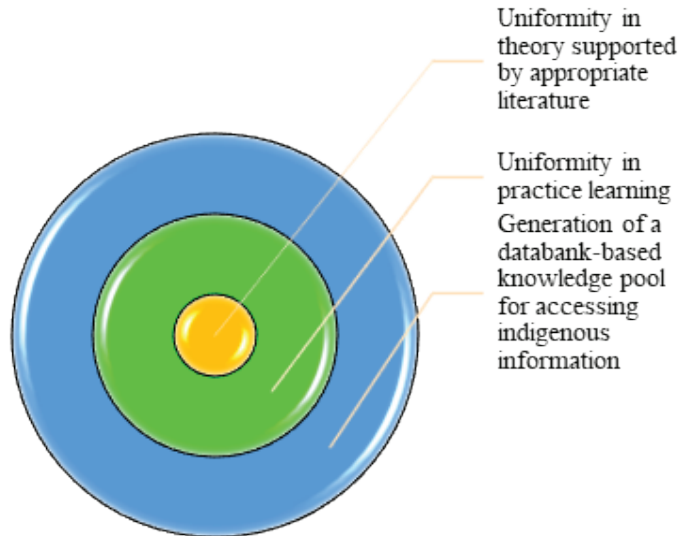


Figure: 4 : Homogenized schooling

“Social workers require new levels of understanding and new models of practice if they are to contribute effectively toward the resolution of social problems that are rooted in worldwide social, political, and economic realities. At a minimum these new models of practice must reflect an understanding of the transnational nature of the social problems that bring clients, client groups, and other constituencies to the attention of human service workers” (Jacob Jincy, 2016).

CONCLUSION

Public demand is the litmus test of the effectiveness of a practice-based profession like social work, which cannot be expected to surface impulsively. A concerted effort is necessary on the part of academics, organizations, political parties, government and community, for developing social work into an impeccable profession whereby benefits reach out to people through and through. All the stakeholders - clients, practitioners, NGOs, beneficiaries, students and educators - have the responsibility to sound a clarion call for accentuating the prominence of the profession. There is still a long way to go for attaining the goal. Here, a few questions need to be answered. Who will set the agenda? Who will take the leadership, commitment, and persuasive action? Who will coordinate the interests of stakeholders? Who will make our voice heard at the appropriate forum? Who will bring the professional bodies and academic fraternity under the umbrella of a national agency to strategize categorical steps for implementation of revised policies? It's up to social work pundits and veteran practitioners to act upon the deteriorating context of the profession; but continuing the current *modus operandi*,

under the pretext of bettering social work education, is something like a cacophony of deafening alarm bells signifying nothing.

REFERENCES

- Bodhi S.R (2011), Professional Social Work Education in India- A Critical View from the Periphery, *Indian Journal of Social Work*, 72(2):289-300, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/363212426_Professional_Social_Work_Education_in_India_A_Critical_View_from_the_Periphery
- Burns Kenneth (2018), SPARK: A Self-Care Tool for Professionals Working in Child Protection, Linked in
- Garvey Joseph (2019), It Is Time for SMARTER Goals Setting, Blog . Performance Management, PeopleGoal, <https://www.peoplegoal.com/blog/smarter-goals-setting>
- Hager Paul & Gonczi Andrew (2009), What is competence?, *ResearchGate*, July 200918(1):15-18, DOI:10.3109/01421599609040255, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/232061493_What_is_competence
- Helena Strehlenert, Emma Hedberg Rundgren, My Sjunnestrand, Henna Hasson, (2024), Fidelity to and Adaptation of Evidence-based Interventions in the Social Work Literature: A Scoping Review, *The British Journal of Social Work*, Volume 54, Issue 3, April 2024, Pages 1356–1376, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcad170>
- Jacob Jincy (2016), Current Prospects of Social Work in India and Abroad, *International Journal of Current Research and Modern Education (IJCRME)*, Volume I, Issue I, 2016, www.rdmodernresearch.com
- System C (2023), Professional Identity of Social Work: What is it and Why is it Important?, <https://www.systemc.com/resource-hub/blogs/professional-identity-of-social-work-what-is-it-and-why-is-it-important/>
- TextExpander (2024), SOAP Notes for Social Workers: Template and Examples, <https://textexpander.com/>