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Envisioning a professional identity: charting pathways through social work education in India

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This paper presents an overview of social work as a profession in India, tracing its historical beginnings, philosophical base, dominant practice perspectives, its relevance in the country's current socioeconomic and politico-cultural context and its impact on emerging trends in global practice. It also aims to stimulate discussion on the possible ways through which Social Work education can make significant contributions in the wake of the changing trends in state responsibility towards the poor and marginalised and in doing so carve its professional identity in order to gain its rightful status in Indian society.

Historical beginnings

The profession of Social Work in India marked its platinum jubilee in the year 2012. Seventy-five years and more have been critical in the establishment of the profession as an independent helping profession, interdisciplinary in nature and based on a foundation of traditional Social Work methods and skills, values and ethics built around humanitarian principles with a combination of several religio-cultural philosophies rich to the nation. The Western legacy of professionalisation of Social Work continues in several developing countries that have adopted an American–Eurocentric model. The initiation of Social Work education in India was based on Western thought and pedagogy.

Professionalisation of Social Work began with practice in Mumbai (erstwhile Bombay) in 1936 under the leadership of Sir Clifford Manshardt, an American missionary, at the Nagpada Neighbourhood House (settlement house for family welfare). He became the founder-director of the Sir Dorabji Tata Graduate School of Social Work which began with a Diploma in Social Service Administration. In 1964, the School became the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (a Deemed University) which offered a Master of Arts Degree in Social Work.

In the 1950s and 1960s several schools of Social Work started in other parts of the country with faculty who completed doctoral studies in the US. This was a major factor, particularly for the growth of postgraduate degrees in Social Work with specialisations in clinical and non-clinical Social Work. Social Work educators have written extensively on

the urgent need to indigenise the curriculum. Writings of Gore (1965), Dasgupta (1968), Banerjee (1972), Desai (1985), Siddique (1987), Desai (2004), Saldanha (2008) and recently by Bodhi (2011) have strongly criticised the Western models and made emphatic deliberations on the need for a newer and relevant curriculum design for Social Work practice in India.

It was in the 1970s also that the concept of integrated methods and integrated social work practice entered the curricula of several Social Work programs across the country. This led to a greater emphasis on the interface between macro and micro practice using the systems framework for social change (Pincus and Minahan 1973). Studies reveal the persistence of American influence over the curriculum and issues relating to adapting Western Social Work values to the Indian culture (Nagpaul 1993; Mandal 1989; Srivastava 1999). When professional Social Work was 'imported' to India from the West, it was squeezed into the social fabric and forced to deal with several local factors. Thus, the experience of professional Social Workers is complex and requires a constant dance between different systems and cultural ideologies (Kuruvilla 2005).

Philosophical base of social work

Given India's diverse socioeconomic and politico-cultural milieu, it is no easy task in identifying a single philosophical base for the profession's existence. As discussed earlier, the context in which Social Work education emerged in India drew heavily on the American curricula given its historical beginnings of partnership between the Tata Trust and the US Education Technical Mission with the Council of Social Work of America (Gore & Gore 1977). In retrospect, the dependence on Western ideologies to a large extent deferred the indigenisation processes of the profession, perpetuating rigid curriculum structures which did not evince sufficient credibility, support and recognition from entities that govern the country's development or education. However, the arduous journey towards greater integration of indigenous knowledge and practice frameworks continues.

Social service in India stems from deep-rooted religious beliefs. It existed in the form of almsgiving and charity to the poor and needy, creation of shelters and kitchens, and institutions for orphans and elderly, the destitute, and beggars. Philosophies of welfare and humanitarianism that arose from deep-rooted religious beliefs and practices of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Islam, Christianity and indigenous beliefs were at some point the driving forces behind education and practice of Social Work in India. Kulkarni asserted that the Indian model is indigenous and the aberrations, if any, are minor (Kulkarni 1993). A few schools integrated India's distinguished lineage in the freedom movement and adopted the thinking of world renowned philosophers such as Gandhi, Swami Vivekananda and Tagore in their curriculum (Kumar 1998). Yet some other schools emphasised the value of human rights, empowerment and social justice as their core values in their curriculum.

Increasingly, the trend is that missions of schools are influenced by their affiliations and political interests of governing members and trustees or on faith and missionary enthusiasm. Today there are several central, state, private and deemed universities with: departments/faculty/schools of social work. Departments of social work are located in state or national health and mental health academic institutions, and social work courses are taught in social science departments in a state or central university. These programs claim to be secular in their curriculum development and teaching approaches. There are

also Social Work degree programs offered by faith-based 'minority-labelled' institutions (Report of the Consultation on National Network of Schools of Social Work for Quality Enhancement of Social Work Education in India 2012).

Dominant perspectives on education and practice

Perspectives for practice have changed with the changing economic and political developments in the country. From charity and reform it gradually moved to welfare and subsequently to development and more recently to human rights and social justice. However, this has not been observed as a linear progress; rather, all forms of practice perspectives are known to exist simultaneously.

A historic meeting in 1964 of professional Social Workers with Gandhian workers led to the realisation that while Gandhian workers accepted the need for education and training, professionals recognised that Social Work needed to move beyond ameliorative work to social action so as to remedy the roots of social malaise and to change the social order (Dasgupta 1967 cited in Desai and Narayan 1998, 537, 538). As observed by Gore and Gore (1977, 265–66), curative Social Work through casework dominated in the Social Work programs (cited in Mandal 1995). It de-emphasised the needs of social and economic development, promotion of preventive services and social action – the prime need of the country in the post-independence era.

Social Action, Social Policy and Social Administration as important courses were emphasised in the Review Committee Report of the Second University Grants Commission (Mandal 1995, 539). These areas were identified in the National Curricular Review in 1988–1990 undertaken by the University Grants Commission. According to Pathak and Siddigui (from Mandal 1995, 539) several educators have observed that Social Work education has not pursued in practice what it has professed (Pathak 1980; Siddiqui 1984 cited in Mandal 1995, 539). However, field-based practice as a response to emerging issues in health education, women's rights, reproductive and sexual health, HIV/AIDS, child rights, etc. has moved ahead with the times. This movement is seen in the shift from a clinical-based remedial approach to a rights-based approach, more concerted use of empowerment methodologies, social action and involvement in policy efforts.

At the turn of the 20th century, labour welfare persisted as a social work specialisation in the form of human resource management, although it lost its 'Welfare and Social Work' practice features. The focus continues to be on industry and the organised sector in quite a few schools that offer the specialisation. More recently the issue has been brought to the fore for debate but the dichotomy of whether it falls in the purview of social work education and practice in India still looms large, being contested in several conferences and seminars.

Global influences in India

Similar to other nations, particularly in the global South, globalisation has posed tremendous challenges for the profession with its accompaniment of privatisation and neoliberalisation, bringing both benefits and negative effects to people. Those who are on the fringes of Indian society – the rural and urban poor, the homeless, malnourished children and women, dalits (lower castes), tribals and sexual minorities – are bearing the brunt of some of the negative fall-out of the rapidly increasing emphasis on economic growth and focus

on foreign direct investment. Studies show lower rates in development indicators among the marginalised sections, the most economically and socially backward populations in India. Discrimination on the basis of caste, class, gender, age, religion, disability and sexual orientation are issues which need attention both from the global to the local context.

Economic growth and development continues to be the priority of the Indian polity. Natural resources are exploited and people are being ousted from their roots. There are social movements against expansion of industries like mining for steel or coal, hydropower or nuclear power projects that are neither environment friendly nor people friendly. 'Contemporary Social Work issues in India cannot be addressed without a shift to a more politically aware definition of the profession, guiding both national and international goals for Social Work. Standards that support equity and human rights as well as focusing on adjustment are necessary to address these issues in the global context' (Alphonse et al. 2008).

In the globalised world, protecting the ecosystem is not just the responsibility of a single country but is an international political issue. Ecological social work or social work on environmental issues and environmental justice including climate change are emerging as critical areas for curriculum and practice in India. New epidemics are appearing while old ones are re-emerging. According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS), 43% of India's children remain underweight and an estimated 88% between six and 24 months are anaemic. More recently mobility has become a major issue for development and health workers.

Use of digital communication and social media has shrunk the world and has opened up many avenues for sharing of resources, campaigning on common fronts, and attracting support from people around the globe on several issues. With the opening up of the Indian Government towards foreign universities setting up campuses in India, without an Indian partner, the impact on higher education in India will necessarily go through a sea change in its intake of students, its curricular design and its quality of output. This phenomenon will also impact upon social work education in the country, a cause for reflection and action.

Fortunately, despite the pressures to give in to globalisation demands, Social Work has maintained a fair balance, and continues to support the development of health and education as human rights (as seen in the National Rural Health Mission and the Right to Education Bill). Working with the State means also having to deal with the issues of poor governance of welfare programs where the allocated resources are not reaching the poorest of the poor in both the urban and rural areas. The big challenge is how education of Social Work should be positioning itself in India given the strong global influences.

Shift from problem perspective to development perspective

A very significant paradigm shift in social work curriculum was the move from a 'social problem perspective' to a 'developmental perspective' in the analysis of social issues. This was greatly influenced by the World Summit on Social Development in 1995 in Copenhagen that led to the United Nations focusing on key social development themes. Social work educators were thus influenced to integrate development concerns and issues in the curriculum. This perspective was also integrated in the National Social Work Curriculum (University Grants Commission 2001). Since the turn of the century, social work teachers have been joining hands with human rights groups to protect the rights of children, women, prisoners, activists, etc. Social work colleges in India too are gradually incorpo-

rating the human rights perspective in their curriculum, pioneering programs and policy change to protect the rights of the child, the girl child, women, and the right to education, health and livelihood. This is in keeping with the United Nations Human Development Reports (United Nations Development Programme 2007 and 2009) adopted by the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW).

The education of social work in several institutions by and large complies with the requirements of their respective university standards. The absence of a body that would govern social work education and practice in the country seems to be a big setback in the development of the profession in the country. However, a few institutions incorporate the suggestions made in the Global Standards.

Though international social work is not a dominant practice perspective, there is a growing trend towards teaching international social work. The Indian Government is encouraging universities to open their doors to international students, and compete in the global market. More departments and schools are thus linking with international social work programs through teacher and faculty exchanges and online courses. 'International Social Work' is gradually becoming a popular course among Indian students, especially those who vie for higher studies abroad. Programs abroad are also seeking new sites for field placements for their students in developing countries and India is providing ample opportunities for this movement of foreign students coming for short-term or semester internships earning credits in their home university. The government of India permits international students through a Home Ministry providing the opportunity for students to study in India. This also provides an opportunity of creating an international movement of social work alumni around the world to work together on the common cause of reducing inequalities, support for the cause of human rights and social justice for the poor. This freedom to innovate is feasible in universities or colleges with an autonomous status and where legal procedures are less cumbersome.

Nevertheless, efforts to indigenise the curriculum tailored to meet the local needs of the Indian population as well as equip students with the required knowledge on international influences and international practice are on the rise in several schools. There is an attempt at discourse on anti-oppressive practice in the development of dalit and tribal social work. Social work educators in the country are also leading special centres on social exclusion and human rights that conduct research and practice with special reference to minority and oppressed populations.

Local influences on social work pedagogy

The knowledge base for social work education in India is interdisciplinary in nature. For an in-depth understanding of society, human behaviour and societal development, foundation courses span a wide range of disciplines like psychology, sociology, medicine, psychiatry, economics, law, management and administration. Methods courses – Case Work, Group Work, Community Organisation, Social Work Research, Welfare Administration, and Social Policy Analysis and Development – provide the core skills base. History and Philosophy of Social Work, Ideologies and Perspectives, Social Development and Social Problems are covered as essential and core courses.

State influence on social work curriculum

In 1990, the University Grants Commission set up a Curriculum Development Cell for Social Work Education at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences. The 1990 report suggests that while core subjects remain common across social work programs, there are attempts made to tailor the curriculum to regional needs. A unified and holistic approach in the curriculum may not be the answer to solving diverse social challenges. The mission and goals of social work education, that are adopted from the International definitions of the International Association of Schools of Social Work (www.iassw-aiets.org), the International Federation of Social Workers (www.ifsw.org), and the National Accreditation and Assessment Council (www.naac.gov.in), vary in terms of institutional goals, regional challenges, cultural practices, religious emphases, human rights and justice values and a range of other contexts in which schools are established.

All courses are subject to approval of Boards of Studies and Academic Councils appointed by universities and/or the University Grants Commission. In very few instances, departments or schools have experimented with more generic areas of study like micro and macro practice, social welfare and social development. Students are required to select either of the domains. The School of Social Work at Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, offers nine master's level degree programs in social work in nine specified thematic areas prioritising needs emerging from the changing social, economic, political, and cultural scenarios in the country and available expertise (www.tiss.edu).

Fieldwork education comprises several components which are organised across the semesters. The basic framework across most programs is made up of field orientation and observation visits, rural camps, study tours, block placements and concurrent fieldwork under the supervision of a field and faculty supervisor. Government and non-government organisations are identified where students gain a wide exposure to the social realities of the poor and marginalised. They get hands-on experience of working with people at different levels including systems-based interventions, policy and advocacy work.

The major gap is that universities in India fail to recognise the uniqueness of the social work curriculum with its field practice laboratory and view it on similar lines to other departments. This has led to a lack of academic support for fieldwork training which is an exclusive requirement of the profession. Fieldwork gets further diluted in social work courses offered through distance and online programs. Social workers graduate from these courses most often without adequate field supervision.

Due to the increasing emphasis on research and publications, both national and global, social work educators have been encouraged by higher education bodies, such as the University Grants Commission and those Universities supported by central and state governments, to research and publish and demonstrate high quality in areas of research. There is a dearth of provision in creating proactive scholarship among social work academics in India. The burden of performance on the educators increases with the balancing of several tasks simultaneously: teaching, fieldwork supervision, research and writing. Though these are core responsibilities of the social work educator, processes that can enhance and enable better performance need attention.

Continuing faculty development and field engagement

Education and training in the discipline of social work is far more complex in view of its unique nature. To create a cadre of competent professional social workers requires com-

petent teachers and practitioners who together form a pool of educators created from a praxis of reflections on theory and practice. Most social work educators are trained social work professionals who qualify through passing the UGC governed National Eligibility Test or the state governed State Level Eligibility Test (www.ugcnetonline.in) to teach at the college level. Giving priority to past or simultaneous practice experience is always an advantage. They further qualify with an MPhil or PhD in social work. Schools of social work are required to mandatorily employ such qualified personnel in the teaching profession. Faculties are also required to complete certain refresher courses for career advancement.

A major challenge is the lack of faculty development programs or refresher courses tailored specifically for enhancing capacities of educators. Retaining competent faculty is a major challenge owing to the larger sociopolitical, financial and infrastructural constraints that draw them to more fulfilling and greener pastures, even outside the country. The need for a strong body or network of schools that weaves together the diversities in teaching and learning methodologies, and ensures high quality in the education and training patterns in the country, is apparent.

The profession is not governed by an exclusive council or a body that oversees the areas of social work practice. Therefore no rigid or clearly marked boundaries exist in the country. Social work practitioners do not require a licence as would doctors, lawyers, nurses, etc. This has led to several other disciplines entering the domain of social work practice. Educational programs such as Human Rights, Development Studies, Health Management, Human Resource Management, Rural Management, Urban Studies etc. are becoming independent disciplines or professions, which were once an integral part of the domain of social work. One tends to agree with Darvill et al. that:

> in future Social Workers are likely to be employed less in social services and Social Work departments and more in multi-disciplinary and multi-agency settings. In these settings integration of different skills and professional groups is the norm, and this varies according to the requirements of user centered services, greater social inclusion and new ways of working. (Darvill et al. 2001, 4)

The profession is going through the process of re-establishing a national association of social work educators in the country. Educators are spearheading this effort to create a credible body that will monitor and enhance the quality of social work education and practice in India. This effort has taken on a distinct and clear-cut structure in the recent past in the formation of a National Network of Schools of Social Work (Nadkarni & Desai 2012). In a recent consultation, a group of senior educators from the network met at Tata Institute of Social Sciences to launch the Indian Association of Social Work Education (IASWE). This association is expected to chart new pathways for enhancing the competency and visibility of the profession through its educational programs.

Indigenous social work theory and practice

One of the most obvious pathways towards creating an identity for social work in India would be to evoke indigenous theoretical and practice frameworks. With English as the medium of instruction in most schools, the indigenisation of social work is grossly stunted. Students from the vernacular (regional language) medium face difficulties in coping with English as a medium of instruction and expression. Some slim efforts have been made to

develop literature in regional languages. The absence of indigenous literature in practice has led to the poor quality of referencing and preparing home-based and classroom assignments. Nevertheless, India has a wealth of literature and creative writings in regional languages relevant to social work education and practice; such literature can be made available in local languages. This will go a long way in augmenting social work knowledge in the country. 'As far as the Indian context is concerned, there is a growing realisation among contemporary Social Work educators and practitioners alike that there cannot be one overarching indigenous Social Work knowledge base' (Bodhi 2011, 290).

Field action through colleges/schools/departments has been supported as a pedagogical tool to test and evolve indigenous social work practice. These projects that start with micro-level practice become model programs supported by relevant ministries in the government; they influence national programs and policy, serve as learning centres for social work students, paraprofessionals and faculty. Several major initiatives in the country range from work with the most marginalised populations to remedying existing clinical and social systems or creating new ones.

Several indigenous projects are emerging as models to replicate. For example, CHILD-LINE India Foundation (www.childlineindia.org.in), which started as a helpline for street children, has demonstrated the need to reach out to children through the rights-based approach and policy development on child protection. It is today a national scheme fully sponsored by the Ministry of Child and Women Development. Inclusive education for all children through the NGO, 'Pratham' (www.pratham.org), started as a pilot project to attract poor children of preschool age to school, as a collaboration of the College of Social Work in Mumbai and a social entrepreneur. This has become an institutionalised (registered) movement with branches all over the country and abroad. Integrating the concepts of social entrepreneurship with social work, a sustainable partnership in the era of globalisation has been forged.

Social work colleges in some parts of the country have been very sensitive to their local needs and emerging challenges. Indigenous practice models have also been developed in the fields of disaster prevention and response, relief and rehabilitation of displaced persons, HIV/AIDS and new emerging diseases, dalit and tribal social work.

Concerns and challenges

The complex Indian reality

The Indian social reality is a complex and multi-dimensional one. Its social, economic, cultural and political factors capped by its invasive caste, class and gender system call for more careful and deeper analytical understanding of India's reality and a social work response that will necessarily have to be multidimensional. 'The high degree of ethnic heterogeneity and dynamic interface of gender-caste-tribe-religion-class reality coupled with the dialectical relationship between the "traditional-modern" and "conservative-progressive" subsumed within an overarching frame of institutionalised exclusion and oppression in the form of caste, is indeed a colossal task to comprehend' (Bodhi 2011, 292).

The current scenario calls for a curriculum that will depart from its traditional trajectory and move towards one that will equip students with liberatory and emancipatory ideologies, theories and practice of social transformation with radical underpinnings that

will respond to the complex Indian social realities. It is in these contexts that social work education will have to take responsibility and work towards gaining its rightful recognition in the complex Indian reality.

Need to reposition human resource management

With increasing focus on the services and manufacturing sector in India, there is today great demand for management skills in business and industry. In this era of an unregulated labour market, there is increasing need for human resource management and skills in project planning and development as well as monitoring and evaluation. The response of social work has been to cater to these capacity-building needs by initiating postgraduate degrees in these areas which have been the territory of management schools. In turn, management schools are also preparing managers and social entrepreneurs for the social sectors.

In the current context where management is the buzzword for any professional whether in business, health, education or social welfare, there is a danger of social work losing its people-centred focus. In the process of over-professionalisation, the compassion and empathy of working with people at the grassroots is replaced by quantitative performance-oriented targets such as the University Grants Commission's Annual Self-Assessment for Performance Based System Indicators and Scores for promotion of teachers (www.ugc.ac.in) measuring efficiency and effectiveness of social work practice.

Need for more bachelor level programs

The second major issue has been that social work education in India began with postgraduate programs rather than undergraduate programs. The first undergraduate degree in social work began in 1974 at the College of Social Work, Nirmala Niketan, Mumbai University. The current scenario is that most of the colleges/departments prefer to run postgraduate programs again due to the jobs available in the government and non-government sectors. Only very few five-year integrated social work programs are offered which start after junior college (12 years of formal education in India).

In the context of graduate education in India, a bachelor's professional degree is viewed as the foundation for any profession and the student is expected to complete a professional master's degree for professional practice in that specialisation. The social work undergraduate program provides the basics in the social sciences or in social work; the social work graduates are more motivated to work as field practitioners.

Advocacy for creating positions for social work at the bachelor's level is imperative. This is part of the process of making social work education more relevant to Indian sociocultural settings. There is a need to attract social workers at younger ages so as to mould them into socially aware citizens and effective social workers. Youth social workers have to become socially aware and active citizens whose rights are embedded not merely in personal entitlements, and grounded in location but grounded in personhood. It is essential to incorporate diversity into our understanding of social rights (Drover 2000).

People-centredness vs elitism

Professionalisation has been said to create elitism in social work where the field is dominated by the urban middle class. According to Siddiqui (1984), the priority for offering of courses is the easily available job placements and this influences the selection of students who fit into these jobs (cited in Desai and Narayan 1998). The Second Review Committee Report strongly advocates that the profession of social work should be non-elitist both in the content and pedagogy as well as in the social class from which the students hail:

> These developments and the rise of the middle classes have been increasingly making the job of structural Social Work challenging, so much so that Social Work is experiencing an identity crisis in India. (Rao 2011, 38)

For students with rising costs of living, the dilemma remains – an elitist job with high salary or a development organisation with comparatively low salary and no perks. There is also now greater opportunity for international jobs and projects. There is a danger of focusing more on projects and consultancy instituted by foreign funding agencies with little relevance to the country's needs. Institutions of social work education in India, who face serious resource crunches, find it increasingly difficult to address these issues.

Need for social work professionals at different levels

According to Fook, the autonomy of all professionals is challenged in the current context. Managers and bureaucrats are taking control of professional practice due to the increased emphasis on managerialism and changed funding arrangements. Thus, the assumptions are being questioned. Professional identities are being undermined and professional boundaries are weakened. Jobs are represented in fragmented skill or program-based terms, rather than holistic professional terms. Competition between different professional groups increases as each one struggles for territory and ascendancy (Fook 2002). Midgley and others view globalisation as involving complex processes with both positive and negative impacts. Social work education has to build student and faculty capacity to critically assess these processes and anticipate the challenges (Midgley 2000).

In a workshop on 'Perspectives for Social Work Training: 2000 AD', the alumni of TISS were divided in their opinions about the future thrust of training. While the majority advocated for focus on conscientisation of the marginalised, the minority preferred the established remedial orientation of social work and clinical social work which was urban- and middle-class oriented (Desai 1991).

Institutions could encourage academic activism through critical research, policy-level interventions and by expressing solidarity and support with people-centred movements (Desai & Narayan 1998, 547). As social workers, we need constantly to translate and communicate what the values and goals of social justice mean to different people and groups (Desai & Narayan 1998, 547).

Considering its size, diversity, poverty levels and increasing disparities, India needs a range of trained social workers – the paraprofessionals, the graduates and the postgraduates, along with the doctoral-level research practitioners who will work with a holistic perspective at a variety of levels and catering to a variety of needs. 'We need the ability to transfer our knowledge and skills in any setting' (Fook 2002, 28).

There is also the realisation that there are many more players involved in these processes besides the trained social workers. Joining hands with them to work towards social transformation on a robust foundation of theory and values should be the goal of social work education. The greatest challenge is to 'be the change you want to see in the world'. A majority of schools need to work towards establishing high quality social work education programs.

Based on the need for a transformative paradigm for social work education, the National Network of Schools of Social Work members developed objectives to make social work education emancipatory and transformative to create an inclusive and just society; set minimum required standards of curriculum, re-emphasising its ethical foundations; created a universally accessible repository of high quality knowledge, resources, expertise and processes of sharing with schools across the country; achieve visibility for the profession through structures that engage state, civil society, and industry; established linkages and databases that connect and inform all responsible stakeholders; strived to improve standards through accreditation systems and periodic reviews; and created representative scientific associations to explore various facets of social work, taking responsibility for collective advocacy and action (Nadkarni 2012).

Need for a core curriculum framework

The need for a national curriculum when there is extreme diversity in the country is a question often debated in some fora of social workers. Conceptualising a core framework for social work theory and practice through praxis, that would serve as the foundation for the social work curriculum, is the need of the day. This framework could then be developed further regionally to integrate the local social and developmental issues.

A national consultation to achieve this was organised by the National Network of Schools of Social Work spearheaded by the Tata Institute of Social Sciences. However, it was observed that there was a need for greater conceptualisation and re-imagining of social work education. Efforts to collate the emerging fields of practice and in-depth analysis on various components of social work education is being carried out. A Social Work Education Observatory as the mechanism to develop and digitise indigenous knowledge resources and disseminate them to all corners of the country has been envisaged. This would serve as the knowledge hub that would create country-wide classrooms for imparting basic courses and specialised courses and thus enable students to access knowledge resources and lectures through web-based systems.

This implies that all institutions would need to develop the technological base, trained staff, ongoing training and sufficient resources to access the knowledge hub. The National Network will moot the idea for continuous enhancement of knowledge, promote active research to inform social sector policy evaluation, and change and develop IT and digital library networks to share knowledge and learning resources so that students located in any part of the country are able to access quality teaching offered from schools of social work.

Conclusions

While social work in India has not created a visible identity for itself nor has a marked territory for practice, the fraternity is aware of the insightful prediction that the social work

professional 'will increasingly be required to work in more than one task-specific team simultaneously, and change teams thereafter. They will have key roles in setting up, maintaining and changing teams' (Darvill et al. 2001, 4).

An important aspect that is critical to envisioning a professional identity for the profession in India is to chart out a clear curriculum that emphasises critical and analytical thinking to enable students to commit themselves in working towards development needs of the poor and marginalised people: the dalits, the indigenous people, children, women, girls, the socially stigmatised and all groups that are increasingly deprived of social safety nets with the reducing investment of the government in social sectors. Indian social work educators need to continuously tailor programs and update themselves on current knowledge frameworks in order to carry forward a professional approach in the plans for work, especially in the most poor and backward areas of the country. In doing so, the profession of social work will gain its rightful recognition and acceptance in Indian society. The task may be uphill but it will move towards the achievement of what social work definitions portend in all the major bodies of social work education in the world.

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