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COMMUNITY PRACTICE IN INDIA: TRENDS AND WAY FORWARD

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ABSTRACT

The practice of community work in India precedes the imported social work education. However, as one of the methods of social work practice, the imported knowledge produced in the United Kingdom was implanted with the inception of the first school of social work. Today, community work has gained a broader canvas with specialisations on issue-based practice and from the enriching movement of the tribal, dalit, women, ecology and others. It has gained acceptance as a more conducive method of social work given the socio-cultural context. The paper presents the practice of community work in India where non-uniform practices in the pre-social work period is analysed. It also maps the changing trends and trajectory of approaches in India from genesis to today. Lastly, the paper will submit a perspective on the current debates and knowledge contestation and offer a critical insight on the direction and the need to indigenise the subject at hand.

Keyword:

Community Organisation, Indigenisation, non-uniform practice, social work education

INTRODUCTION

The term community is subjective, composing different elements from different insights and frameworks. From a sociological lens, community is perceived from its composition and nature, i.e. homogeneity and heterogeneity that Ferdinand Tonnies propounded in the 1880s as '*Gemeinschaft*' and '*Gessellschaft*'. Community has also been perceived and emphasised on physical or geographical location having distinct recognised space such as a nation, district and region and so on. Another way to look at a community is from a shared interest and characteristics of members informing their identity across physical boundaries, example of this type of community, will be a group of physicists having a similar common interest and pursuits.

Propple (2017) gives a distinct normative interpretation of community. In his account, community as viewed by sociologists like Tonnies he called it a ¹*'Nostalgic View'* which represents a place of warmth, intimacy and social cohesion which can be construed as a form of resistance and confrontation to the change of the present time. ² *'Romantic Socialist View'*, was popularly known and echoes in the nineteenth century and specifically in the industrialised states, decentralisation and participatory form of governing was advocated in workplace and community with embedded socialist principles by the Labour party in United Kingdom. Here, community as a normative subject describe sets of relationships of two or more groups or alternative sets of relationships of those in place.

From social work perspectives, the notion of community underlined the dynamics and dimensions influencing and affecting the lives of the members in the social setting. To gain an insight, three frameworks are widely used (Malathi, 2010). ^{1st} *Social System framework*, deriving from the general system theory, where community is understood to be composed of multiple elements or sub-systems interacting and integrating with each other in a unified manner ensuring functional equilibrium. ^{2nd} *Ecological system framework*, highlights a system of numerous parts functioning in symbiotic relationship in a geo-cultural perspective where space such as land and distributing patterns, characteristics of the location and population and technology interacts to achieve equilibrium. ^{3rd} *Power and Conflict*, community from this framework is not seen as an integrated sub-system as those from the previous frameworks, but it is constructed on the bases of power and conflict between the dominant and subordinate/marginalised group. Solution is not arrived with just planning, collaboration and coordination but it is via conflict, negotiation and confrontation. The central perspective of community is power where change is envisaged through dialectic conflict. This lens helps not only to realise the concentration of power of the dominant group but also the need to strengthen the power base of the subordinate groups to confront their opposition and strive for change. Whereby, in the process, power is not only change and redistributed but more significantly, the organised relationship interpret power in a new light (Kahn, 1996).

Community Organisation as one of the methods of social work practice emerged with the development of Settlement Houses and Charity Organisation Societies in United States and United Kingdom to address the impact of expanding industrialisation and modernisation. Thus, Murray G. Ross (1967) emphasised on activities such as organising and coordinating social welfare related services and generate cooperative and

collaborative attitude in communities (Siddiqui, 1997). However, community organisation is believed to be as old as humanity itself, dated back to hunters and gatherers and it is seen as part of a life process of man and society for its continuity (Kahn, 1996). Today, community work has gained a broader canvas with the specialisation on issue-based practice and from the enriching movement of the tribal, dalit, women, ecology and others. It has evolved into the trans-disciplinary subject that has a better understanding of the history, structure, culture, adversarial, identity and power relations between groups.

The focus of this paper is to draw the historical development of the community organisation in India by looking at different practices from the past that may suggest the existence of the same, either in the framework of community organisation or some in some other arrangement. It also discusses the trends and trajectory of the method from inception as a discipline and the courses that it had taken in India. Lastly, knowledges and debates informing the subject today will be explored to provide a critical insight and a direction to corroborate or deconstruct in a new light. Sources of data are secondary, accessible on the published books and journal articles on community organisation and related subjects such as community development and social work syllabi and pedagogy. University Grant Commission Model curriculum for social work education has also been taken as a source to understand the objective above.

INCEPTION OF COMMUNITY ORGANISATION CONCEPT IN INDIA

Like the term Community, social work literature has propounded several prescriptive meanings to the term Community Work or Community Organisation. The inception of the term emerged and used in the United States of America prior World War 1 but it was accepted only in the 1960s as one of the core methods of social work practice (Siddiqui, 1997). Today, the scope and domain of community organisation is wider, reflecting a macro practice. There is a clarion appeal that community practice ought be applied over community organisation, as it has a broader space, encompassing community development, social action, administration and planning (Hadrastle et. al, 2011).

There is no clear historical account of community work in India, which can help us trace the turning point of community work and render analysis to the concepts and development of theories and practice. The literature is limited to authenticate any major claim (Siddiqui, 1997). Nevertheless, an attempt is made to chalk out the events in history from various sources that suggests a form of organising task reflecting the framework.

Ancient and Medieval Period

Viewed from humanitarian approach to tackle glitches arising in the social environment, community organisation is as old as society itself (Gangrade, 1971). Promoting the welfare and common good of all, seems to be the special attributes of Indian society in ancient times. It manifests in many spheres of life, carried by individuals, as well as an organised groups. Majumdar (1961) traced the practice of community organising from folktales and legends preserved in old literature. In the legend of '*Kulavaka Jataka*', Bodhisattva (Buddha) gathered thirty young men from the village, organised them to do constructive work for the welfare of the public. One of the account was them constructing village roads. Seeing the substantial task at hand, he organised the inhabitants where men and women participated and contributed their resources to the project.

The '*Arthashastra*', dated back to the third or fourth B.C., is one of the oldest work on polity, reflects the organising systems where provisions were made for children, the aged and the ailing individuals. Furthermore, kindling of fire was rigorously monitored and regulated and each member of the village was organised to render aid and response to such incidence. Here, members were trained and instructed to fill thousands of vassels with water and keeping them in a row into the big streets and gates. A fine is imposed on other members who fails to keep a water pots, one pitcher, a ladder, an axe, a winnowing basket, a hook and a leather bag. Besides this, anyone who fails to extend help during the response action, were penalised (Majumdar 1961).

In the thirteenth century, *Sultan Firuz* established hospitals for both natives and travellers coming to the city. Competent physicians and doctors were appointed to serve the needful, along with free medicines and foods. This project was achieved with the contribution of the public, especially, from the well-cultivated and rich farmers of that state. One of the eminent organising work of *Firuz*, is the reform he made for the upliftment of slaves by making provisions to assign them in army, allotting them a village, grant them allowances and to give them opportunity to be educated. A social service programme named '*diwan-i-Khairat*' was also launched to promote and aid marriages for those who cannot afford the ceremony expenditure (Majumdar 1961).

There are abundant evidence depicting community work and organisation during the medieval age. The community work had endowed religious and educational institutions, temples, roads, rent-houses and dharmasalas for travellers and the less fortunates (Majumdar 1961). Eschewing major structural change and social action, the approach in this era seems to enunciated on welfare, services and developmental work through hortatory cooperation and integration of the community as those opined by Ross (1967).

British and pre independence period:

Before the advent of the British, village organisations stimulate, proctect and promote the welfare of all the community members. To meet the needs, voluntary associations and the elderly organise the people to take up projects such as digging of well, paving of village trails and others. But all these organised systems was disrupted and shaken with the tranistion made by the British. The initiation of commercial agriculture, the creation of factories and industrial cities to name of few, pounded the equilibrium of the society. The goal of the East India Company is to equipped and geared to meet the demands for its shareholders laying less emphasis on the welfare of the people.

From the works of Manshardt (1961), reformation via social actions carried out by individuals alone and in groups has been charted. With the passing of the Charter Act which makes provision to share the western form of education, contributed the Indian reformers to look at their traditional systems from the lens of humanity. Although the initiation to abolish 'sati' was from the Serampore missionaries, but it was Raja Ram Mohan Roy who advocated in 1818. Fighting with the establishment until the practice was made illegal with the signing of Regulation XVII in 1829. Another pioneer was Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, who was instrumental in organising the public to demand the right of widow to remarry. And this has resulted in the passage of the Act XV (1856) 'The Hindu Widow Remarriage Act' inspite of opposition. Similarly, Behramji M. Malabari in 1891, Mahadev Govind Ranade 1842-1901, Sasipada Bannerji 1840-1925 and others has advocated aganist 'age of consent/marriage', women's rights, 'right of a widow' respectively. This period was not just individual protests but it is seen as the birth of a movements, like the Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, the Ramakrishna Mission and Thesophical Society. Although these are all religious movements but they had a firm interest to organise and reform the social structure.

In the twentieth century the reformation has shifted to a liberal, intellectual and humanitarian view from the religious change approach (Manshardt 1961). Imbued with poverty, disease and deluged with ill-fate, activists like Gandhi, Tagore and other eminent individuals felt the need to organise, rebuild and uplift the people in rural villages (Gangrade 1986; Goswami & Roy 1953; Manshardt 1961). In 1921-22, Rabindra Nath Tagore commenced this idea by inaugurating the Institute of Rural Reconstruction at Sriniketan, West Bengal. Distraughted over the cultural degeneration of the village, he launched a rural programme with a moto 'Light through learning'. His attempt is to bring back life to the village and organise them in such a way that they will live more freely (Gangrade 1986; Goswami & Roy 1953).

In 1929, F. L. Brayne experimented a novel method to develop the community in Gurgaon. Convinced that improvement can be made and kill the fatalism attitude and to shake the people out of their slumber, he launched a programme with objectives to increase agricultural products, management of waste and upgrade the settlement. Community workers were appointed to carry on the task of organising. The initiative was successful owing to the dynamic leadership of the Brayne and his team but the programme dilapidated as soon as he left. Criticism came from indian thinkers like Gandhi that the ownership of the programme was missing and that change was imposed from above. There are also other parallel initiatives taken at different part of the country, like the Rural Development Centre in Martandam, Kerala started by Christian missionaries in 1921. In Bombay (Mumbai), the Congress party entrusted the initiative to a private agency, called Village Industries Committee in 1937-39. A unique initiative at that time, with a novel approach to discourage the dependency on the government. In Gujarat, we have the Baroda Rural Development Project in 1927 which believed to have influenced the Community Development Programme later in India. Working along the lines and vision of Gandhi, the project envisaged empowering community by raising their standard of living through the establishment of cottage and small scale industries. Further, it extended to the improvement of agriculture and related activities (Gangrade, 1986).

Gandhi contributed greatly to community organisation in India, with his idea, later popularly known as 'Sarvodaya' (uplift of all). He focuses on the reconstruction of villages through non-violence, self-governance and self-sufficiency as far as the necessity is concerned. The village at the local level would be the focal point of economic development. He discourages industrialisation for it replaces work force and hence adds to unemployment. Decentralizing social and political power was aimed through local institutions

such as panchayat which they would have the legislative, executive and judicial rights to manage their affairs (Gangrade 1986; Ghosal 1959; Goswami & Roy 1953; Manshardt 1961; Siddiqui, 1997).

From the events and initiatives of eminent personalities, community work preceded social work education in India. It was only in 1937 with the experiment working in the slum of Bombay, leads to the formalisation of social work education in Sir Dorabji Tata Graduate School of Social work. At this period, the school contributed only in providing social awareness and lectures of the social service programmes of the government of Bombay (Manshardt 1961; Siddiqui, 1997).

Post-independence period:

Faridabad and Nilokheri projects are the two community development projects launched in 1947 by the United Provinces Government to rehabilitate the refugees who came from the North-West of undivided India. Mr. S. K. Dey in Faridabad and Mr. Sudhir Ghosh in Nilokheri facilitated the community to become more or less self-sufficient by organising and orienting people towards setting up industries and crafts predominantly on cooperative lines. With a small incentives from the government, the organised community build all the construction needed like primary schools for boys and girls, medical facilities, social service centre and others. Half of the food requirement were also produced by the community themselves (Gangrade 1986; Manshardt 1961).

Another essential experiment in community development was in Etawah, Uttar Pradesh in 1948 spearheaded by Mr. Albert Mayer. The aim here is to ameliorate the living condition of the people by integrating the Gandhian and the American ways of helping. The approach emphasised on understanding the village's practical problems prior proposing any assistance. Village level workers are trained in cattle breeding, vaccination, agriculture, running of schools, supervision in health measures and other related work. Panchayats were organised, strengthened and their determination were enhanced to tackle the challenges in the village and this inexpensive organisation came out with a remarkable outcome. Paving way for the formulation of Community Development Programmes in 1952 (Gangrade 1986; Manshardt 1961; Pandey, 2008)

As we can see from the above, there are practices of community work but in a non-uniform mode spearheaded by enthusiastic thinkers and practitioners having concern and vision of what community ought be

be. Some are driven on religious lines, some want to make a change in the community structure and there are others underlining on activities to meet the demanding situation. But community work as a method of social work in India emerged with the development of Settlement Houses and Charity Organisation Societies in United States and United Kingdom. The dissatisfaction of casework as a method in addressing the implications of industrialisation and modernisation, community organisation as a method came to recognition. Activities in organising and coordinating social welfare related services were their primary concern at this period (Gangrade, 1971; Hardcastle et al, 2011). In India, community work was in a dormant state before 1950s, there were no opportunities for trained social workers to practice the method, until the commencement of Rural Community Development Programme by the Government of India in 1952 (Siddiqui, 1997).

TRAJECTORY AND TRENDS OF COMMUNITY WORK IN INDIA

Since, method of community organisation in social work has its roots in the UK and US, Siddiqui (1997) construed a timeline in reflection to the trends in these countries. Comparing the trajectory of community organisation with UK, four major forces were outlined. The first phase, drawn from 1880s-1920s where community work revolves around individuals, enhancing their adjustment and adaptability in the society. The essence of community work in this phase is to coordinate activities carried by voluntary agencies.

The second force of community organisation in from 1920s to 1950s, this phase was influenced by theories propounded M.G. Ross in North America. Neighbourhood organising was discerned with a new sets of skills and approach. This phase has a conservative outlook whereby community were organised to resist and react against urbanisation and to seek amelioration from social problems within the neighbourhood.

The third phase in 1960s-70s, remarked as the reaction period of the notion of neighbourhood as community. Scholars, educators, practitioners and other professionals began to analyse the failure of community organisation. It is the reports from Seeborn and Gulbenkian groups in 1968 that the concept of community organisation was refined and redefined in more broader spectrum. They underlined the concept as an interface between people and social change, besides delivering and coordinating services, research and development of policy social planning were also grounded. Not satisfied with the non-directive methods to realise structural change, questions were raised on the concept promoted by earlier academicians and

practitioners during the third phase. In 1980s, marked the fourth force with radical community movement with its conflictual strategies, building on a power based of the under-privilege groups to confront the establishment. But with the commencement of the neo-liberal policy under Thatcher Government, the radical approach is struggling to influence against free market policy, laissez faire approach and welfare. In contemporary phase, both the radical approach and consensus approach co-exist (Agnimitra, 2010; Siddiqui, 1997).

As discussed earlier, in India, the practice of community work precedes the imported social work education. They are numerous non-uniform community exercises, aiming to uplift and improve the society but as a method of social work, it began with the experiment in the slums of Bombay city which also leads to the establishment of the first school of social work in 1937 (Manshardt 1961; Siddiqui, 1997). Upto 1950s, the initial phase, community organisation is said to be in a dormant state. With less opportunity to practice community work, social work education in this period stressed more on case work and group work method to be employed in demanding urban areas. Although the institutions like Sir Dorabji Tata Graduate School of Social work and the Delhi School of Social Work contributed in providing social awareness and lectures on social service programme and trained manpower in the social welfare sector but, there is very less substance to it (Manshardt 1961; Siddiqui, 1997).

The first push of community work, began with the launching of community development programme by the government in 1952. In this phase, community work is seen as a vehicle to facilitate community initiative and participation, aimed at promoting community wellbeing. Mukerji in 1961 draws the notion of community work from the UN framework which described community development, diving into two processes i.e. extension education and community organisation. By community organisation, Mukerji, focuses on setting up village panchayat, community schools and community cooperative. The first force of community work in India was congruent to the 2nd phase in United Kingdom, whereby, community organisation focused on self-help and encourage the community to adjust and find solutions within their neighbourhood. Cooperative attitudes and collaboration as theorised by M.G. Ross was emphasised. Unlike in UK and US where community work is concentrated in urban setting carried by voluntary organisation, in India community work is synonym with rural development which majorly sponsored by the government (Agnimitra, 2010; Gangrade, 1971; Siddiqui, 1997).

In 1970s onwards, owing to the failure of community development programmes and dissatisfaction on the result of the practice, where impact of poverty, health, education, sanitation and other services were not met, triggered community workers to revisit and re-examine their emphasis on local development concerns. In this phase, community work is more progressive than the earlier period, critiqued was made on the apolitical nature of social work. This critique, expanded the concept of community work, where educators reformed and realigned with literature borrowed from social movements, trade unionism, mass-based people's organisation and idea of small group organising like the self-help groups (Andharia, 2009).

Voluntary organisation started to explore new domain in literacy, women and children's rights, urban slums and others. There are others, who position on the history of the specified group or region to ignite a mass organisation. In 1980s onwards, more activists and educators associated with such mass based struggles, empowering communities at the grass-root and advocating against exclusion, discrimination against women, dalits and other marginalised groups and assertion of rights. Driving the change from a traditional welfare means to a more critical and radical perspectives was very slow.

But in 1990s-2000s, recognition of an alternative approach, which is more radical in nature started to pick up. With a confrontational approach, community work seeks to redistribute power and resources and challenge injustice in the structural level. Embracing different perspectives and ideological orientation, evolved community work with a political advantage. (Andharia, 2009).

The current trends of community work continue to engage themselves with the poorest of the poor, tackling the issue from both ameliorative framework and a pro-active involvement in policy and radical change. Community work has gained a broader canvas with the specialisation on issue-based practice and from the enriching movement of the tribal, dalit, women, ecology and others. Today, the involvement of cooperative houses in community welfare programme has somehow extended the involvement of community workers in delivering services. A sharper ideological orientation has shifted the practice to look beyond the prescript methods (Andharia, 2009). Moving into the trans-disciplinary mode, accurate understanding of the history, structure, culture, adversarial, identity and power relations between groups, helps in preventing disputes, splits and ruptures in communities. Celebrating diversity and appreciating differences has become fundamental to community work (Jha, 2009). From the first force until today, community work in India has evolved from welfare centric, being a vehicle of government development programme, to a much more

sharper political and rights-based orientation. With social justice and human rights at heart, community work has ventured in multiple areas to respond to various issues addressing inequality, exclusion, oppression, violations of rights and facilitating change and resistance.

WAY FORWARD

The informed knowledge has changed over the years, from charity it has progressively moved to welfare, then slowly to development and recently to human rights and social justice. However, not all these former perspectives have not been weeded out or come of age but they exist simultaneously. With the report of the Review Committee of the Second University Grants Commission, social action, social policy and social administration has been underlined as significant in the social work course. The focus has shifted from the clinical based remedial approach to a rights-based underpinning with empowerment methodologies, social action and policy efforts.

Globalisation of curriculum has become a major debate today. The International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) has been engaging in several global initiatives. The standardisation or the global agreed standards in promoting high quality social work education have been seen as a neoliberal project. This move to standardise the curriculum with the global standards gained much critics. Sewpaul (2014) contended against the importance of the contextualisation and context specific curriculum stating that the human experience cannot be understood outside of its social context. However, others believe in globalisation seeing it as the opportunity to address issues such as caste, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation and others from both global and local context. For instance, protecting the ecosystem is seen as the responsibility of both the international institutions and the country as well.

Viewing from Indigenous Paradigm, these imported methods with their informed knowledges for countless times have been reported that it has done more harm than strengthening indigenous systems and their way of working. Therefore, efforts should be made to indigenise the curriculum, so that, it will be congruent to the local needs and condition of the indigenous community. However, indigenisation does not negate knowledge sharing with other parts of the world nor stop to collaborate with external experts and partners. Owing to the

diversity of India, contemporary educators should realise that, there cannot be one umbrella for indigenous framework and knowledge base. A discourse has been attempted in some schools to develop a dalit social work on anti-oppressive and emancipatory practice. However, less to no attempt has been made to critically examine the contemporary methods, principle, values and techniques applied from the contemporary social work framework in indigenous communities in relation to their worldviews and practices. Understanding the indigenous approach from their philosophical lens will de-colonised the discipline and will reclaim their inherent rights of working and ways of helping. Andrea (2013) states that educational curriculum and work practice should be initiated so that to increase insights towards the Indigenous worldviews, cosmovisions, epistemologies, knowledge and dialogue, which are accurate and sufficient, represented through research.

CONCLUSION

The practice of community work in India precedes the imported social work education. They are numerous non-uniform community exercises, aiming to uplift and improve the society but as a method of social work, it began with the experiment in the slums of Bombay city. Over the years, community organisation has developed and evolved from welfare centric and being a vehicle of government development programme, to a much sharper political and rights-based orientation. With social justice and human rights at heart, community work has ventured in multiple areas to respond to various issues addressing inequality, exclusion, oppression, violations of rights and facilitating change and resistance. However, literature on community organisation in India is very limited. Few attempts have been made to map the changing trajectory of the practice but still, are not enough to depict a clear portrait of very decade and the changing trend in different parts of India. There is only a minor scholarly work on the interface between practices in the field and the informed knowledge of the subject, assessing and appraising the result in geo-cultural context.

With the strong influence from neo-liberal discourses, the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) opined to standardise the content and knowledge with an aim to refine social work education and making it as a centre of excellence. Conversely, the author is of the opinion that there is a need to carry out a comprehensive research to indigenise the practice in India with a non-uniform, non-nationalised approach. Scholars and educators have also advocated for indigenisation of curriculum and practice since the inception but no documentation and research have been carried out to produce a corpus of knowledge to realise the call.

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