

World Social Work Day and India

–Sanjai Bhatt*, Shailesh**, Shivani Chauhan Barooah***

ABSTRACT

The World Social Work Day (WSWD) is celebrated on the third Tuesday of March every year with a specific mission. The origin of this world celebration of social work can be traced to the beginning of the 1980s, but members' organisations of the International Federation of Social Work voted to establish an International Social Work Day in its 2004 General Meeting in Adelaide. Initially, Social Work Day started as an event to appreciate the work of the United Nations in social work; later, its scope was enlarged. In the Indian context, its significance is many times greater as it is an occasion to celebrate the triumphs of social work, to raise awareness of social services for the future of societies and to guard social justice and human rights. During "Amritkal", India reaffirms its constitutional commitment to democratic values, human rights and social justice. There is a need to recognise the professionalisation of social welfare services and development practices and primacy of social sector. The National Association of Professional Social Workers in India has initiated celebrating a National Social Work Week (NSSW) from 15th August every year since 2020, which culminates in the celebration of Indian Social Work Day on 21st August every year. NSSW is a week of retrospection, introspection, prospection and reflection.

Keywords: *World Social Work Day, National Social Work Week, Social Work Profession, Retrospection, Social Change and Development, Well-Being*

* Department of Social Work, University of Delhi, Delhi, India.
Email: sanjaibhatt@gmail.com

** Assistant Professor, Amity Institute of Behavioural and Allied Sciences, Amity University of Haryana, Gurgaon, Haryana, India.
Email: 2982.shailesh@gmail.com

*** Assistant Professor, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Guwahati Off-Campus, Assam, India. India. Email: chauhan.shivani@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

The United Nations designates specific days, weeks, years and decades as occasions to mark particular events or topics in order to promote, through awareness and action, the objectives of the organisation. Usually, one or more Member States propose these observances, and the General Assembly establishes them with a resolution. On occasion, these celebrations are declared by the specialised agencies of the United Nations, such as UNESCO, UNICEF, FAO, etc., when they concern issues that fall within the scope of their competencies. Some of them may be later adopted by the General Assembly (UN Website). Quoting from the International Federation of Social Welfare website, it was mentioned that “the first World Social Work Day was celebrated in 2007” with the theme “Social Work: Making a World of Difference” under the observance of the International Federation of Social Work (IFSW website). After that, the social work fraternity across the globe celebrates World Social Work Day (WSWD) on the third Tuesday of March every year with a specific mission. However, Suburu (2019) and Zinman (2020), have mentioned that “the World Social Work Day (WSWD) was launched by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) in the year 1983, with the aim of strengthening communication and partnership with stakeholders of social work, recognising the contributions of social workers and spreading knowledge about the social work profession across the globe (Bhatt & Salman, 2020).

The origin of this world celebration of social work was started at the beginning of the 1980s. Jack A. Kamaiko, IFSW United Nations Representative in New York, spearheaded a project in 1983 to bring social workers from the area into the UN Headquarters. In hindsight, this was a humble beginning of an annual celebration called Social Work Day at the United Nations. “The original idea behind the Social Work Day was to organise an event that could be a way of interpreting the work of the United Nations to the social work profession and of alerting social workers to the means by which they can collaborate with the NGOs on humanitarian issues” (IFSW, 2020). IFSW has also mentioned that its UN representatives continued to organise these days during either April or March. “In 1997, IFSW members’ organisations in Europe launched a pan-European Social Work Action Day, which arose from the EU funded Social Inclusion Project. This initiative, which was widely supported across Europe, led to a global proposal about celebrating WSWD. IFSW

members debated about how to link the Social Work Day at the UN and the European Social Work Action Day” (IFSW, 2020). At the 2004 IFSW General Meeting in Adelaide, members’ organisations voted to establish an International Social Work Day. Fortunately, the first author of this article has participated and contributed in favour of the motion in this meeting.

This year, WSWD was celebrated on Tuesday, 21st March, by honouring the diversity of the world. Undoubtedly, it is a significant opportunity to mobilise all social work networks and the communities in which they work to contribute to the values and principles that enable all people to have their dignity respected through shared futures, as well as to engage all social work networks and the communities in which they work. Since it is an occasion to celebrate the triumphs of social work, to raise awareness of social services for the future of societies, and to guard social justice and human rights. India, being a welfare state, has some obligations regarding the justice and freedom. The celebration could serve as a reminder of how social work fraternity can fulfil these obligations to the existing diversity. India is under “*Amritkal*” of its growth trajectory; therefore, it is important to look at the situation of avowed objectives of the constitution, like democracy, liberty, equality and fraternity. The present scenario regarding stated objectives and the relevance of the celebration of the World or Indian Social Work Day for the nation can be considered quite apt and significant for not only raising awareness about professionalism for social service but also equally important in making right-based agenda and primacy of social sector as a part of governance. This is high time when policymakers should agree that social sector, development or welfare services are no more political tools but these are approaches based on expertise and skilled intervention for the betterment and well-being of the people. The challenges facing social work education and profession in India are to understandable and make it understand to other stakeholders the importance of professionalism, values and philosophy of the social work profession vis-à-vis development challenges for the well-being of people.

EXAMINING INDIA’S CURRENT SITUATION

India scored 107th out of 121 countries in the Global Hunger Index 2022, lower than neighbouring countries such as Pakistan and Bangladesh (The Economic Times, 2020). Due to this, child wasting rate of 19.3% is the

highest in the world. Most interestingly, the largest democracy in the world (India) is placed at 108th on the Democracy Index 2023, barely two spots above Pakistan (The First Post, 2023). The study of V-Dem (varieties of democracy) by the Institute of Sweden University points out the erosion of democratic values in India. The downfall of democratic values has triggered the economic disparity because development and democracy are very interlinked. Discrimination with regards to gender, race, region and religion is intertwined with inequality (Radhakrishnan, 2023). The UN highlights that Indian women experience discrimination and sexual intimidation; however, Dalit women plight is even more extreme. Religious minorities and Dalits have experienced prejudice and oppression, hate crimes and shunning. The NCRB reported that 5,650 farmers committed suicide in 2014, representing 4.3% of the total suicides in the country because of agrarian distress. According to NCRB data from 2021, the number of suicides in the country was 1,64,033, a 6.2% increase over 2020. But, strategically, the government did not segregate the farmers' suicide, from the overall data. Unfortunately, it is continuing (Deshpande, 2023). There is a rural-urban dichotomy based on income and infrastructure. And the mandated governing structure has yet to do enough to understand and act against poverty, hunger, education, health, environmental management, or development. So, the situation is getting complex and requires an urgent look into the matter regarding the approaches, availability of trained social work human power and allocation of budgets for social development purposes.

TALES FROM THE WEST AND THE PAST

Like India, the Europe was under strain during the industrial revolution as people migrated from rural areas to urban areas. England was in a severe economic downturn in 1,601, with high levels of unemployment and widespread famine. Because of it, there were several beggars on the roads. It was solved through the institutionalisation process, like correctional houses and almshouses. This developed into social service through the Social Welfare Board in the West. Later, in the UK and USA, Charity Organization Society, Settlement House Movement and Child Welfare Movement contributed significantly to citizenship training, adult education, counselling, recreation, day care centres, social advocacy and social services. All these changes led to the development of social work as an inter-disciplinary course to serve individuals, groups, communities and

societies. It was the first sign of professionalism in settling social issues. Over the course of time, social work developed as a helping profession to cure poverty and family disorganisation in the west rather than merely assisting the poor. Just like medicine and engineering, social work now applies science to social welfare. Later, it came to other colonies of Britain, like India. A point worth mentioning is that many changes happened in India in the process of adoption of social work. Gandhi, Tagore, Ambedkar and Vinoba, have great impact on it. Ahead of it, the Etawah Pilot Project (1947), Marthandam Project (1928) and Sriniketan Experiment (1921) had their own success stories. This provided more room for professionals to take part in addressing social issues and caused social work to grow in India. Towards the end of the 20th century, the development of educational institutions prompted several professional associations to improve the professionalism and development of the curriculum of social work to settle the social issues at both the global and national levels. Especially, International Federation of Social Work (IFSW) is an active and worldwide accepted association in the field of the social development and social work. It has a key role in setting the curriculum and developing the skills needed to face the challenges of today. Now, social work has the same recognition as medical science and engineering in the West. This widens the space for social work in the west. In India, the profession has also moved quite rapidly from the different phases from charity to welfare, to development and to right based development, and finally to empowerment and currently, to well-being. But, India is quite different as it has witnessed the rise and fall, birth and death of professional organisations in the country due to varied reasons—small numbers of professionals, pro establishment, also factionalism and ideological conflicts. Not many associations could make dent in the system, yet some associations like, National Association of Professional Social Workers in India have come out with a few innovative moves. It has been relentlessly working for organising social work professionals and securing social acceptance for the profession and ensuring quality of education and training. However, professional organisations in social work appear ineffective because of the lack of support from both—its members and the state. The higher education system in India is one of the world's largest systems of its kind. There are 526 social work educational institutions. Comparing the data of enrollment in BSW and MSW programme in nine AISHE reports from 2010–11 to 2018–19 (AISHE, 2011–2020), there is almost 1,00,000 more (precisely 97,238) students' enrollment in the MSW

programme in comparison to BSW programme as there were 3,95,561 students enrolled in MSW programme against 2,98,233 students at BSW courses in past nine years from 2010–11 to 2018–19 (Bhatt, 2021). From the experiences of the past, it is necessary to use their professional skills to soothe the social distress. So far, India lacks in an appropriate policy to engage the skills of trained social workers. The NEP 2020 has made a commitment to appoint trained social workers to manage proposed *school complex* in school education. However, the current scenario calls out to policymakers for a serious contemplation of the potential of social work professionals.

EXPLORING THE RELEVANCE OF PRESENT WSWD IN INDIA

The theme of this year’s WSWD is “Respecting Diversity through Joint Social Action”. This day is intended to honour the accomplishments of social work as well as increase awareness of social services for the future of diverse communities. In its global definition, the purpose of social work has been emphasised to bring social change, development, cohesion, empowerment and liberation of people. It was first time explicitly emphasised that social work is an academic discipline and practice-based profession. “It has also put emphasis on the diversity. In doing this, social work guarantees the ideals of social justice and human rights, including respect for diversity. The famous idiom “*kos kos par badale vani, char kos par badale pani*” shows the diversity of India; that is, every two miles the dialect changes, and every eight miles the drinking water has a different taste and texture. Indian subcontinent is the birthplace of around the 10 religions, including four of the world’s major religions: Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism and Christianity, with no state religion. India has 22 officially recognised languages, 121 languages spoken by over 10,000 people and 19,500 dialects. This means, one can easily assess the religious, linguistic, caste, ethnic and geographic diversity by travelling across India. The national integration, growth & development, global recognition and peaceful coexistence are all enhanced by respecting this diversity. So, diversity and its respect matters are of great significance for India. The official gazette of India and NAPSWI appear to have the same philosophy for development, democracy and diversity. As part of the developing nations, India has the obligation to act on development, democracy and diversity. In a report on world celebration of Social Work Day, Pulla et al.

(2022) have remarked that Social workers seem to go along with fixing the society and reach the last impoverished man on the planet, unmindful of what appears to happen to resources (Pulla et al., 2022). WSWD is about recognising social change, development and well-being of the people. The time is now for policymakers, professionals, professional associations and communities to come together and make concerted efforts.

NATIONAL SOCIAL WORK COUNCIL: PANACEA OF ALL ILLS?

Social work is currently taught as an academic discipline in colleges and universities spread over 145 countries. Most of these countries have Councils for Social Work to manage. In Asia, India pioneered social work education and training programmes way back in 1936, but they are only partially recognised in government schemes / programmes as professional courses. Social work in India is well known as an academic discipline and is regarded as one of the most job-oriented courses in the university system at different levels: under-graduate, post-graduate and research. However, what ails the profession is the lack of a Council in India, a professional and regulatory body. As per the University Grants Commission, the role of the professional councils is to recognise courses, promotion of professional institutions and provision of grants to undergraduate programmes and various awards. The statutory professional councils listed on the UGC website range from technical education, medicine, teacher education, agriculture, dentistry, pharmacy, nursing, law, homeopathy, Indian medicine, architecture, rehabilitation, rural institutes and state councils for higher education (UGC, 2020). The absence of social work profession from the list enumerated above might or might not ring the alarm bells for our brethren and community. However, it does bring us to the crossroads, an important juncture vis-à-vis the state of the profession that it was, is and aspires to be in the future. A news report by Ashlin Mathew has wrongly reported that “the government has circulated a draft of the National Council of Social Work (education and practice) Bill, which aims to regulate quality, flexibility and autonomy in social work education, practice” (Mathew, 2020). Unfortunately, this news report depicts the half-understood concept of social work, and even interviews were twisted and selectively published as per the reporter. In fact, this bill was prepared by a group of social work professionals during its advocacy campaign which was later submitted to government for adoption. The social work community, through its

nationwide consultation and its national campaign, has prepared a “The National Council for Social work Education (NCSWE) Bill 2021”. The bill has been prepared by a working group of professional social workers at their own level. It calls for the establishment of the National Council for Social Work Education and highlights the need to enhance quality and ensure standards in social work education, including its linkages with practice, knowledge and ethical conduct; and to create national registers of accredited social work education institutions and programmes. The bill has been divided into six chapters with 29 sections. As proposed in the bill, the Council will operate from New Delhi with six zonal councils: North, West, Central, East, Northeast and South. The council will lay down the procedure of registration of social work professionals (NAPSWI, 2021). The Social Work Council may not be a panacea for all the ills of social work profession, but it can surely be a major pill for curing and preventing its many diseases.

THE NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY 2020 AND SOCIAL WORK PROFESSION

On professional education, the National Education Policy 2020 (GoI, 2020) refers to the ‘preparation of professionals must involve an education in the ethic and importance of public purpose, an education in the discipline and an education for practice’ (para 20.1). The professional councils will act as professional standard setting bodies (para 18.7). These bodies, after restructuring as PSSBs, will continue to draw the curricula, lay down academic standards and coordinate between teaching, research and extension of their domain/discipline.

The role of professional and regulatory bodies in any profession cannot be undermined. There are mainly four key aspects that impact higher education: specifying the nature of the education and training required for entry to the profession; assessing the knowledge, competence and values of aspiring professionals as a condition of entry to the profession; ensuring that the providers of professional education and training are suitable; specifying the ongoing education and training required for continued practice within the profession (Harvey et al., 2014). While we are celebrating Social Work Day, can we think of reminding the social work fraternity of these aspects also.

NAPSWI EFFORTS TO CELEBRATE NATIONAL SOCIAL WORK WEEK AND INDIAN SOCIAL WORK DAY

NAPSWI has been celebrating National Social Work Week (NSSW) since 2020. In that very year, the nation celebrated the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi and the 100th year of Kashi Vidyapeeth and NAPSWI also entered in its 15th year of existence. In view of the above, NAPSWI believed that there cannot be any better occasion to initiate celebration of NSSW, beginning on the foundation day of first school of social work of independent India. Therefore, this one-week celebration began on 15th August, 2020 and culminated as Indian Social Work Day on 21st August, 2020. The main aim of celebration of NSSW is to promote social work education and social work profession; popularise the values, mission and goals of social work profession; and re-affirm the social work commitment for personal and social well-being of every citizen of this country. Through NSSW, the effort was to bring and to synchronise the efforts of different stakeholders of the social work profession on one platform so that social workers' identities, issues and initiatives may be presented in an effective and concerted manner. Any social work school, social work educational institution; government, corporate or voluntary organisations, professional association of social work, its allied and relevant branches; students, researchers, educators of social work, or practitioners related to or committed to the values of professional social work; and anyone who has faith and belief in democratic ethos, social justice, human rights and human dignity; and who cares about the future to change our society / nation for the well-being of the people, can be part of NSSW. Prof. R. R. Singh, in his 1st Raja Ram Shastri Memorial Lecture, explained the meaning of celebrating social work day as:

“This celebration to me is a week of retrospection, introspection, prospection, and reflection. Reflection is the result of integrated learning. The new education policy has put emphasis on social and emotional learning (SEL). Social work has been emphasizing it all along but most of us have taken it as a subject to get a job. Social work education, and for that matter, any quality education, brings about change in feeling, thinking and behaviour. This was taught to us in the course on social case work. This can be extended to social sciences and humanities. Institutes of Technology and Medicine which have separate faculties, treat them as

appendices. Social work education can strengthen them either through interdisciplinary work-shops, block field work, hosting joint camps, or by joining field action projects. Such innovations will strengthen both to bring about social advancement. History of social settlements in the west and Gandhi Ashrams in India and South Africa pursued the goal of change by living and working in the community. This should be followed by the institutions of social work for locality development to show visible results. Corona has thrown a new and long-term challenge to all human service professions including social work. This requires solution-based intervention” (Singh, 2020).

He further stressed that the celebration of Social Work Week thus made him re-visit, relive and re-evaluate his contribution to the profession over six decades and to re-dedicate himself to serving it further. Sadly, Prof. Singh is not there with us anymore however, his dreams, aspirations and goals for the social work profession in India continue to be with us. The year 2023 again serves as a reminder to the social work fraternity to work towards making them a reality for all. The significance of celebration should not be restricted to awareness generation, building capacities and/or communicating with people and stakeholders, but the focus of celebration must include revisiting, reviewing and introspection with regards to our roles, responsibilities and responses towards social work profession in particular and towards society in general.

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