
Issues And Challenges In Social Work Profession: Perspectives Of Social Workers Of Assam

MONALISHA PHUKAN ROY¹, PROF. SEEMA VERMA BORBORA²

¹PhD Scholar, Centre for Social Work Studies, Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh

²Professor, Department of Sociology, Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh

Abstract: Social work being a helping profession has its root in ancient times of India. It was believed then to be a sanctified obligation which in return aided a person to gain a sense of fulfillment. However it can be seen during Ashoka's reign, the helping process got institutionalized. Gradually, in 1843, Association of Improving Conditions of the Poor (AICP), USA recognized that mere charity cannot solve the problems rather it created a permanent liability on society. It can be depicted as the inception of social work profession. Social work as a profession is quite novice in comparison with other professions e.g., Medicine. Unlike other professions, social work encompasses a broad field of interventions: macro, mezzo and micro level. Due to the expansion of the profession in such colossal dimension, it becomes a herculean task to retain its professional identity in an unambiguous manner.

Even after completing 85 years of glorious journey, social work has not gained impetus as a profession in India and is always subjected to debate and discussion.

Assam lies in the easternmost part of India. Though very rich in her natural resources and cultural diversity, Assam is still lagging behind in terms of developmental perspectives. There is lack of industrialization, professional education etc. Apart from the mentioned crisis, other vital issues that is weeding up as a menace towards the safeguarding of serenity and harmony among North Eastern states is borderline conflicts. Assam having a landscape and potential racial, lingual and ethnic diversity which creates ethnic tensions and conflict. Infiltration is another burning issue that is devouring the state of Assam precisely. Social work has to deal with the by-products of the above mentioned problems. However, there is still a lack of awareness about social work profession among the public in general and administration of the state in particular which actually makes the social workers ambiguous about their identity.

The purpose of this study is to understand the status of social work profession in Assam and also to assess the challenges and issues faced by the social workers in Assam.

The paper is based on empirical findings. It will be highlighting the perspective of the social workers towards their future scope being a social work professional and issues faced by them in their professional lives in Assam. It was conducted by taking 60 social workers as respondents working in various sectors (government and non-government) of Assam.

Keywords: Social Work, Assam

INTRODUCTION

Professionalism, as a concept has been the subject of major change over the past millennia, in general and in the last century, specifically. Sociologists define 'professionalism' as 'a vocation with a body of knowledge and skills (expertise) put into service for the good of others; the welfare of the society. The word 'profession' itself encompasses the public commitment to a set of values. Professionalism demands for a specialized knowledge. They make a deep commitment to themselves to improve on their skills and wherever it is required will earn a degree in certificate. Professionalism also insists on honesty and integrity, accountability, self-regulation. A professional is a person who has a specialized set of skills and possesses knowledge required for a particular task to be performed efficiently.

Social work is a practice based profession which mainly emphasizes on use of scientific knowledge and methods in order to help people to help themselves.

'Social Work is a practice based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance well-being.' (IFSW and IASSW, 2014)

The concept of social work keeps on renovating with changing times to fit with the changing needs and demands to ensure the betterment of the society. With the changes in the social realm, the economic renovation

along with political incarnation is quite a customary vista at times. These changes fundamentally affect the lives of the people either way i.e. positive or negative terms. Hence, the social workers constantly strive for innovative ideas to assist the needy through the application and modification in social work theories and enhancement of practice through appropriate use of techniques and skills. Traditionally, social work was more concerned mitigating the psychological needs of the individuals. But with the emergence of new concerns, social work has been embarking into areas like- environment conservation, food security, war and terrorism, promoting social entrepreneurship etc. to name a few.

Even, after completing 82 years of a glorious journey, social work has not gained impetus as a profession in India and is always subjected to debate and discussion. Social Work as a profession is quiet novice in comparison with other professions e.g. Medicine. Social Work as a profession officially originated in late 18th century and early 19th century within United States and United Kingdom. In India, the concept of social service is age old. Charity was considered as morality since Vedic Age. However, Social Work as a profession got established with the foundation of Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai in 1939. (Thomas. Gracious,2010) Social Work as a profession is focussed on problem solving and change. They are the change agents who engrave a deep impact on people's lives (individual, group, community). A social worker is equipped with array of skills, techniques, values, ethics that centres on the comprehensive development of a person and its environment.

Social Work as a profession in India has almost completed its formative years and established itself as a demanding profession in India. A person having a degree of BSW or MSW is considered as a professional social worker in the context of India. Of course, there are myriad of job opportunities sprouting up for social workers in India along with passing times. Opportunities are getting a bit better in both in the Governmental and Non-Government Sectors; policy making, social welfare administration, health, education, industries, development sector, environmental protection etc. In fact, International NGOs are also providing platform to the Indian Social Workers in terms of their career development.

With globalisation, no doubt, interdependence is creating opportunities for development. However, it is also offering us with challenges. With increase in social problems, the work of the social workers is also increasing. The scope of employment is expanding globally for social workers.

SOCIAL WORK PROFESSION IN ASSAM

Social Work as a profession in Assam or to say, in the entire North East India is very novice. Indeed, the very first department of social work in Assam was started in the year 1997 by Assam University. Mizoram University was the second in place to offer Social Work Program in 2008. However, as noted by (Riamei Joseph, 2015) since, 2006, there has been unexpected blooming of social work education offered by Govt. and Private Institutions. Currently, there are 24 Universities/Institutes that offers social work education in the entire North East India.) Till the last decade, a handful of people knew about this profession and mostly used to pursue their career as a social worker outside of Assam. There was a popular belief among those who pursue social work as a career, 'it's a very humane profession and very few get the opportunity to be a social worker. However, there is no way back home because there is no job'. The situation hasn't been totally reversed currently. Still, people in general are unaware about this profession. The one who does it, goes through a tough time explaining his/her identity as social worker. Currently, lot many educational institutions are offering the course of social work and students are also increasing day by day. Along with it, NGOs and Govt. Projects are also opting for social workers as employee. However, compared to the mainland India, North East India is still far away from recognizing the accomplishment a social worker earns in his/her career.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

North Eastern States indicates the states towards the eastern most part of India- Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Tripura, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, and Sikkim. It is known as the land of seven sisters and one brother as Sikkim is newly included in North Eastern states. However North-Eastern States are still far away from developmental perspectives. Though these states are very rich naturally, but due to insurgencies by militants every time, these states have not developed so far. There is lack of industrialization, scope for professional education etc. Apart from the abovementioned crisis, other vital issue that is weeding up as a menace towards the safeguarding of serenity and harmony among the North East States is the borderline conflict between different states and ethnic conflict concerning North East India. It is having the landscape with potential racial, lingual and ethnic diversity which creates ethnic tensions and conflicts. Infiltration is another burning issue that is devouring the state of Assam precisely. North- Eastern states of India are also prone to natural calamities such as flood, earthquake etc. To bring into the limelight the recent incident in Nagaland where 33% reservation of women in Urban local bodies is being denied by various organizations in Nagaland putting forward the justification that it will impair their customary law. The North Eastern States which are prominent in terms of upholding the dignity of women in comparison to other states of India is a paradox now. As it is already mentioned above that there is a scanty number of social work schools in NE India, the social

work education system is in a state of uncertainty. The absence of indigenous practices to tackle the issues concerning NE India is another impediment. Apart from the insufficiency in the numbers of schools of social work, the organizations working for the welfare of the people are also less in numbers in comparison to other states in India. On the other side, state administration's blurry ideas about the profession of social work also create a hindrance in providing a solid identification of this profession. Another candid debate is the establishment of NGOs by non- social workers which is again questioning the sustainability of social work as a profession. All these aspects have emerged as a question towards the status of social workers in NE India.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The term social work remains rather ambiguous as people find it difficult to differentiate it with other relative concepts such as Social Services etc. Another very prominent issue in India which acts as a hindrance in recognizing social work as a profession is that the politicians, religious leaders, voluntary workers etc. also label themselves as social workers which generate confusions. There is no formal licensing body for the social workers in India which affect in regulation of behaviors among the members of social work fraternity. To be specific again, most importantly, there is lack of co-ordination among the social work educators and field practitioners which upholds the glory for the malfunction of the profession in India (Verma, Journal of Social Work Education, Research, and Action).

There are 522 schools of social work in India imparting social work education. Social Work Education is expanding its horizon under many State, Central deemed private universities, colleges and institutions. Out of these 522 schools, meagrely 40 schools are located in the entire North East India (Bhatt, Phukan,2015)

At the North East zone consultation on Social Work Education 2012, it was noted that there were many issues and challenges faced by different institutes/ Universities from different states of North East India. There is a variation in terms of methodology, selection process of students, curriculum, pedagogy, faculty student ratio, field work structure, etc. As further noted by Riamei Joseph, 2015) that a layman's perspective towards the terminology of social work is applicable to anyone who is socially engaged. Basically, social workers are generally considered as 'sidekicks' of politicians. (Riamei Joseph,2015)

The social work education system in India is still dependant on the knowledge borrowed from the western world. Being totally diverse from the western countries in the context of culture and tradition, it demands indigenous methods to practice social work in India. Hence, it becomes difficult to address the problems in India by the social workers and the issues tend to be the same. Apart from it, the mushrooming of social work schools in every nook and corner has given rise to commercialization somewhere failing to uphold the social work values (Verma, Journal of Social Work Education, Research and Action).

OBJECTIVES

- i. To assess the challenges faced by the social workers in NE India
- ii. To understand the perception of the social workers in North East India towards the profession of social work

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The researcher opted for mixed method for the study conducted. The researcher here used the descriptive and exploratory research design. For primary data collection, the researcher selected 60 social work professionals as respondents. The researcher used Non- Probability Sampling (Convenience Technique). The researcher collected the data through telephonic conversation, email, and also met in person a few of the respondents. The researcher collected the data from the respondents with the aid of Interview schedule. The researcher used various forms of secondary data like literature reviews, articles, journals, verified websites.

FINDINGS

The findings of the research are arranged according to the objectives of the study.

Profiling of the respondents:

As it is already mentioned above that there were total 60 respondents. The researcher has opted for 50% male and 50% female as respondents. Most of the respondent's age is between the age group of 20-30 years. 74% of the respondents come from Arts background, 22% from Science and 4% from Commerce background in their graduation. 90% of them have completed their Masters in Social Work from various institutes/ universities of Assam itself. Most of them have a work experience of 1-5 years. 100% of them are working in Non-Government sector. However, some of them are involved in Govt. Projects, but on a contractual basis.

Salary paid:

The researcher has found it important to study about the salary package in order to find out their economic status and security

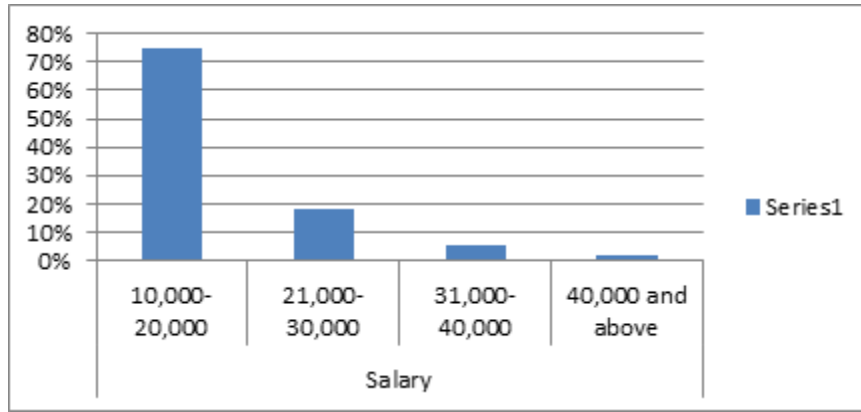


Fig-1:

From the above diagram, it can be seen that 76% of the social workers are paid between 10,000 to 20,000. It can also be seen that 16% of them are getting paid between 21,000-30,000. Further, 5% of them are paid between 31,000 to 40,000 and only 3% are getting paid above 40,000.

Motivation for current employment:

The researcher here intends to study about their motivation for current employment because most of them are engaged in contractual jobs of NGOs or Govt. Projects.

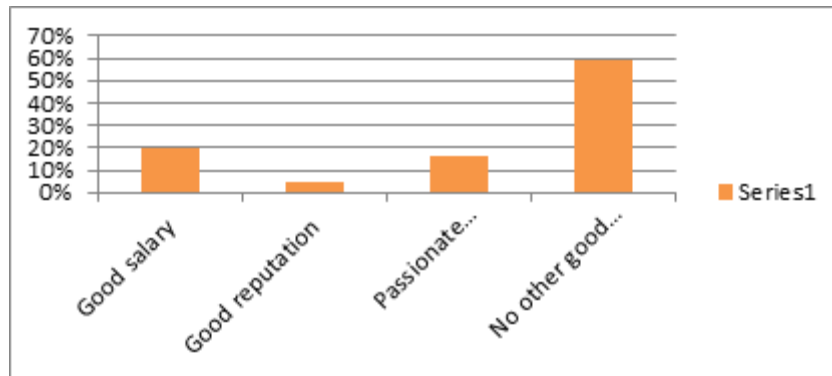


Fig-2

From the above figure, it is quite visible that 59% of them are working in those respective organizations because no other good opportunities are available yet. Further, 20% of them are working because of the good salary. It can also be seen that 15% of them are passionate the job they are doing and 6% of m are working because of good reputation.

Sector wanted to serve being a social worker

This point is important for the study because after pursuing a professional course, everyone has their own preferences regarding their choice of work.

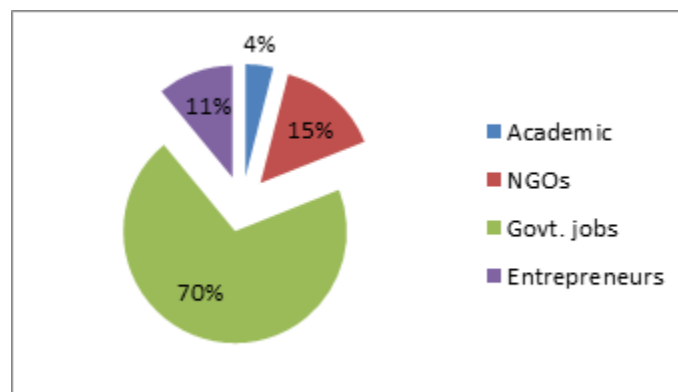


Fig-3

From the above diagram, it can be seen that 70% of them want to be in Govt. Jobs. Further, 15% of them wants to serve in NGOs. It can also be seen that 11% of them wants to be entrepreneur and only 4% wants to pursue their career in academics.

FINDINGS AND VITAL OBSERVATIONS

After interviewing the social workers in depth, the researcher has come up with the following findings and observations:

- i. Most of the respondents are seeking for good opportunities in the Govt. Sector where their career will be somehow secured.
 - ii. They are also of the viewpoint that North East India lacks in NGOs (National or International) which limits their employment opportunities.
 - iii. The respondents with Human Resource management as specialization are of the viewpoint that the kind of job profile they should be into after doing the course is rarely available in North East India.
 - iv. Most of the respondents feel insecure about their present employment both in terms of income and career development.
 - v. The researcher asked whether they are planning to change their career line from social work if given an opportunity and the reply came was 'yes' from almost 98% of the respondents.
- The social workers are of the viewpoint that social work is a noble profession and it has helped them to shape their thoughts about the society and developed them as good human beings and the values will be carried forward till the end of their lives. But however, when it comes to identifying one with the profession, they feel that the opportunities are indeed scanty.

CONCLUSION

Social Work being a professional course about bringing changes in the individual, group, and community at large equips up the professional social workers with a scientific temperament, specific skill sets, values and ethics. The course not only provides theoretical knowledge but also practical ground level experiences by placing the social work trainees in the field. After completing the course, it has been always observed that social work trainees develop a critical understanding about the issues pertaining to the society. They also develop on a compassionate level as a human being. Therefore, after going through a rigorous training of two years and gaining deeper experience on how to work with the people on the grass root level, if they are not even recognized for the skill sets they possess, it leads to a certain amount of demotivation. Therefore, social workers should be able to identify with their profession so that their skill sets are being properly utilized for the betterment of the society as well for their own career development.

SUGGESTIONS

Every year almost, 1500 social worker graduates in the entire North East India. And if we take Assam into consideration, approximately 700-800 students receive their post graduation in social work. However, the ratio of social work graduates and job opportunities varies in huge terms. As already mentioned above, there is lack of NGOs (National and International level) in the entire North East India. Local NGOs aren't able to provide the minimum remuneration which a social worker deserves. That is why, they prefer to appoint simple graduates, HS pass students to do the job which they are not actually fit for because they can be appointed on less remuneration.

Therefore, as a researcher, I would like to make a few suggestions:

- i. Govt. Educational Institutions in Assam should offer the social work course with a reasonable course fee. It will allow more efficient people to join the course which in turn will make the people in general more aware about the value, this course carries. Campus placement should be encouraged by inviting recruitments from other parts of India. That will boost the aspirations of the students of social work.
- ii. State Government should also pay a heed in opening up Social Work Course at College levels too which will in turn generate secure employments in Academics for Social Work. As the researcher has already mentioned, only 4% respondents are interested to go for Academics because Assam lacks in secure jobs for Academicians of Social work as very few Institutions are recognized by the Govt.
- iii. Govt. Administration should understand the fundamentals of this course and open up vacancies as per the requirement. Many at times, it is seen that the Govt. Administration fails to differentiate between Social Work and Sociology and when it comes to advertisement regarding posts related to social welfare, the social workers capability is under looked.
- iii. Social work as a subject should be taught from the ground level i.e., from school level that will assist a person to become a responsible and compassionate human being. Social Work is a subject that not only helps one to understand the menace of the society, but also understand oneself in a more organized way. In order to make the coming generations more responsible citizens, social work can actually assist.

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