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Professional Pledge in Social Work: Implications for Professional Identity and Value Integration

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Abstract

The social work profession lays a strong emphasis on internalizing and reinforcing core social work values and ethical standards in order to create a cadre of social workers who can withstand the criticalities of any crisis and commit themselves to firmly stand with those whose survival and well-being is fragile and "on the brink". The performance of this role not only requires a dynamic and contextual knowledge base and evolving skills set, it mandates a deep rooted acquiescence with a fundamental set of values that shape the profession's vision and mission, and establish the goals and priorities of the practitioners. The transition from an entry level neophyte to a competent social work professional entails a journey which is characterized by the assumption and bolstering of a professional persona that grounds the incumbent within the functional niche of social work. The present paper looks at the integration of a social work pledge as a viable means for social work incumbents to establish identification with social

work values, don a professional identity, and assimilate with professional peers. It looks at the existing practice of pledge taking by highlighting the experience of a distinguished school of social work. It envisions the 'pledge' and the tradition of 'taking the pledge' evolving as a strong and more universal medium for creating an emotional connect of social work students with the value driven profession of social work.

Keywords: Pledge, values, ethics, social work, profession

Human services are performed by distinct professions which respond to human needs and human problems. The Library of Congress of the United States of America defines human services as incorporating "the various policies, programs, services, and facilities to meet basic human needs relating to the quality of life, such as education, health, welfare" (Barnetz & Vardi, 2015, p. 68). Zins (2001) characterized human services as "social services designed to meet human needs that are required for maintaining or promoting the overall quality of life of the prospective service populations" (p.7). He differentiated human services from the occasional and sporadic help given by family members, friends, or "good Samaritans", in that they construed institutionalized systematic services. In a proposed definition of human services, Kincaid (2009) postulated that human services were grounded in an integrated interdisciplinary knowledge base, and they endeavored to "facilitate client self-determined systemic change at all levels of society; personal, interpersonal, small group, family, organizational, community, and global" (p. 20). A comprehensive definition of human services as a field of knowledge was provided by the National Organization of Human Services (NOHS) wherein broadly speaking, human services strive to meet human needs through an interdisciplinary knowledge base, as they focus on prevention and remediation of problems, while being committed to improving the overall quality of life of service populations (NOHS, n.d. a). As can be gleaned from the above, while human services pertain to a more generalized field, 'helping professions' construe distinct and more specialized professional realms. With human service at its core, the helping profession of social work advocates for social justice for

both individuals and vulnerable populations and fosters social change. Its primary mission centers on the enhancement of human well-being, as it strives to help meet the basic and complex needs of all people, with particular focus on those who are vulnerable, oppressed and impoverished.

Practice in social work and human services posits complex and challenging issues that require careful thought and engagement to provide appropriate assistance. The values and ethics of those providing the services become central to the performance of their role and the choices they encounter in practice, more so in contemporary plural societies (Hugman, 2013). Values resonate as a core component of human service, and values training emerges as an integral component of the training of human services professionals. The "Ethical Standards for Human Service Professionals" adopted in 2015 (NOHS, n.d. b) draw focus on values being core to human service. Human service workers are characterized by an appreciation of human beings in all of their diversity as they offer assistance to their clients within the context of their communities and environments. The Preamble of the Ethical Standards affirms that human service professionals and those who educate them foster and integrate the unique values and characteristics that underlie human services. In doing so, they uphold the integrity and ethics of the profession, promote client and community well-being, and enhance their own professional growth. The core values include: respecting the inherent dignity and welfare of all people; promoting self-determination; honoring cultural diversity; advocating for social justice; and acting with integrity, honesty, genuineness and objectivity. These values reflect universal relevance and synergize with the context in which any human service professional is expected to function. Different human service professions also have their own distinct values frameworks. The National Council for Human Services charted out detailed standards encompassing the obligations of human services professionals in six domains: towards the client, the community/society, colleagues, the profession itself, the employing organization, and themselves (NOHSE, 1996). Human service professionals are expected to follow these standards in their ethical and professional

decision making. Professional obligations based on ethical standards are encapsulated in the codes of ethics of professions.

Needless to iterate, a core value framework embedded within teaching, research and practice is the fulcrum on which the human service profession of social work rests. Social work values reflect the profession's guiding philosophy of advancing human welfare, as well as its commitment for ensuring that social workers across the globe remain strongly united with common belief systems and are guided by professional commitments and ethical standards. Values in social work are informed by the pursuit of social justice, productive human relationships, human rights, and best practice (IFSW, 2014). They mark the 'tilt' of the profession towards certain desirable and envisioned ends.

The professionalization of social work: value base of practice

Since its beginnings in the last third of the 19th century, the drive to attain professionalism and a professional status for social work was strong in many countries, including India. A profession is defined by certain core attributes, within which 'professional values' or 'code of ethics' figure prominently. Greenwood (1957), one of the earliest proponents of the 'attributes approach' to professionalization, highlighted five critical attributes of a profession as being: a systematic body of theory; professional authority; sanction of the community; professional culture; and a regulative code of ethics. The acknowledgement that professional values pertaining to a "particular grouping and ordering of values within a professional context" (Congress, 2010, p. 19) are the cornerstones of the social work profession gained prominence as early as 1915, when in his address to the US National Conference on Charities and Corrections, Abraham Flexner posed the basic question: "Is social work a profession?" He went on to announce that to be a profession, social work needed, among other things, a professional code of ethics. This address initiated a process for creating a professional ethical system for social work (Gray & Webb, 2010). In one of the earliest works on the exposition of social work as a profession in India, Nanavatty (1952)

articulated the need for 'professional consciousness', or a sense of belonging or brotherhood arising from a shared philosophy of service to humanity being inculcated among the newcomers to social work. According to Nanavatty, 'professional consciousness' also implied "loyalty to one's own profession…. and willingness to carry out one's responsibilities with a high standard of service" (p.165). Fostering high standards of service based on social workers' "willingness to abide by professional ethics, emanating from the profession's philosophy of work and a sense of direction and of values" (p. 165) constituted the envisioned ideal for the Indian social work profession. That social work is not value-free and "values imbue everything that is done in social work and the entire practice of frontline delivery of services and practice interventions" (Gray & Webb, 2010, p.7) has remained integral to social work practice ever since.

The obligation of any profession to articulate its basic values, ethical principles and standards finds manifestation in its code of ethics. Much of the progression towards the development of a code of ethics for social work transpired in the West. Mary Richmond provided an experimental Code of Ethics in 1920. This served as the foundation for social workers seeking social justice and equality for the vulnerable and oppressed populations (Reamer, 2006). After the formation of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) in 1955, a simple code of ethics was adopted in 1960, followed by a more comprehensive code of ethics in 1979. Subsequent revisions were made to incorporate new components of social work practice. The most recent version of the code of ethics was adopted in 2017, and it has been used as a model for social work practice across the United States and worldwide. (Another update in the code has been undertaken in 2021 to address the importance of professional self-care in challenging workplace climates and exposure to trauma and revisions to standards for cultural competence.) The code of ethics is relevant to all social workers regardless of their professional functions, the setting in which they work, or the populations they serve. It identifies core values of service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence on which social work's mission is based. It also summarizes the

broad ethical principles that reflect the profession's core values and establishes a set of specific ethical standards that can be used to guide social work practice (NASW, 2021).

Values and ethics have special significance in these late modern times. As social workers are being called upon to deal with a complex range of issues, they often confront difficult ethical dilemmas in a practice context riddled by rapid change (McAuliffe, 2010). In such a frame, they need to have "robust, rigorous and efficient ways of making ethical decisions" (ibid. p.74). Gray and Webb (2010) lament that although extensive trappings of "rational choice prevail within the codes of ethics, codes of conduct and ethical decision making frameworks" (p.17), these are bereft of their moral and philosophical underpinnings, as moral philosophy seems to have disappeared from the social work curriculum. Congress (2010) has also highlighted that despite several attempts to make the code of ethics more easily translatable to professional practice, most remain general statements or principles. She quotes Banks (2006) in asserting that most codes are "principle based, rather than character based" (p. 25). This constraint may stem from the fact that in most educational contexts, social work values have been narrowly defined and have been restrictive in terms of the diversity of perspectives they encapsulate. They are also articulated in a rather "formulaic manner" at the level of practice, as a select set of perspectives, which seem to be in vogue at the time (Gray & Webb, 2010). Social work students and practitioners often receive sparse training for resolving ethical dilemmas, especially those arising from a clash of values or from their own beliefs.

The professional values, ethical standards and ethical principles of social work which have found acceptance across the world have of late been criticized for being West-centric. There is an increasing demand to make space for ethics and values which are localized and indigenous to the native contexts. The current focus on anti-oppressive practice demands that students be prepared to respond to the needs of diverse and distinct indigenous groups, for whom the much prescribed dominant Western worldview is not relevant, and what is needed is an alternate value

perspective (Gray et al., 2008). Anti-oppressive social work has found an echo in developing countries, which find case work and individualized social work and their accompanying values set of limited relevance (Grey & Fook, 2004).

Within the specific context of India, Weiss-Gal and Welbourne (2008), in a cross national study, highlighted the lack of a single, formal, nationwide code of ethics in India. A few social workers' associations, such as the Bombay Association of Trained Social Workers, had in fact sought to develop a nationwide ethical code, but it had not been possible to unite all professional groups with one shared code of ethics. The study also questioned the thoroughness of the integration of the ethical strictures represented in the codes in the day-to-day practice of social workers. It proposed that a lack of internalization of values and ethics could emanate from social workers' unfamiliarity with the code or lack of training to apply the values and ethics, or inability to adhere to the code within their contexts, all of which eroded the accountability of the profession. On a positive note, Weiss and Welbourne (2008) concluded that despite the uneven progress of social work professionalization in the set of countries under consideration, for all of them, the aspiration to achieve professional status was strong, and it acted as a powerful motivating force behind the development of professional organizations, professional ethics, and professional knowledge.

In India, a draft 'Declaration of Ethics for Professional Social Workers' was prepared in the mid-nineties by the Social Work Educators' Forum (SWEF) at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, the first school of social work in India. As per its Preamble, the Declaration was "intended to serve as a guide to the members of the social work profession" and ….was "rooted in the contemporary social reality which has a historical background and in the framework of humanistic values, based on the intrinsic worth of all human and non-human life" (TISS, Social Work Educator's Forum, 1997, p. 336). The Declaration provided general ethical principles to guide conduct with respect to self and the profession, work with the marginalized and other people in need, the society and the state, co-workers, employing

organizations and social work education and research. However, apart from the fact that the Declaration tried to codify the ethical obligations of social workers, it did not find universal acceptance by social work educators and practitioners.

Subsequently, in 2015, a "Code of Ethics for Professional Social Workers in India" was developed by the National Association for Professional Social Workers in India (NAPSWI). In framing its Code, NAPSWI acknowledged reference to sections from the Code of Ethics developed by professional associations of social workers of other countries, notably the U.S, U.K, Canada, Australia, Singapore and Switzerland. According to the NAPSWI document, a code of ethics issued by a professional body is of the nature of a policy statement, and even a form of legislation within the closed group of professionals. This was done to create a binding on its stakeholders, resulting in specific sanctions for the violation of the code. It was expected that the "adherence of such code of conduct shall lead to a higher standard in professional education, training and practice with equally high professional accountability" (NAPSWI, 2015, p.3). However, this Code of Ethics has also not been universally acknowledged by the entire social work fraternity across the country.

Thus, we see that there is yet much ground to be covered when it comes to evolving and accepting a universal and contextual code of ethics for social work practice. At the same time, there is widespread recognition that the profession must reaffirm its distinct presence in established domains of practice and stake claim in newer realms that envisage a functional niche for social work. There is also a concerted movement towards the creation of a national regulatory body viz. a national council for social work. Under the circumstances, the imperatives for social work to firm up its professional identity are all too obvious.

The pledge and oath: meaning and significance for professions

As per the Cambridge Dictionary, a pledge is "a serious or formal promise or something that you give as a sign that you will keep a promise" (Cambridge

University Press, n.d). The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English furthers the definition when it says that a pledge represents "a serious promise or agreement, especially one made publicly or officially" (Bullon, 2008). Professional pledges often take the form of 'oaths'. The Merriam Webster.Com Dictionary qualifies oath as "a solemn usually formal calling upon God or a god to witness to the truth of what one says or to witness that one sincerely intends to do what one says" and as "a solemn attestation of the truth or inviolability of one's words"(Merriam Webster Inc., n.d). Oaths have "public, as well as private implications; transcend both the swearer and the observer(s) who witness the oath-taking; involve the personhood of the oath-taker; and prescribe consequences that arise from the failure to fulfill the oath" (Theunissen, 2008, p. 56). An oath may be regarded as a very special kind of promise. It transcends time and geographical boundaries in the process of uniting people. Oaths thus bind people to a particular community as they connect the viewer, and speaker with those who had come before and those who will come after through a defined ceremony (Sunstein, 1990). Quoting Austin (1970), Sulmasy (1999) says that both oaths and promises are "performative utterances" (p. 331) and by virtue of the fact that they do not operate in private domain, such public utterances have a powerful hold on the participants who are less likely to violate it (Sunstein, 1990). Consequently, professional oath contributes towards enhancing professionalism and creating greater conformity to professional standards (De Bruin, 2017).

De Bruin (2017) also qualifies oaths as being stronger than promises in terms of the obligations they impose on their incumbents; the moral compulsion they carry; and the additional formal and substantive conditions they incorporate. Oaths are

> generally distinguished by their greater moral weight compared with promises, their public character, their validation by transcendent appeal, the involvement of the personhood of the swearer, the prescription of consequences for failure to uphold their contents, the generality of the scope of their contents, the prolonged time frame of the commitment, the fact that their moral force remains binding in spite of

failures on the part of those to whom the swearer makes the commitment, and the fact that interpersonal fidelity is the moral hallmark of the commitment of the swearer (p.329).

Finally, oaths are generally not contractual in a legalistic sense, but represent a relational commitment to the personhood of those toward whom the oath is directed. As such, an oath uses a higher form of ethical or moral authority than implied by a commitment or promise, and therefore, represents a higher level of obligation on the part of the practitioner. A distinction also needs to be drawn between 'oaths' and 'codes'. According to Sulmasy (1999) codes are collections of specific moral rules, and not performative utterances. They do not signify future intentions, nor do they impose a personal obligation of adherence on the one who is enjoined by the code.

Many professional groups "swear an oath on the basis of legal privilege or, alternately, on the basis of ancient tradition" (Theunissen, 2008, p. 56). De Bruin (2017) considers professional oaths as being the most dated form of ethics management. Deriving their significance from the social function that the profession is ordained to perform, they often represent "promises made during public ceremonies that exhort the oath-takers to act in ways that are consistent with professional standards" (p.1). If carefully designed, they "foster professionalism, facilitate moral deliberation, and enhance compliance with professional standards" (ibid).

Medical practitioners rely on ancient tradition for the swearing of a common oath. The Hippocratic Oath is perhaps the oldest oath which goes back to the time of Hippocrates of Kos (c. 400 BCE). The oath represents a sacred bind between caregiver and patient, and upholds the obligation of the medical practitioner based upon the ethics affirmed in the text and voluntarily assumed by him/her. Kass (1983), maintained that being a medical 'professional' was a matter of ethics which necessitated dedication to a way of life, in the service of others and to serve some higher good. The oath and the pledge are reminders to the medical profession of their

responsibility to their patients. All modern medical oaths follow the essence of the Hippocratic Oath.

Nursing also has a long history of oath taking by its incumbents. The Nightingale Pledge, named in honor of Florence Nightingale, the founder of modern nursing, is a modified version of the Hippocratic Oath and was initially created in the year 1893. This pledge represented a statement of the ethics and principles of the nursing profession in the United States. In 1935, a revision to the pledge was made. In the more recent years, many nursing schools in the U.S have made changes to the original or 1935 versions to promote a more independent nursing profession, with its own distinct ethical standards. The oath is often administered at graduation ceremonies wherein nurses take a pledge to do their best for their patients. Even in India, in many schools of nursing, probationer nurses recite the 'Florence Nightingale Pledge' to dedicate themselves to the profession. The American Psychotherapy Association has also adopted a pledge to uphold the ethical standards of practice of psychotherapists (American Psychotherapy Association, n.d). Many other professions including teachers (Heiderscheidt, 2003), lawyers (Bar Council of India, 2021), pharmacists (Indian Pharmaceutical Association, n.d), and library staff (American Library Association, 2017) have also created their own pledges which are administered either at the time of their entry into professional education or when they graduate.

A question that arises is, if oaths are neither a universal endeavor nor do they construe a legal obligation, and if they do not even guarantee morality based on the ethical standards underlying them, then why do professionals such as doctors take an oath? Sritharan et al. (2001) shared the results of a working party of the British Medical Association in 1992, which found that the affirmation can strengthen a doctor's resolve to act with integrity in extreme circumstances. This group recommended that medical schools should incorporate medical ethics into the core curriculum, and all medical graduates should make a commitment, by means of affirmation, to observe an ethical code. With increasing complexity of health care arrangements and interagency collaborations, and with public confidence

in doctors being on the decline in the U.K, the medical profession was forced to re-examine its core values. Under such circumstances, for newly qualified doctors to freely declare their intentions to act ethically and professionally proved popular for those who placed themselves in their care, and for the community at large. Based on a review of literature on medical oaths, Theunissen (2017) found that despite scarcity of evidence, many authors had elucidated a reliance on the practice of professional oaths for the formation of professional identity for a physician and for the development of ethical medical practice.

In the overall context, Scheinman et al. (2018) reported that professional oaths performed several purposes. First of all, they helped in connecting the takers of the oath with the legacy and traditions of the profession, and instilled in them a sense of obligation to uphold this heritage. Further, recognizing and embracing the obligations iterated in oaths contributed to professional identity formation in the oath takers. Oath taking also signified voluntary acceptance of a code of ethics, and thereby acted as an acknowledgment to society that the profession was guided by a common ethical code. As with other public rituals, like singing the national anthem, the recital of an oath in unison served to bind participants as a group, and to other professionals in their domain. And depending on how it was presented and contextualized, the ceremony of oath taking tended to distinguish the professionals from others and helped bind them together through recognition of common obligations.

Methodology

The present article is based on the analysis of secondary data obtained from Delhi School of Social Work at the University of Delhi (hereafter referred to as the School). The annals of the School were perused to explore the background and context of the two pledges that had been conceived at different points in the history of the School. These pledges were analyzed within the milieu of the socio economic and political contexts of the times in which they evolved, in order to understand the discourse surrounding them.

The aim was also to gauge the thrust of the pledges; decode the social work values being communicated through them; and to connect them with the prevailing definitions and scope of the social work profession. An analysis of student journals written by social work students during a formal orientation programme helped assess students' response and feedback on the pledge and the pledge taking ceremony, which was a part of the programme. The journals were thematically analyzed to comprehend the responses of the students towards their entire experience of pledge taking. The analysis of these two sets of data aided the authors to build the arguments set forth in the paper.

Social work professional pledge: Indian context

A reference to oaths taken by medical and nursing professionals becomes significant for social workers, as both medicine and social work are deemed exemplars of human service professions. Social work can benefit from the appropriation of the same tradition of such other human service professions that have effectively used a professional pledge or oath to internalize the core values set in their constituents, including faculty, students and practitioners. A professional oath for social workers can provide a sound ethical grounding in: service and commitment; social and economic justice; human rights; respect for the dignity of the clients, their distinctness, abilities and rights. Nathanson (2003) argued that the ethical component of practice was based on the principles and core values of the profession, and constituted an integral part of all practice, like medicine. Ethical practice was a core function of the social work practitioner, and the use of an oath affirmed adherence to a set of rules, principles and values between the practitioner and society. Further, ethical issues were not "add-ons" to professional practice; rather they were the foundational core to all professional decisions, just like those in the medical realm. An increasing focus on ethics sensitization and training in social work professional education underscores the imperative to consistently instill ethical thought into practice. Viewed from this perspective, a professional oath can operate

as an important means to integrate an ethical stance as a central pillar of social work practice. It portends the potential of arousing the much needed ethical consciousness among budding social workers; deepening their sense of bonding, loyalty and duty to the profession and to the client groups; fostering professional competency; and helping to maintain the highest ideals and attributes of professional practice.

At this point in time, there is no universally accepted oath that finds prominence in professional social work education and training in India. Even outside of India, few schools of social work in the United States, Canada and South Africa have been known to have pledge- taking ceremonies. There are some documented illustrations of self-devised and voluntary pledges undertaken by students at some schools of social work. In India, the 'Declaration of Ethics for Professional Social Workers' by TISS (TISS, Social Work Educator's Forum, 1997), did take the form of a pledge and encapsulated an articulation of the value framework of social work. However, being too lengthy, it was not pragmatic for the Declaration to be used as a pledge or an oath for Indian social workers. The founding fraternity at Delhi School of Social Work, which was the second school of social work to be established in the country, did recognize the need to institute a pledge for its social work class in its formative years. The initial pledge was replaced by another one, which aligned better with the changing paradigm and thrust of professional social work in the country.

The tradition and practice of a social work pledge at a school of social work

The pledge at the School has a unique place in the history of the institution which was established in 1946. During the foundational years of the School, the faculty recognised the need to facilitate student's recognition of social work convictions and convert them into the semblance of a pledge in order to create a connect between the student trainees and their envisioned mission as social workers. However, the pledge remained specific to the School.

It was in the year 1947, during the post partition violence that Mahatma Gandhi had shifted to Delhi, and was pleading for non–violence among the two religious communities. He was keeping a close watch on the work of volunteers who were working to assuage the wounds of the people who had been suffering the immensely adverse impact of this cleavage that had carved the nation into two parts. The students of the School were working on the ground, and Gandhiji was cognizant of their efforts. On the occasion of Mahatma Gandhi's birthday on 2nd October 1947, the students wanted to give him a unique gift. The then principal of the School, Ms. Elmina Lucke, suggested that they individually write and dedicate three personal convictions to the Mahatma. That year the School had enrolled 19 women students. They all wrote their convictions and presented them to Gandhiji. Ms. Elmina Lucke blended the convictions of the students into one cohesive pledge which was also presented to him on his birthday. This is how the formative pledge of the School came into being. It was framed by all the students of that time and reflected their convictions as social workers. (Mahatma Gandhi was highly appreciative of their gift, and invited the students for interaction during his evening prayer time.) The original pledge was made more compact in 1948, and this evolved as the first formal pledge of the School. Thereafter, it became a practice for all neophytes to receive this first formal pledge during their investiture into the master's programme in social work at the School. This pledge was traditionally written on khadi paper, symbolizing the value that Gandhiji ascribed to khadi, and it continued to function as a much-cherished guidepost to the social work till the year 2007-08. It is reproduced in Appendix A.

The simplicity and the earnestness of purpose of the oath taker/beholder that is reflected in the first pledge adopted by the School are striking. In the context in which this pledge evolved, Gandhi's spirit of service had come to occupy primacy. Faith in the highest virtue of 'service' to humanity, and belief in the predominance of duty as Gandhi's core postulates underlay the essence of this pledge. The pledge was clearly seen to uphold the value of service to humanity, and especially to those who were rendered weak or were in distress. Non-discrimination in rendering service

to all who needed them was the hallmark of such service, which if undertaken with love, patience and conscious intent, had the capacity to heal pain, suffering and ill-will. Additionally, the formative years of social work in India continued to draw from the cultural context of 'service' and 'welfare.' The awakening of a sense of social concern and an orientation to helping others in need permeated the spirit of the first pledge.

The pledge recognized compassionate service; kindly disposition and sympathy (as against social work's contemporary focus on empathy) in engaging with the lives of the vulnerable and those who deviated from normative prescriptions. The recognition of dignity of all human beings and of their inherent ability to create change in their thinking and behavior formed the edifice of social work. Loyalty to all those who served the profession, and with all those who served the nation and its people was also extolled. Being a pledge, persistence and perseverance in working towards the goals of social work was emphasized. The sentimental value of this pledge was so immense that it continued to imbue the spirit of the School for a long period of time.

It was only much later that a new School pledge took form. This pledge was written by the faculty and formally introduced in the School in the year 2007-08. This pledge added to the present day foundation for the professional conduct of social workers. As has been highlighted above, a gap of more than six decades separated this pledge from the original pledge. There was thus, perceptible difference in not only the focus of the two pledges, but also the way they respond to, and echo, the larger social narrative. The present-day pledge is attached as Appendix B.

The second pledge reflects the significant shifts in social work: from welfare to development and subsequently to social justice and human rights paradigms in social work discourse. During the last six decades, socio-political and economic churning across the globe has led to significant transformations. Human misery emanating from poverty, livelihood loss, wars and civil strife, climatic changes, terrorism, and religious and ethnic conflicts, have pushed a multitude of individuals, groups and communities to the margins. Most significantly, globalization has posed several

challenges for the profession, as rural and urban poor, homeless people, malnourished children, women, dalits (lower castes), tribals and sexual minorities have borne the worst negative fallout of the enhanced emphasis on economic growth (Nadkarni & Joseph, 2014). These challenges have brought forth a powerful discourse built on the edifice of social justice, equality, human rights, democratic participation and the dignity and worth of individuals and groups, which was echoed at diverse national and international platforms.

The latest global definition of social work reads:

> 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 knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. The above definition may be amplified at national and/or regional levels (IFSW, 2014).

As the social work profession in India has endeavored to respond to the critical challenges, it has redefined its contours by adopting the global definition of social work, and contextualizing it within the indigenous frame. Analysis of the present pledge shows that it has not only imbibed the global definition in letter and spirit, but has gone much beyond. It portrays the paradigmatic shift in the stance of the profession in a very discernible manner. Core attributes of social change, solidarity and social cohesion, diversity, justice, empowerment, liberation and human rights are pervasive in the pledge, just as they are in the definition of social work. The pledge even goes beyond the definition when it brings to fore the manner in which institutions with which professionals engage must be managed. It also recognizes the obligations and rights which are mandated by the Constitution of India.

The pledge can be seen to cover three main aspects permeating the profession. First, the professional self; second, the institution/s with which

the profession is associated; and third, the constituencies with whom the profession engages and its associated ethos. The pledge acknowledges that as individuals, social workers may have their own biases and prejudices. However, as responsible human service professionals, they must question their own biases, process them and confront them. The social workers' ability to critically interrogate their own beliefs and value systems enables them to be open to the acceptance of the diversity of opinions, views, beliefs and value systems around them. It also enhances their ability to take concerted positions on issues, especially those that do not correspond to their own beliefs and values sets. The pledge nudges the professionals to challenge the confines of their secured life, and the narrow belief systems that they may have embraced on account of the distinctness of their socialization and lived experiences.

The pledge also urges social workers to critically reflect upon social institutions and structures, in order to strive for social change aimed at equality, human rights and social justice. It prompts them to transform institutions into dynamic spaces for action for social change. As social workers, they are expected to augment the transparency and accountability of the institutions to various stakeholders, and at the same time work towards enhancing the knowledge base on which the profession rests. The issues and challenges confronting society find manifestation in the pledge as it exhorts the professionals to stand 'with' and 'for' those who are marginalized or oppressed and who face systematic institutional biases. It expects social workers to participate in the protection of peoples' right to freely express themselves; a right which is also constitutionally protected. Reaching out to people holding diverse views so as to engage them in meaningful dialogue is crucial, as it not only enhances social solidarity, but also ensures participation of those who are peripheral to mainstream discourse.

Above all, the pledge acts as a reminder to social workers that they are professionally bound to promoting equality and diversity; working towards ensuring justice to all; and resolving differences through reconciliation. The focus of pledge is on an inclusive struggle to promote a life of dignity for all,

irrespective of religion, ethnicity, culture, group or community. As an instrument of positive change, the professional is encouraged to act in an ethical manner and with conviction arising out of critical understanding, passion and perseverance, while at the same time maintaining honesty and humanity. In no uncertain terms, the pledge serves as a beacon, a symbol, that unites students, teachers and future social workers in their professional commitment.

Inculcating professional ethos amongst social work students through the Pledge

It is pertinent to note that although the value framework that social work upholds is core to the professionalization of its constituents, the integration of professional values seems rather elusive and difficult to implement during professional education and training. To help the diverse group of students appreciate the imperatives of identifying and absorbing the fundamental values and engaging with the ethical and philosophical positions which will inform their work and competence as a professional is by no means a simple process, or even a mechanical one that can be achieved through simple classroom instruction or field supervision. Multifarious and ongoing ways to engage with the teaching and integration of values and ethics are necessary to prepare practitioners who are well grounded in values-based practice. While the cognitive and practical elements of learning are crucial, they are not sufficient; rather, it is the emotional components that are indispensable if we are to emphasize that social work is, above all, a genuine human encounter. The use of a pledge (or alternately a professional oath) is one such viable medium to build commitment for the assumption of the roles, responsibilities and obligations of the social work profession.

For the past eight years, the new batch of students take this pledge in a symbolic ceremony on the first day of a carefully designed, formal orientation programme. The background to the Pledge is created by the rendition of a well-known devotional song treasured by Mahatma Gandhi

called *Vaishnava Jana to* [3]. This famous song radiates the core professional social work values of empathy, honesty, dignity and worth of individuals, equality, selflessness, and also controlled emotional involvement. The attributes of

> creating an empathetic connect with people; possessing egalitarian thoughts and action; developing acceptance and non-judgmental attitude; shedding bias and prejudice; rendering service with humility; reinforcing gender equality and ethical conduct; integrating an abiding faith in truth and justice; and choosing to tread the challenging path of service with the single minded focus on vision and mission are amply revealed by Mahatma's most favourite bhajan (Agnimitra & Sharma, 2020, p. 6).

The pledge taking 'candle light' ceremony starts with a student of the senior batch passing on the flame of a lit candle to the chain of students of the newly admitted batch. All the students collectively and publicly, in the presence of the faculty and staff of the School, then recite the pledge with lit candles in their hands creating an emotionally palpable ethos of committed human service. This symbolic ceremony has evolved as an important medium for connecting the neophytes with the ethos of social work through an oath of allegiance to its cherished goals and values. An analysis of the learning journals written by students of two successive batches, who recorded their experience, reflection and introspection about the two weeks long orientation to social work, revealed a discernible acknowledgement of the impact that the pledge ceremony creates for them in apprising them

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[3] Vaishnava Jana to' was one the most favorite hymns of Mahatma Gandhi. The hymn underscores the qualities of a good human being and it was regularly sung at Gandhi ashram. The hymn can be accessed at
https://www.indembassybern.gov.in/docs/Lyrics%20of%20Vaishnav%20Jan%20To%20bhajan_23052018_111927.pdf

about the professional ethos of social work, its values framework and expected professional roles and obligations. A student wrote,

> Although I had joined social work in the hope of a prospective career, I had little idea about what exactly professional social work was! I only knew that it was about helping people. However, when we collectively read out the social work pledge, it was a moment of reckoning for me. The pledge apprised me about what social work was; who it serves; what principles I am expected to follow; and what my forthcoming role would be! But I was also a little intimidated by the responsibility that seemed to be placed on me!

Another student reflected on the validation that the pledge provided for her choice of social work. She wrote,

> I am not a very emotional person, yet the 'pledge' and the manner in which the pledge was read out by us was a moment like no other! I was emotionally moved, beyond words! It struck me that I had entered a space which held immense expectations from me..... Although I did feel quite intimidated by what I was expected to do from hereon, it was almost as if I found a reason to be here, and a justification to convince my own self that this was why I had chosen social work.

Many students were moved by the professional ethos that emanated from the pledge. The pledge emphatically lays down the responsibilities and expectations from the budding professionals. In fact, it even urges them to go beyond those iterated within it. When the neophytes take this pledge in public, in the presence of the senior batch, faculty and staff, it reaffirms their conscious intent to enter the realm of committed human service and join the league of social work professionals. This articulation builds moral pressure on them to live up to the mandate of the profession that they have publicly endorsed. Some students did admit that the pledge had created for them moral benchmark. This was distinctly captured in the following narrative,

> I did not know that social work had such a distinct set of virtues that every social worker was expected to develop. I went home and read the pledge once again. It was all about me and what I was expected to do

from hereon. I became aware that I had to work on myself if I was to really become all that I was pledging for!

Yet another one acknowledged,

> After the pledge I realized that social work is ethical, and social workers have to become ethical. There were so many values that were present in the pledge like compassion with thoughtfulness, conviction, passion, honesty, perseverance, humanity, inclusion, and acceptance. Social work is certainly not everyone's cup of tea... I hope that I can develop all these and really serve people with the right spirit and devotion.

Reflections in learning journals also revealed the essence of the emotional impact that the pledge ceremony evoked. As one student recorded,

> I got goose bumps while we all recited the pledge together, with the flame of the candles illuminating our faces in the dark auditorium. Each word of the pledge and what it represented for us as future social workers was so beautifully written! I immediately got connected to social work in that moment.

Yet another neophyte was bewildered by the cohesiveness and connection that was felt by members of gathering as the pledge was given. He wrote,

> I was so surprised to see each member of the teaching faculty and senior class reciting the pledge with us, with so much passion, devotion and sincerity. It was almost as if the pledge had connected all of us. We were all aspiring to become social workers. And then in the end, as all our lit candles stood huddled together, I could not locate which one was mine. They all looked so beautiful...shining together. This was all so unexpected. I have been to two higher education institutions earlier, but had never felt such vibes.

Sunstein (1990) articulated that the public rendition of a pledge manages to create vertical and horizontal connections as the viewers and speakers are bound together in the embrace of a shared vision, mission and values. The imperative of this symbolism and culminating practice is integral to professional practice in a country as diverse as India. As a microcosm of the

nation, neophytes from diverse social, cultural, regional and religious backgrounds and ideological positions converge in the School to achieve their common aspiration of doing social work. The collective rendition of the professional pledge subsumes some of this this diversity into a shared iteration of common professional roles and expectations. In the words of another student,

> As we formed a human chain and started passing on the light of our candles to each other, what struck me was how our identities; be it gender based, or coming from different corners of the country, with different backgrounds, and speaking different languages just shrunk! We were all connected like beads in a string. The ceremony united all of us so beautifully. What stood out was only one thing... our common desire to become social work professionals!

And yet another one wrote,

> I shall never forget the pledge taking ceremony in my life. It brought tears in my eyes. I will always cherish it and will be reminded of it each day! What an inspiring way to begin my new journey as a social worker!

Another comment that stood out was by a student who wrote,

> I am so glad that I found my true calling in life. As I took the pledge, I knew instantly, that this was truly where I belonged! And I thanked my parents for standing with me in my choice! They would be so proud of me...

The public articulation of the pledge also has the potential of bringing to fore the personhood of those groups and communities who belong to diverse castes, regions and religions, some of whom have been marginalized, their voices silenced. It helps to create connection of the aspiring social worker with the people belonging to such communities, exhorting them to share their struggles and challenges. As a student articulated,

> The pledge was like an entire orientation to social work. As I recited the pledge, I became aware of my role as a social worker and whom I have to

stand for! And in the end when we said...this is the least that I pledge for, I became aware of the huge sense of responsibility that I had just taken upon myself! I hope I can fulfill this responsibility well.

Conclusion

The authors are of the firm conviction that in view of the increasing complexity of issues confronting the social work profession in these confounding times, an unequivocal focus on values inculcation is critical. Social workers are increasingly being called upon to perform many complex tasks involving complicated human interactions. They often confront a plethora of competing values in trying to take the right decision about how to intervene in any given situation. Over the course of their practice, they also face a wide range of ethical issues and dilemmas that are difficult to resolve. On account of these, social work education has to be adequately invested in rigorous and systematic values training, with resolute thrust on the internalization of values and ethics among social work incumbents. Additionally, there is dire need for social work to consolidate and reflect on its professional identity and relevance. Facing competition from other disciplines, even in those domains which have traditionally been its core practice areas, social work in India is increasingly aware of the need to 'become more visible'. Based on their experiences as faculty in a school of social work, the authors propose the institutionalization of a social work pledge articulating the ideals of the profession and associated professional obligations. This may be a crucial step in grounding the newly recruited incumbents in the professional ethos. As a profession that intensively engages with human beings, a pledge, delivered in a solemn manner can generate a consciousness of the sense of responsibility and ethical conduct that social workers must imbibe right from when they step into the professional fold.

The pledge could emerge as a locus and binding force around which social workers can acquire a collective professional identity. A pledge that recognizes the local context and gives space to values and issues emerging

from the grassroots can help overcome the emergent challenges and redefine the contours of this profession. It also presents an opportunity to foster a professional and public understanding of the values that social workers share with the groups and communities they serve. Whether it is a universal pledge, or one that is distinct for an institution, it can enable social workers to extend social work 'virtues'. Illustrations of students' reflections on pledge-taking provide evidence that the experience helped them to connect with the legacy of the profession and made them appreciate the immense responsibility that the profession bestowed on them. Recognition of professional obligations in the pledge contributed to their professional identity formation. Such public rendition of the pledge not only reinforces the spirit of voluntary acceptance of the code of ethics, it also acts as a reaffirmation to the larger society that the profession is guided by an ethical code (Scheinman et al, 2018). The symbolism of an investiture ceremony to be institutionalized in schools of social work can aid the neophytes to amalgamate the spirit of human service; evolve the coveted professional consciousness; and embrace the social work professional mantle more readily and effectively.

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Appendix A: The First Pledge

I shall serve to the best of my ability the depressed, the disabled and the needy

I shall serve all equally and I shall try to develop such judgment and affection and patience that my service will heal ill feelings and distress

I pledge myself to compassion and words of kindness and friendly sympathy that will enter into the joys and sorrows of all who are needy or afflicted or erring

I shall never lose my faith in the value of every human being and their capacity to change ways of life and thinking

I pledge to work for loyalty within my professional group. I shall work also for extension of such loyalty to all men and women who have the responsibility of serving my country and my people

I shall look not back but forward until the goal is reached

Let me serve my fellow beings. That is all I ask.

Appendix B: The New Pledge

I shall self-reflect to examine my own biases, clarify my beliefs and take stances.

I pledge to step out of my area of comfort so I may meet people, listen to their lives, grow and be open to their full harmony

I pledge to be critical and ask questions in order to cast doubt, inquire and prompt social change

For myself and my colleagues in profession, I shall strive continuously to advance knowledge about people and issues

I pledge to contribute towards turning our institutions into genuinely transparent, accountable and fair communities of action.

In solidarity with those who have been forced to silence, I promise to defend freedom of expression, to being open always to dialogue and listening

I shall be consciously inclusive towards all people and act to promote diversity, equality mutual respect, justice and reconciliation

To marginalized people from different ethnicities, religious cultures, groups and communities, I give promise to walk in arms in their struggle for life and dignity

From this day I am aware that I am a part of community of change agents

I thus pledge to act ethically, in compassion with thoughtfulness, conviction, passion, honesty, perseverance and humanity

This is the least I pledge for …