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Unfortunately it almost vanished from the country of its origin after prevailing there for about 1500 years. Dr B R Ambedkar staged its revival in 1956 when he embraced Buddhism along with millions of his followers. Buddhism was founded by Gautam Buddha (563 BCE-483 BCE). In his period, the birth based Varna System (Chaturvarna system) was prevalent which was highly discriminatory against the Shudras, (ranked lowest under the Varna System) and the women. Inequality, injustice and discrimination were the hallmark of the Varna system. Buddha relentlessly attacked the Varna system and sought to establish an equalitarian society based on the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity, through his Dhamma. Buddha's philosophy appealed to the masses and this led to the emergence of Buddhism as the religion of the majority. Buddhism was spread to whole of Indian subcontinent and even to Afghanistan and Iran. The great Mauryan emperors, especially Ashoka, played pivotal role in the expansion of Buddhism. Ashoka, during his reign, sent missionaries to Srilanka, Egypt, Greece. India, it is claimed, was Buddhist for around 1500 years, which is said to be the golden period of India.

Keywords: Buddhism and Social Work, Dhamma, Ashoka, Spirituality

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Buddhism The Pioneer of Social Work Practices

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Buddhism is an ancient Indian religion that is practiced in many parts of the world including countries like Japan, China, Burma, Thailand, South Korea, Vietnam, Mongolia, Srilanka. Unfortunately it almost vanished from the country of its origin after prevailing there for about 1500 years. Dr B R Ambedkar staged its revival in 1956 when he embraced Buddhism along with millions of his followers. Buddhism was founded by Gautam Buddha (563 BCE-483 BCE). In his period, the birth based Varna System (Chaturvarna system) was prevalent which was highly discriminatory against the Shudras, (ranked lowest under the Varna System) and the women. Inequality, injustice and discrimination were the hallmark of the Varna system. Buddha relentlessly attacked the Varna system and sought to establish an equalitarian society based on the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity, through his Dhamma. Buddha's philosophy appealed to the masses and this led to the emergence of Buddhism as the religion of the majority. Buddhism was spread to whole of Indian subcontinent and even to Afghanistan and Iran. The great Mauryan emperors, especially Ashoka, played pivotal role in the expansion of Buddhism. Ashoka, during his reign, sent missionaries to Srilanka, Egypt, Greece. India, it is claimed, was Buddhist for around 1500 years, which is said to be the golden period of India.

Sangha, the order of the Buddhist monks (Bhikhus/Bhikhunis) was a well organized unit. The Bhikhus/Bhikhunis reached out to

the masses to serve them. They rendered exemplary social services to the people with great dedication and commitment. They were the earliest social workers who pioneered the social work practices. Unfortunately their contribution to the humanity hasn't been acknowledged.

1. Buddhism and the Goal of Social Work

The primary goal of professional social work is to promote human well being with special attention to the marginalized, oppressed and those living below poverty line. Thus the social work emphasizes on the human well being as well as the well being of the society in general.

This goal of the professional social work is echoed in the Buddha's philosophy. The centre of his Dhamma is man and the relation of man to man in his life on earth. This was his first postulate. His second postulate was that men are living in sorrow, in misery and poverty. The world is full of suffering and that how to remove this suffering from the world is the only purpose of Dhamma, nothing else is Dhamma. The recognition of the existence of suffering and to show the way to remove suffering is the foundation and basis of his Dhamma.

2. Liberty, Equality, Fraternity and Buddhism

Although the motto "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" first appeared during the French Revolution, it was added to the French Constitution in 1958. However the ideals of Liberty, equality and fraternity were part of Buddha's philosophy long before the French revolution. Dr B R Ambedkar has observed that his philosophy too was "enshrined" in these three words. However he adds, "Let no one however say that I have borrowed my philosophy from the French Revolution. I have not. I have derived them from the teachings of my master, the Buddha. I found that his teaching was democratic to the core". Dr Ambedkar further argues that for Buddhists the Dhamma is that "universal morality which protects the weak from the strong, which provides common models,

standards, and rules, and which safeguards the growth of the individual. It is what makes liberty and equality effective....” According to Dr Ambedkar, fraternity ‘is nothing but another name for brotherhood of men which is another name for morality. This is why the Buddha preached that Dhamma is morality.’

Buddhism laid great stress on equality, the admission to Sangha was open to all irrespective of caste, varna, social status and gender. Inside the Sangh all were equal and the rank was regulated by worth and not by birth. In this regard Buddha once said, “The Sangh was like the ocean and the Bhikkhus were like the rivers that fell into the ocean. The river has its separate name and separate existence. But once the river entered the ocean it lost its separate name and separate existence. It becomes one with the rest. Same is the case with the Sangh. When a Bhikkhu entered the Sangh he became one with the rest like the water of the ocean. He lost his caste. He lost his status”

3. Buddhism in the Context of Social Work Core Values

The professional social work has certain core values of service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence, on which are based the ethical principles of social work. These principles are the expression of the ideals to which all social workers should aspire. These ideals are reflected in the philosophy of Buddhism and the activities of Buddhist Sangha.

The Value of Service

Ethical Principle: Social workers’ primary goal is to help people in need and to address social problems. The social workers invoke their knowledge, values, and skills to address social issues and help those in need without significant financial returns.

The Buddhist Sangha was a well organized order of the Buddhist monks. Unlike the ascetics who are dissociated from

the society, the Buddhist monks were intimately connected with the masses and rendered valuable services to the people in return for nothing. In addition to preaching the Dhamma, the Buddhist monks provided individual counseling, family counseling, group counseling on matters relating to daily lives. They were instrumental in conflict resolution between /individuals/groups/ states and establishment of a peace loving society. They provided support to the oppressed and the marginalized that included the shudras, women and other lower castes. The monks also provided the much needed health care to the needy people. Many monks were trained in medicine at the Buddhist universities of Taxila and Nalanda which had courses in medicine. Jivaka, the famous physician, looked after the healthcare of Buddha and his Sangha. He was very keen to join Sangha, but Buddha asked him not to join Sangha and instead use his expertise in medicine for serving the masses.

The Value of Social Justice

Ethical Principle: Social workers challenge social injustice.

Buddha vehemently attacked the then prevalent birth based Varna system/caste system through his sermons and discourses. Under the varna system the society was divided into four classes namely Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and the Shudras. There was graded inequality, Brahmins were placed at the top ; the Kshatriyas were placed below the Brahmins but above the Vaishyas; the Vaishyas were placed below the Kshatriyas but above the Shudras and the Shudras were placed the lowest of all. It was also necessary that each class must follow the occupation assigned to it. The Brahmins' occupation was to learn, teach and officiate at religious ceremonies. The Kshatriyas' occupation was to bear arms and to fight. The occupation of the Vaishyas was trade and business. The Shudras' occupation was to do menial service for all the three superior classes. Transgression from one class to the other was not possible. Thus social disabilities were heaped upon the Shudras, the lowest ranked as well as women. While the upper

three Varnas namely the Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas enjoyed all the privileges, the Shudras and the women suffered a lot and faced discrimination and deprivation in every aspect of life. Buddha and his Sangha challenged this unjust social institution and championed the cause of the Shudras and women. Buddha was of the view that for Dhamma to be Saddhamma, it must pull down all social barriers between man and man. There is no argument in favour of caste and inequality which he did not refute. The argument between Buddha and a Brahmin named Assalayana in Assalayana-Sutta on the issue of superiority of Brahmins is very enlightening. Assalayana went to the Buddha and placed before him the case in favour of the superiority of the Brahmins and the Varna system. He said, “ Brahmins maintain, Gotama, that only Brahmins form the superior class, all other classes being inferior ; that only Brahmins form the white class, all other classes being black fellows ; that purity resides in Brahmins alone and not in non-Brahmins; and that only Brahmins are Brahma’s legitimate sons, born from his mouth, offspring of his, creations of his, and his heirs. What does Gotama say hereon?”

The Buddha’s answer simply pulverized Assalayana. The Buddha said : “Assalayana, are not the Brahmin wives of Brahmins known to have their periods, and to conceive, and to lie and give birth? Notwithstanding this do Brahmins really maintain all what you have said though they are themselves born of women like everybody else?” Assalayana gave no answer. The Buddha went further and asked Assalayana another question. “ Suppose, Assalayana, a young noble consorts with a Brahmin maiden, what would be the issue? Will it be an animal or human being? “ Again Assalayana gave no answer. “As to the possibility of moral development, is it only a Brahmin and not a man of the other three classes, who in this country, can develop in his heart the love that knows no hate or illwill?” No. All four classes can do it,” replied Assalayana. “Assalayana ! Have you ever heard,” asked the Buddha, “ that in the Yona and Kamboja countries and in other adjacent countries, there are only two classes, namely, masters and slaves, and that a master can become a slave and *vice*

versa? “ Yes, I have heard so,” replied Assalayana. “If your Chaturvarna is an ideal society, why is it not universal?”

On none of these points was Assalayana able to defend his theory of caste and inequality. He was completely silenced. He ended by becoming a disciple of the Buddha.

Buddha’s discourses led to the awakening among the shudras, women and weakening of the Varna/Caste system to a great extent. The shudras, women and other downtrodden castes were admitted to the Sangha. This step went a long way in ensuring justice to the aforesaid marginalized sections in that period. This made Buddhism popular among the Shudras, women and other lower castes who were in majority and Buddhism spread to all the nooks and corners of the Indian subcontinent and beyond. Buddhism was thus successful in overthrowing an unjust social order and its replacement with an equalitarian society. Thus Buddhism successfully challenged the social injustice and helped in the empowerment of the downtrodden sections of the society.

The Value of Dignity and Worth of the Person

Ethical Principle: Social workers respect the inherent dignity and worth of each person. Social workers are supposed to treat every individual in a caring and respectful manner, considering the individual differences and cultural/ ethnic diversity.

Buddhism challenged the then prevalent social order and sought justice for the down trodden. The Buddhism recognized the worth and dignity of the Shudras and women, challenged the unjust social order that facilitated hegemony of the select few and brought the marginalized sections in the mainstream. Even while Buddhism attacked the Varna system, it did not allow the persecution of the upper three Varnas when Buddhism prevailed in the whole of Indian subcontinent and beyond. It is noteworthy that a large number of Brahmins and other upper Varna people joined the Buddhist Sangha. Buddha successfully reformed gangs of robbers

including the notorious robber Angulimala and inducted them into his Sangha.

The Value of Human Relationships

Ethical Principle: Social workers recognize the central importance of human relationships. Social workers aim to strengthen relationships among people in a purposeful effort to promote, restore, maintain, and enhance the well-being of individuals, families, social groups, organizations, and communities.

Buddhism revolved round the human well-being and relationships among people were given utmost importance. In fact liberty, equality and fraternity are the core principles of Dhamma. According to Buddha, for Dhamma to be Saddhamma it must pull down all social barriers such as caste, varna, class and gender. The tireless work by the Sangha resulted in establishing a just and peace loving society based on the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity. Buddha stressed on love and respect not only for human beings but for all living beings. He said Dhamma is Saddhamma only when it teaches that more than 'Karuna' what is Necessary is 'Maitri'. Karuna is love for human beings. Buddha went beyond and taught Maitri. Maitri is love for all living beings'. The Buddha wanted man not to stop with Karuna but to go beyond mankind and cultivate the spirit of Maitri for all living beings.

This is reflected in one of Buddha's sermons to the Bhikkus; "Just as the earth does not feel hurt and does not resent, just as the air does not lend to any action against it, just as the Ganges water goes on flowing without being disturbed by the fire so also you Bhikkus must bear all insults and injustices inflicted on you and continue to bear Maitri towards your offenders. So almsmen, Maitri must flow and flow for ever. Let it be your sacred obligation to keep your mind as firm as the earth, as clean as the air and as deep as the Ganges. If you do so your Maitri will not be easily disturbed, by an act however unpleasant. For all who do injury will soon be tired out. Let the ambit of your Maitri be as boundless

as the world and let your thought be vast and beyond measure in which no hatred is thought of.”

The Value of Integrity

Ethical Principle: Social workers behave in a trustworthy manner.

The Social workers are expected to act honestly, responsibly and promote ethical practices on the part of the organizations with which they are affiliated.

The Buddhist Sangha was a very well organized and disciplined unit. Buddha himself had framed about seventy five conduct rules (*Sekhiya Dhamma*) for the Bhikkus and it was compulsory for the Bhikkhus to follow these conduct rules. Buddhist monks were supposed to behave well and be model persons in their mode and manner of behaviour. The Bhikkhus were accountable to the Sangha. Even general public could complain against Bhikkhus to the Sangha in case of misconduct on part of Bhikkhus. The conduct rules were strictly enforced. They were legal in substance involving a definite charge, trial and punishment. No Bhikkhu could be punished without a trial by a regularly constituted Court. The Court was to be constituted by the Bhikkhus resident at the place where an offence had taken place. The following punishments could be awarded against a guilty Bhikkhu: (i) Tarjaniya Karma (warn and discharge). (ii) Niyasha Karma (declaring insane). (iii) Pravrajniya Karma (expulsion from the Sangh). (iv) Utskhepniya Karma (boycott). (v) Parivasa Karma (expulsion from Vihar). Thus the Bhikkhus were men of high integrity who were bound by the conduct rules. Since the Bhikkhus were the messengers of Dhamma, Buddha wanted them behave responsibly and in the manner prescribed by the Sangha. It was for these reasons that the masses respected and trusted them.

The Value of Competence

Ethical Principle: Social workers practice within their areas of competence and enhance their professional expertise. Social workers should aspire to contribute to the knowledge base of the profession.

Bhikhus being the messengers of Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, certain rules were laid down so that only those who are fit and deemed competent by the Sangha could become the Bhikhus. For a person to become a Bhikhu, he /she had to pass through two stages. The first stage was called Parivraja and the second stage was called Upasampada. It was only after the Upasampada that he/she could become a Bhikkhu/Bhikhuni. A person aspiring to be a Bhikhu had to first find a Bhikhu who could act as an Upadhyaya. Only those Bhikhus who had completed ten years tenure as Bhikhus were eligible to be Uppadhyayas. Such a candidate if accepted by the Upadhyaya was called a Parivrajaka and had to remain in the service and tutelage of the Uppadhyaya. After the period of tutelage ends it is his Uppadhyaya who proposed the name of his student to a meeting of the Sangh specially called for the purpose for Upasampada and the student must request the Sangh for Upasampada. The Sangh must be satisfied that he /she is a fit and a proper person to be made a Bhikkhu/Bhikhuni. For this purpose there was a set of questions which the candidate had to answer. It was only when the Sangha was satisfied the permission for Upasampada was granted and the person could become a Bhikkhu/Bhikhuni.

Thus the Sangha had laid down a procedure by which only the dedicated, competent and enlightened persons could become Bhikhus/Bhikhunis and then serve the people and spread the message of Dhamma.

4. Bhikhus: The Earliest Social Workers

Dr Ambedkar, the great scholar of Buddhism, in his work *Buddha and his Dhamma* has made the following observation

with regard to the function of the Bhikhus: “There is also another question that requires an answer. What is the function of the Bhikkhu? Is the Bhikkhu to devote himself to self-culture or is he to serve the people and guide them?”

He must discharge both the functions. Without self-culture he is not fit to guide. Therefore he must himself be a perfect, best man, righteous man and an enlightened man. For this he must practice self-culture. A Bhikkhu leaves his home. But he does not retire from the world. He leaves home so that he may have the freedom and the opportunity to serve those who are attached to their homes but whose life is full of sorrow, misery and unhappiness and who cannot help themselves.’

The Bhikhus and the Bhikhunis were highly disciplined and dedicated messengers of Buddha’s philosophy, their commitment to the welfare of the masses was beyond any question. In addition to preaching Buddha’s Dhamma, they challenged the unjust social practices such as birth based varna /caste system, discrimination against women and the shudras, exploitation of the masses by the priestly class, animal sacrifice and related rituals. They worked hard for the emancipation of the oppressed especially the shudras and women and strived for an equalitarian society based on the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity. Many monks were trained in medicine and they provided healthcare and support to the needy. The role of the Bhikhus in conflict resolution is commendable. Armed with effective communication skills and counseling acumen the Buddhist Sangha played pivotal role in conflict resolution and helped in the establishment of peace loving society. The Bhikhus/Bhikhunis always remained connected with the masses and rendered valuable guidance /counseling to the society. Emperor Ashoka, the great Buddhist emperor is also credited with the social services he rendered to the masses. He is said to have built hospitals, not only for human beings but also for the animals, shelter houses for the homeless. The 84000 thousand Stupas/ Ashokan pillars that he built carry the message

of universal brotherhood and peace. He fully supported the social welfare measures undertaken by the Buddhist Sangha.

Conclusion

Social work education is a modern concept and has been imported from the western countries. However the social work practices were pioneered in India about 2500 years ago by the Buddhist Sangha. The services rendered by the Bhikhu Sangha, with utmost dedication and commitment to the masses has hardly any parallels in the world history. The social work practices by the Bhikhu Sangha has its roots in Buddha's philosophy which centered around the wellbeing of humanity in accordance with the ethos of liberty, equality and fraternity. Unfortunately this great contribution of Buddhism to the mankind remains to be acknowledged.

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