An orderly curriculum for a messy field? Classroom-field tensions in community organization in India

Mouleshri Vyas*

Abstract The large-scale reverse migration from cities to villages at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and again during the second wave in 2021 highlighted the persistence of poverty in India. Civil society responses pointed to the pressure that it was under in the absence of adequate outreach by the state for meeting food, livelihood, and other insecurities of urban and rural populations. Against this backdrop, the article outlines some of the challenges facing Social Work and Community Development in addressing poverty and marginalization. An examination of the relationship between Social Work with the state, and the contemporary complex neoliberal context for practice, highlights classroom-field tensions in community organization (CD). In preparing graduates for what appears to be a messy field, an orderly curriculum, irrespective of how well thought out it may be, struggles to retain convergence between principles of CD and certain elements of contemporary practice. It emerges that education for CD needs to build systematically on critical community practice and align with an anti-oppressive framework, in order to contribute substantively to addressing poverty and marginalization.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic globally raised issues of social justice, social protection, and governance. In India, it brought to a head the following key development concerns: that migrant labour in the city needs daily

*Address for correspondence: Mouleshri Vyas, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Sion-Trombay Road; Deonar, Mumbai - 400088; Maharashtra, India. Email: molly@tiss.edu

wages to survive from one day to another; that the bottom rung of the informal economy is unprotected and lacks security; that migrants in the city need to, out of necessity, retain a connection with the village they come from; and that those in precarious conditions look to the state and the voluntary sector for support in times of crisis (Bremar, 2020). The sight of millions of migrants walking back to their villages brought to life the statistics of migration, poverty and the informal economy in the midst of the public health crisis. In cities, it created a flurry of responses by voluntary organizations, individuals, and the state to respond to visible issues of food and livelihood insecurity and managing the crisis.

The pandemic has foregrounded the persistence of poverty in the country in the face of rising inequality of income and wealth¹. For university social work educators and community practitioners in the country, this is an opportunity for some consolidation of the impacts of our work with communities and re-thinking ways forward. As a practice theory, the scope for community organization (CO) in addressing development issues with communities and in meeting the scale of outreach that the country context demands has always been significant. It must be emphasized that the social work profession is not yet recognized by the state, although several public-funded universities offer undergraduate and graduate programmes in social work. Social workers are largely located in the civil society space, which is where student fieldwork is situated. Hence any re-thinking exercise would necessarily draw upon civil society experiences of development practice.

Community practice in India through community development (CD) and community organization (CO) is a vast field and needs a nuanced understanding. In eighty-five years of social work education in the country, CO, a core component of the curriculum has been taught for more than sixty years (Andharia, 2009). Trained social workers (with a Bachelor's or Master's degree) are community practitioners in diverse spaces from direct work with people to advocacy and policy level practice. Outside social work, community organizing by large numbers of activists and practitioners is imbued with passion and commitment to social change. Any analysis of community practice in India needs to acknowledge both types of community practitioners and the interface between them. Further, several fields of practice (such as development, health and mental health, disability, criminology and justice, work with women, children and families, Dalits and tribes) have scope for CO. Practitioners therefore work on a range of issues in diverse contexts. The distinction between CD and CO that emerged out of the failure

1 Although India's per capita GDP increased five times between 2000 and 2019, the top 1 percent earned 11 percent of the country's total income in 1990; in 2019, this increased to 21 percent of the total income. The Gini coefficient in 2011 was at 35.7 percent and increased to 47.9 percent in 2018 making India the second most unequal country in the world (Chaudhuri and Ghosh, 2021).

of the government-launched community development programme (CDP) in the 1950s led to CD being viewed with disdain. Through subsequent decades until the 1990s, CO was viewed as more progressive and practised through mass-based movements and voluntary organizations that responded to social and political issues in the country. In this period, there also emerged 'a critique of social work positioned largely as an apolitical enterprise' (Andharia, 2009, p. 277) and tensions with the broader discourse of social work because of the tendency of its frameworks, values, and language to be totalizing and therefore homogenizing, rather than recognizing complexities and diversity (Andharia, 2007).

The above features of CD influenced curriculum and classroom interactions. Since the 1990s, the structural adjustment programme articulated through the New Economic Policy in India had far reaching consequences (Ajit Kumar Singh, 1993) for marginalized communities that needed a response through community practice. New fieldwork placements for students on issues such as labour rights, food security, and urban housing led to questions about the relevance of classroom inputs. Over a decade and a half, there was a significant re-positioning of the curriculum for CD and CO (Andharia, 2007).

Describing the curriculum as 'orderly', and the field as 'messy', may be an oversimplification. There is mutuality between them. Notwithstanding, tensions and dissonance between these two spaces—the classroom and the field—are evident in discussions with students, more so in the past year of the pandemic. As a social work educator teaching CO for almost three decades, attempting to analyse the effectiveness of CO in addressing the question of poverty and its various dimensions in India, I am confronted with certain questions: What does the present field for community practice and education look like? Is the pandemic a potential watershed in development practice, or have earlier trends in the field already made it 'messier' and unsettled the connection between education and practice? What should be the nature of response from CO educators to the continuing concerns of poverty and vulnerability?

In attempting to answer these questions, I focus on significant changes in CD education and practice. From these, I draw out the epistemology for the nature of the response from social work to the pandemic. Beginning with a discussion of CO in the broad period of the last two decades, I discuss key developments in the field of practice. I then chalk out what emerges as the way forward in CD through social work education in India.

CD education and practice: Some issues

Some of the shifts in CD education and practice in the past two decades have significant ontological implications. They need to be recognized and worked

through so that we are able to address poverty, marginalization, and social injustice.

Relationship with the state

The Indian Constitution provides the framework for the state to ensure justice and rights for citizens. This makes the state central to the practice of development and social welfare. The beginning of CD and CO in the country emphasizes the close relationship of the social work profession, and of CD with the state, and therefore, of the 'civil society' and the 'political society' (Gramsci cited in Bates, 1975, p. 353). A detailed and linear discussion of the history is beyond the scope of this paper (see Andharia, 2007). CO in the country has been important to efforts at bringing about social change and started with a thrust on CD. In this section, I outline four epistemological moments that explain, at least in part, the juncture that we are at through the relationship of social work, and of CO, with the state. These are the beginning of CD through social work education, a shift towards CO, the focus on critical community practice, and the present debate concerning the regulation of social work practice and education.

The beginning of CD through social work education Through the era of liberalism of political freedom in India from the 1950s till the 1980s, marked by establishment of the rule of the Constitution, and goals of nation building and poverty removal, social workers engaged in CD processes and programmes working with government and voluntary organizations. In 1936, the first graduate programme in social work was established in India² and social workers trained through a curriculum drawn from the USA, were to strengthen the hands of the state by working on programmes such as the CDP, an idea that held great merit in the initial decades after Independence. However, the CDP emerged as 'a top-down, centrally guided and centrally-sponsored program with a management approach rooted in a liberal ideological framework. Although the policy and programmatic approach to development has undergone substantial shifts, the term CD in India generally connotes a failed government programme' (Andharia, 2007, pp. 97-98). The critique of CD in India is based on the idea of community that it created, as individuals devoid of agency and passive recipients of welfare (Jha, 2016); and an apolitical understanding of communities that does not recognize that the community is a contested concept (Checkoway, 2011).

2 At the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in Mumbai; the Department of Rural Welfare and Urban Community Organization and Development was established in 1955, and renamed Urban and Rural Community Development in 1967; it is now the Centre for Community Organization and Development Practice (CODP).

A shift towards CO From the 1970s, the growth of CO in the field and within the social work discipline reflected the dynamism of practitioners, educators, and other actors. Andharia (2009, p. 290) defining of the nature of CD in India asserts:

It is rooted in pro-poor organizing, draws on development discourse, critical studies and is based on an analysis of society, state power and politics of resistance. It is a process which encompasses all efforts that seek to re-define power relations that contribute to the experience of discrimination and marginalization. Therefore, CO entails efforts not just at the level of communities but with social structures and with democratic institutions of governance.

CD grew largely in the voluntary sector that led the ‘institutional, social and political processes of welfare and development’ (ibid). As other professionals joined the field to work towards development and social change, it grew in multiple directions. Disillusionment with the state, its inability to address poverty, and the marginalization of Dalit and tribal communities were some of the factors that spurred the growth of this sector. Voluntary organizations, trade unions, and social movements across the country were engaged in CO on a range of issues with diverse strategies and what Rothman (2007) refers to as multiple modes of organizing. As Social Work graduates initiated or joined some of these organizations there was blurring of the boundary between ‘professional’ social workers and activists.

Focus on critical community practice Since the 1990s, increasing informalization of labour across industries added to insecurity of employment and diminishing decent work conditions. Large infrastructure projects that had multiple impacts on livelihoods, social networks, the natural resource base of communities, and the environment, heightened the precarity of the already marginalized. They became more vulnerable and struggled to emerge from these setbacks (Vyas, 2012). Critical community practice based on analysis of power (Butcher *et al.*, 2007) provided a lens to understand processes and issues of marginalization and has been emphasized in the CO curriculum from the 1990s. This approach is reinforced through fieldwork placements of a section of social work students with organizations that work on structural issues with a political approach that redistributes power. The approach gained emphasis in the curriculum because it enabled critical thinking for students (Andharia, 2009; Vyas, 2009).

The debate around regulation of social work In the past two decades, a section of social work educators and practitioners has been working towards its recognition as a profession. The debates around the recently introduced

bill for the regulation of social work education and practice³ highlighted divergent standpoints within the educator and practitioner fraternity. These standpoints included: views for and against regulation and standardization, those advocating for some regulation of education but not of practice, and apparent indifference to the outcome of the debate. CO practitioners and educators are found among all opinion holders. Discussions reflected concerns to do with practice settings, and with the quality of undergraduate and graduate social work programmes being offered across the country (Gopal, 2020; Mathew, 2020). Regulation as a requirement for addressing quality of education, and the initiative of a member of the NITI Aayog, a policy think tank of the government⁴ in introducing the bill, is a reflection of the hegemony of political society over civil society. In fact, Heron's view of competency standards for social workers in Canada warns us that a measure such as regulation actually 'secures Western ways of knowing' and works alongside neoliberalism 'to transform the social work profession in ways that are removing it from the reach of epistemic disobedience, and by extension, social work's social justice commitment.' The arguments for regulation are indicative of 'the epistemicide of Other's knowledges' (Santos, 2007, and Hall and Tandon, 2017, cited in Heron, 2019, pp. 66-67), and what in Andharia's view (2007) can be attributed to totalizing frameworks that constrain critical thinking and practice.

From the viewpoint of communities at the centre of practice, the emphasis on CO and critical community practice are progressive moments that are at risk of being undermined through regulation. Alongside education, and not unrelated to it, practice spaces too have witnessed significant changes at a broader level of the policy context, as well as the micro context of communities.

Major shifts in the field of practice for community organization

In the past two decades, the content of social policy and the systematic entry of corporates into the field of social development has resulted in significant restructuring of community practice.

Community practice within India's new welfare architecture Among changes in social policy that sought to address issues of marginalized communities is a slew of legislation focusing on food security, forest rights, and so on. These, and others such as the Right to Information Act (RTI), enacted in 2005, and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGS), assured rights to citizens. In India's 'new welfare architecture' (Mehta, 2010, cited in Ruparelia, 2013, p. 570), civil society organizations (voluntary and membership-based organizations)

3 See (Draft for) The National Council of Social Work Education Bill, 2021.

4 <http://www.niti.gov.in/>.

became intermediaries between people and the state, facilitating access to rights and entitlements for citizens.

These laws led to some restructuring of community practice. The RTI provided citizens the right to information under the control of public authorities; it aims at promoting transparency and accountability. With this, community practice received a shot in the arm, as there is now access to information that can strengthen community struggles for rights and entitlements. Community practitioners learnt how to make this law work for disenfranchised communities. Introduced around the same time, the MGNREGS became the backdrop and also focus of rural community practice across most of the country. Raising consciousness about the programme and preparing people to participate in governance through seeking accountability from implementing agencies resulted in creating new arenas for community practice, such as social audit (ibid, p. 571; Mukherji and Jha, 2017)⁵. Its embeddedness in local power relations may limit its scope to bring sustained transformation of the implementation of programmes; yet, in giving a voice to otherwise invisible 'beneficiaries', social audit, now being mandated for other social protection programmes, contributes to deepening democracy.

Jobs for facilitating implementation of social protection programmes draw professionals from diverse disciplines—management, rural development, engineering, social sciences, social work, and others, who compete with each other to get selected. Inputs provided through curriculum enhance ability of young professionals to respond to requirements in this work space. The increased emphasis on social policy courses in social work aims to prepare graduates to engage with social protection programmes. Schools of social work like ours at TISS came into this space through a national level capacity building course that we were asked to design and offer,⁶ an engagement that opened up fieldwork placement opportunities for our students with social audit units in certain states. This pedagogy enabled students to gain a grounded understanding of programme implementation issues and to carry out social audits together with village-level social auditors.

Corporate social responsibility The Companies Act in 2013 made it mandatory for all companies with a certain net worth to spend a part of their profit after taxes on corporate social responsibility (CSR). Beginning with

5 Social Audits are 'new governance mechanisms furnish poorer citizens with an opportunity to challenge the practices of corruption and patronage that have enabled benefits to be targeted towards or captured by particular social groups in the past' (Ruparelia, 2013, p. 571). With MGNREGS, the legal mandate for Social Audits created a legitimate space for community members to examine, verify, validate, and question those responsible for implementation of the program.

6 For the Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India.

public sector units, the law subsequently brought private companies into its ambit (GoI, 2013). With this, the market entered the social development field more directly—inserting huge funds into social welfare and specifying permissible activities⁷. CSR succeeded in strengthening the neoliberal project in the country, reducing the role of the state in social welfare, and adopting strategies that undervalued community solidarity and grassroots democracy. The corporate world is making the most of the opportunities, expanding its ‘economic frontiers by acquiring land and setting up new ventures’ (Sharma, 2011, p. 639). It is trying to ‘win over communities’ and ‘engaged in image building’ (ibid, p. 647). Stating that educators in academia need to be alert, Andharia (2007, p.106) points out, ‘several social workers are engaged in CSR initiatives without recognizing that CD based on economic rationalism often adopts a rhetoric, which sounds politically progressive, while in fact is serving a different agenda of the relatively privileged.’

Strategies adopted by corporates highlight their agendas and approach to communities. For meeting targets of annual spending, CSR committees are set up, and engineers and Human Resource professionals within companies are deputed across departments to CSR teams; some companies employ social work graduates. Engagement with communities is indirect through the disbursal of funds to local Non-Governmental Organizations (also referred to as voluntary organizations/civil society organizations). Direct interaction with communities, when it takes place, is mostly through key community persons. These persons are intermediaries—individuals, and organizations—required for needs assessments, community-level work, impact assessments, and so on. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) funded by corporates are required to measure and quantify impacts in a positivist framework through instruments of assessment specified by the corporate. The resultant valorization of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) has propelled its growth as a sector. Newer instruments for M&E, as well as consultancy firms offering specialized services, have emerged. Students of Social Work, Management, and allied disciplines are being trained in their use.

The sustainability of changes brought about through CSR is questionable. This is corroborated by Sharma’s study (2011, p. 647) of CSR in seventeen business houses in India highlighting a ‘lack of focus’ of interventions because corporates lack clarity about who their key stakeholders are. The

7 Schedule VII, Companies Act 2013 lists these as eradicating hunger; poverty; and malnutrition; promoting education; gender equality; ensuring environment sustainability; protection of national heritage, art, and culture; to contributing to the Prime Minister’s national relief fund; and research and development projects.

absence of accountability of CSR initiatives to communities as key stakeholders creates a value conflict for community practitioners from social work trained in critical thinking. CSR picked up and continued the depoliticization of CD of the mid-1980s, and co-opted communities for 'agendas decided by the state-market nexus'. It adopts a 'homogenized and totalizing concept of community' and treats communities as passive recipients of welfare (Jha, 2016, p. 71).

The emergence of CSR has led to substantive restructuring of development sector funding. The corporate is now almost centre stage with a large volume of funds, its mandate of CSR and vision of social development. Moreover, philanthropy as a field has expanded and adopted the appropriate language. To illustrate, one of the philanthropy platforms 'began as a venture philanthropy fund to invest in early-stage non-profit organizations in India. The aim was to bridge the gap between funders and non-profits by educating funders to be more strategic in their giving, and helping non-profits use the funds in the most optimal way'; they 'place communities at the forefront' of all their work⁸. This means that in the competition for funds, NGOs lose autonomy because their work needs to align with the vision and strategy of such platforms and donor organizations.

The scale and nature of these processes warrants close and systematic attention from social work education. A cohort of our graduates is drawn towards these jobs for reasons including the promise of a larger field for practice, higher remuneration, and social security benefits. Curricula in programmes like ours now comprehensively cover social policy, social theory, thematic knowledge, and practice components. Hence, if social work graduates who work within the CSR framework are unable to bring community voices and critical community practice into their work, CSR will have succeeded in taking CO back by several steps and decades.

The above discussion highlights the hegemony of the state and market in the field of community practice. Simultaneously, the capacity of CO to contribute to social justice, and to enhancing agency of marginalized populations, is challenged at the micro-level. Restructuring of priorities in neighbourhood communities, and of functioning of organizations working with communities, have posed new questions for education and practice.

Micro community practice

Conventional CO emphasizing problem solving by the community (Ross, 1955) is inefficacious in the present complex context of practice. This is because of power relations in various spaces within and between communities leading to domination of the interests of powerful classes

8 See <https://www.dasra.org/about-us>.

over the others. Between communities, NGOs, and funders (corporate and charitable trusts), they may result in negotiations and outcomes that are at variance with community expectations. Very significantly, community practitioners themselves may undertake flawed assessment of problems through using predefined categories and labels, and not having the ability to problematize structural issues (Fook, 2002). Recognizing these dynamics and employing a critical community practice gaze necessitates a closer examination of certain factors that impact the micro context.

Poverty and the livelihood question With structural adjustment programmes (Polack, 2004) in the 1990s, questions of poverty, marginalization, and disenfranchisement have come to the forefront and posed a challenge to the goals of CO. Increasing informalization of labour and manufacturing, jobless growth, and crises with agriculture have meant that both cities and villages fail to offer secure livelihoods to people. Moreover, land acquisitions for large projects and industries have had a generational impact on communities, with vulnerability compounded by inadequate social protection. Circular migration of footloose individuals and families between villages/-towns and cities has been a survival strategy for these populations (Bremar, 2020). This leads to restructuring of everyday interactions at household and community levels; in both migration source as well as destination areas, the demographics of communities change; households, especially women, are compelled to make adjustments in terms of unpaid care work, and taking up poorly paid work in exploitative conditions such as home-based work as part of (global and domestic) manufacturing supply chains for garments and other products (Gartenberg and Bhowmik, 2014). Socio-spatial transformation is visible in cities as low-income neighbourhoods double up as workplaces. Labour organizing through trade unions and cooperatives in the informal economy has gained some prominence since the 1970s when the Self-Employed Women's Association⁹ was one of the few unions in this sector. While the ideological base of these membership-based organizations aligns with critical community practice, it is most often difficult for them to employ social work graduates because of their limited financial resources, and hesitation on part of donor agencies to support labour organizing due to its political nature.

The project mode of practice One of the fallouts of the funding-based NGO boom of the 80s and 90s was the establishment of the project mode of social work practice, and re-organization of the community practice space into community-driven issue-based work and project-driven work. Both

9 <https://www.sewa.org/>.

A multi-stakeholder project as a context of practice

In the past two decades, several large infrastructure projects in Mumbai have resulted in massive displacement of slum dwellers from their original locations into Resettlement and Rehabilitation (R&R) colonies. For implementing one of these internationally funded projects, government agencies sought and partnered with select NGOs that were to focus on a baseline survey in the slum colonies to identify 'eligible' beneficiaries for secure housing in the R&R colonies and facilitate their resettlement. The NGOs received funding based on the number of households relocated and resettled. Members of 'Project Affected Households' knew this, and in a meeting to resolve conflicts around allocation of houses in the new colonies, they demanded that the NGOs clarify details of utilization of funds as they thought they had not received the entitlements due to them. The response of the NGOs and discussion that followed, underscored the complexity of tasks, budgeting, and web of stakeholders and accountability. Practitioners at various levels in these government and voluntary organizations, become absorbed with completing work on schedule, managing relationships at community and inter-organization levels, and minimizing disruptions and discontent. Added to this are periodic demands of reporting specific formats. Community practitioners working in such a project context may have their hands full without interacting directly with communities.

(Source: Field notes from impact assessment study undertaken by TISS in 2003)

struggled in terms of resources, sustenance, and in dealing with contextual challenges. National and international NGOs supporting projects began to seek periodic reporting from their 'partner organizations' in specific formats that make complex information manageable for them and useable in upstream processes. The project mode has changed the relationship between the practitioner and the community, now mediated by time frames and budgets, which has increased the need for personnel trained in project management.

As illustrated in the case above, communities may be participants in multi-stakeholder projects. Hence, questions of ownership and of accountability emerge in increasingly complex spaces. We find that community practitioners appear to have moved away from CO by not necessarily working in the interest of displaced communities. Yet, given the macro context of such large projects, and the fact that communities or sections of the community may be manipulated in these processes, such a conclusion may be simplistic. Community practitioners in such webs of organizations and issues often make difficult choices about whether or not to engage, knowing that outcomes of practice would not satisfy all sections of the community.

Diverse practice contexts and complexities of issues require workers at various levels, often as part of interdisciplinary teams; they may create ecosystems that necessitate management more than transformative practice.

Restructuring of the practitioner segment The country needs large numbers of social workers whether paraprofessionals, or those with different levels of formal training. These workers need to be able to utilize their

knowledge and skills in any context (Fook, 2002; Nadkarni and Joseph, 2014). We found a significant demand for a short-term course that we initiated in the early 1990s¹⁰. Since then, it is evident that a cadre of paraprofessional community-level workers contribute significantly to the work of NGOs. They are often from the same or similar neighbourhoods, familiar with the milieu and issues, and able to effectively mobilize community members. Their yen for social work adds to the passion with which they work.

The emergence of this cadre of 'near insiders' for CD has led to a gradual restructuring of 'social work' personnel in the voluntary sector. Social work graduates are mostly employed directly at the middle level as coordinators and project managers. This shift began to be discussed in the CO classroom with students placed for fieldwork with diverse organizations voicing concern about being given administrative tasks, rather than those that entail community-level interactions. The dissonance between the classroom and the field is evident because the curriculum continues to prioritize direct practice with communities. Interestingly, over the years, many paraprofessional workers have been prompted to complete formal education, including in social work. This entry of practitioners from communities into graduate programmes has reduced elitism in social work by adding to the diversity in the classroom. It appears that while the classroom is becoming more inclusive through such changes, the field, and larger organizations in particular have found a reason for increased hierarchy of work and personnel through the entry of community-level workers.

The challenge before community organization education

As the discussion in earlier sections indicates, order and messiness in the curriculum and in the field are mere manifestations of the hegemony that the state and market have over the social work profession. In the direction that community practice and education is taking, the hegemony of political society is evident; both these spaces are controlled by processes that decide *who* qualifies for practice, *what* the thrust of practice should be, and *how* practice is to be carried out.

The three pillars of the 'post-war consensus' spanning a period between 1945 and 1980, the importance of collectivism, a mixed economy and a welfare state (Toye, 2013 cited in Singh, 2019, p.103) have gradually been eroded. Recent constraints for CO discussed in previous sections highlight contemporary obstacles in addressing poverty and marginalization and ensuring social justice. The challenge before us is the fundamental one of

10 Through what is now the Centre for CODP, in the School of Social Work at TISS.

Community itself being under the control of others (Jha, 2016). However, we cannot blame our inability to bring about transformative social change on 'the current context of project-based funding and contracting' because social work, 'including the practice of those of us who define ourselves as "critical"—is an expert player within the discourses that enable these forms of ruling' (Rose and Miller, 1992 cited in Wilson, 2008, p. 190).

CO in the field and in the classroom has striven to respond to some of the challenges through making connections between the micro-level issues confronting communities with macro-level changes and policies. This means finding new approaches to address issues of communities; and periodically re-working curriculum and pedagogy (Vyas, 2015). Clearly, practice needs to focus on structural aspects of society and policy. So do academic teachers of CO, as they 'revise and re-interpret their curricula' if they are to enable students of CO to move towards 'a more pro-active involvement in ensuring social and political rights, a life with dignity for the poor' (Andharia, 2009, p. 282). It is evident that employers, including corporates, are influencing education in terms of the 'kinds of knowledge, skills, and dispositions they feel social work professionals need to have'. It is important for social work education and training to not allow structures of partnerships between universities, employers and others to decide the priorities of the professional (Singh, pp. 119-120).

The relationship between civil society represented through the university, and political society i.e. the state has been discussed in an earlier section. In post-Independence India when CD education was introduced, the synergy between them was built by consensus about the need for trained personnel to carry out the project of development from below. In subsequent decades, education has been more compelled to respond to needs of the field and has found the efficacy of its core principles being questioned by the nature of practice in a neoliberal context. Positive bias towards marginalized communities and community segments in practice, through reflexivity and democratizing spaces and processes of engagement of the community and the practitioner, has been weakened. Reflexivity of practitioners within the framework of critical community practice is diminished by the structuring of community work by funders and corporates:

One of the consequences of neoliberalism and managerialism has been to displace collective and critical forms of practice with individualised procedural models, what is disparagingly termed the 'tick-box' approach... Therefore, it is important that we seek to (re)build oppositional structures of anti-oppression, to reverse austerity policies and to resist the co-option of professionals in attacks on the most vulnerable (Singh, 2019, p. 120).

Education for community practice in India needs to move beyond ad hoc responses to perceived field situations and position itself with a larger vision that is based on critical thinking. A macro-level analysis of consequences of diverse strands of CD—from NGOs, and corporates, to trade unions, and social movements (see the eight-model framework of community practice developed by [Gamble and Weil, 2009](#)) would be useful. It might tell us that practice of ‘rebuilding community’ through ‘enhancing social cohesion’, rather than through political mobilization, may increase the exclusion of disadvantaged communities, by submitting to the interests of the more powerful (Lister, 1998, cited in [McClenaghan, 2000](#), p. 572). There is merit in [Heron’s discussion \(2019\)](#) of [Mignolo’s \(2009\)](#) idea of epistemic disobedience that begins with a question about:

whether it can be actualized given the current context . . . epistemic resistance as challenging the prevailing episteme of Western knowledge and discourse . . . on the part of social workers would encompass an awareness of the operation and scope of this epistemology, its history, and its ongoing impact; a refusal to participate in propagating it; and support/create space for other knowledge systems ([Heron, 2019](#), p. 68).

Starting from where we are at present, there are some possibilities. Approaches such as critical community practice have stood their ground irrespective of the compulsions of organizational spaces where graduates are situated. This has created discomfort for graduates, pushing them to make these spaces work for the community, or to quit such setups and move to those with ideological alignment. Strengthening and reinforcing this approach through curriculum seems an imperative, as does the expansion of reach of community practitioners to populations and spaces where there is need for social work and CD through transdisciplinarity. In visioning the way forward for CO, we need to de-hegemonize the profession, strengthen the quality and reach of undergraduate programmes, and offer more training for paraprofessional social workers—a cadre that is in this field because of their close connect with communities, shared experiences, and therefore having more of a political stake in the work. Notably, ‘professionalism maintains power relations’ at many levels ([Fook, 2002](#), cited in [Jha, 2016](#), p. 69). Contradiction manifests when professionals interpret and analyse situations critically at the personal level but ‘authorize’ actions that are more conformist in nature (Boyte, 2008, cited in *ibid*, p. 69). Rather than making education and practice exclusive, which is what regulation does, what is needed is a move towards counter hegemony and creating organic intellectuals of the nature that Freire and Gramsci proposed ([Purcell, 2012](#), p. 269).

A conceptual shift from critical community practice towards anti-oppressive social work may reclaim and consolidate the core ideas that CO

practice and education has been working around in the past few decades. Understanding and working through power relations, critical thinking, and praxis need reinforcement. Singh (2019, p. 120) strikes a warning note for anti-oppressive social workers in the age of social media where the challenge comes from dispersal of 'mechanisms of social production and social control'. These require astute practitioners to grasp the exercise of power and production of dominant discourses about clients and marginalized citizens. These social workers would need to find ways to build alliances and join global struggles. In times of increasing inequalities, this is no mean task (ibid, p. 120).

Several Social Work educators appear to have been working with an anti-oppressive social work approach in the past few decades. Wilson and Beresford (2000) argue that the approach has several merits as well as pitfalls. However, if we agree that 'community development workers tend to use educational processes as a means to explore local knowledge, better understand the nature of the world, explore alternative ideological positions, and explore and promote action for change', we will find convergence between the Freirian idea of 'critical consciousness' and Gramsci's idea of 'counter hegemony' (Purcell, 2012, p. 270). Hence, drawing on concepts and pedagogy from anti-oppressive social work would enable us to find an ideological basis to begin addressing the dissonance between spaces of education and practice. The classroom therefore still has a crucial role to play in influencing practice provided it is more open to diverse groups of learners and remains faithful to its aim of building critical thinking.

Conclusion

Tensions between the field and the classroom may be seen as part of an inevitable dynamic for a practice-based discipline and provide direction for review and revision of curricula. In charting out a future direction for CO education, we would do well to continue aiming to strengthen practice that is based on a political understanding of contexts. Community organizers capable of critical thinking and practice would then be able to negotiate their stances in various spaces without compromising on principles of CO. Training and education that builds reflexive practice are needed across diverse spaces in the country (including CSR). Hence, education needs to be more inclusive through creating short-term courses for paraprofessional community practitioners, and flexible channels for entry and exit for such students into undergraduate and graduate programmes. Opportunities for resistance and advocacy for social change need to be identified and engaged with. As the discussion in the paper shows, the context of practice is messy and full of constraints. There are, however, possibilities to restore some order conceptually by reclaiming the intent of CD. It is through serving the

longer-term interests of marginalized populations that we can play a role in ensuring that we do not witness involuntary reverse migration of the scale that we did during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mouleshri Vyas is a professor at Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, in the School of Social Work, at the Centre for Community Organization and Development Practice.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to acknowledge the editors of the themed section, reviewers of the draft of this article, for their valuable feedback.

Funding

I have received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

There are no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

-
- Andharia, J. (2007) Reconceptualizing community organization in India, *Journal of Community Practice*, **15** (1-2), 91–119.
- Andharia, J. (2009) Critical explorations of community organization in India, *Community Development Journal*, **44** (3), 276–290.
- Bates, T. R. (1975) Gramsci and the theory of hegemony, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, **36** (2), 351–366, accessed at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2708933> (20 February 2021).
- Breman, J. (2020) The pandemic in India and its impact on footloose labour, *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, **63** (4), 901–919.
- Butcher, H., Banks, S., Henderson, P., Robertson, J. (2007) *Critical Community Practice*, The Policy Press, UK.
- Chaudhuri, D. Ghosh, P. (2021) *Why inequality is India's worst enemy*, DownToEarth, 5 March 2021, accessed at: <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/blog/economy/why-inequality-is-india-s-worst-enemy-75778>, (20 April 2021).
- Checkoway, B. (2011) Community development, social diversity, and the new metropolis, *Community Development Journal*, **46** (S2), ii5–ii14.
- Draft for The National Council of Social Work Education Bill, 2021 (2021) accessed at: <http://inpswa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/2021-BILL-15-1-2021.pdf>, (20 March 2021).
- Mathew, A. (2020) *Modi government circulates draft Bill to regulate autonomy in social work practice, education*, Deccan Herald, 9 November 2020, accessed at: <https://www.nati>

- onaheraldindia.com/india/modi-government-circulates-draft-bill-to-regulate-auditing-in-social-work-practice-education, (20 January 2021).
- Fook, J. (2002) *Social Work: Critical Theory and Practice*, Sage, London.
- Gamble, D. and Weil, M. (2009) *Community Practice Skills, Local to Global Perspectives*, Columbia University Press, New York.
- Gartenberg, I. and Bhowmik, S. (2014) Organising the Unorganised: Mumbai's Home-workers Lead the Way, in K. Fakier, E. Ehmke eds, *Socio-Economic Insecurity in Emerging Economies*, Routledge, New Delhi, pp. 97–109.
- Government of India (2013) *Companies Act*, accessed at: <http://ebook.mca.gov.in/Actpagedisplay.aspx?PAGENAME=17923>, (1 March 2021).
- Heron, B. A. (2019) Neoliberalism and social work regulation, *The Canadian Social Work Review*, **36** (1), 65–82 accessed at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26868190> (13 March 2021).
- Jha, M. K. (2016) Community organising and political agency: changing community development subjects in India, in R. R. Meade, M. Shaw, S. Banks eds, *Politics, Power and Community Development*, Bristol University Press, Policy Press, U.K., pp. 65–82.
- McClenaghan, P. (2000) Social capital: exploring the theoretical foundations of community development education, *British Educational Research Journal*, **26** (5), 565–582.
- Mehta, P. B. (2010) *Public advisory*, Indian Express, accessed at: <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/public-advisory/>, (2 February 2021).
- Mignolo, W. D. (2009) Epistemic disobedience, independent thought and de-colonial freedom, *Theory, Culture and Society*, **26** (7–8), 1–23.
- Mukherji, R. and Jha, H. (2017) Bureaucratic rationality, political will, and state capacity, MGNREGS in undivided Andhra Pradesh, *Economic & Political Weekly*, **52** (49), 53–60.
- Nadkarni, V. V. and Joseph, S. (2014) Envisioning a professional identity: charting pathways through social work education in India, in C. Noble, H. Strauss, B. Littlechild eds, *Global Social Work, Crossing Borders, Blurring Boundaries*, Sydney University Press, Sydney, pp. 71–84.
- Polack, R. J. (2004) Social justice and the global economy: new challenges for social work in the 21st century, *Social Work*, **49** (2), 281–290, accessed at: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/23721138> (8 February 2021).
- Purcell, R. (2012) Community development and everyday life, *Community Development Journal*, **47** (2), 266–281.
- Ross, M. G. (1955) *Community Organization: Theory, Principles and Practice*, Harper & Row, New York.
- Rothman, J. (2007) Multi modes of intervention at the macro level, *Journal of Community Practice*, **15** (4), 11–40.
- Ruparelia, S. (2013) India's new rights agenda: genesis, promises, risks, *Pacific Affairs*, **86** (3), 569–590, accessed at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43590716> (11 June 2019).
- Sharma, S. (2011) Corporate social responsibility in India, *Indian Journal of Industrial Relations*, **46** (4), 637–649, accessed at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23070485> (8 February 2021).
- Singh, A. K. (1993) Social consequences of new economic policies: with particular reference to levels of living of working class population, *Economic and Political Weekly*, **28** (7), 279–285, accessed at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4399397> (15 March 2021).

- Singh, G. (2019) Anti-oppressive social work, neoliberalism and neo-eugenics, in M. Lavalette ed, *What Is the Future of Social Work?* Bristol University Press, Policy Press, UK, pp. 99–121.
- Gopal, M.B. (2020) *Draft Bill on Social Work discussed in detail at webinar*, The Hindu, Visakhapatnam, 27 November 2020, accessed at: https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/andhra-pradesh/draft-bill-on-social-work-discussed-in-detail-at-webinar/article33189078.ece#comments_33189078, (20 January 2021).
- Vyas, M. (2009) Unionization as a strategy in community organization in the context of privatization: the case of conservancy Workers in Mumbai, *Community Development Journal*, **44** (3), 320–335.
- Vyas, M. (2012) Surviving urban displacement and resettlement through informal work, *The Indian Journal of Social Work*, **73** (3), 319–338.
- Vyas, M. (2015) Transacting the community organization curriculum in the classroom as a social work educator, *Social Work Journal*, **6** (1), 22–33.
- Wilson, A., & Beresford, P. (2000) Anti-oppressive Practice: Emancipation or Appropriation? *British Journal of Social Work*, **30** (5), 553–573.
- Wilson, T. (2008) Reflecting on the contradictions, governmentality in social work education and community practice, *The Canadian Social Work Review*, **25** (2), 187–202.