

PAPERS

Social Work: Meaning, History and Context from a Bhutanese Perspective

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to provide the readers with an overview of social work in Bhutan and explain how social work is guided by the timeless wisdom of compassion. Providing social service is Bhutanese society's most profound intangible culture that influences the social relationships, the value of help and reciprocity, wellbeing and happiness in the society (Choden, 2003). In order to understand social work in Bhutan, people need to be clear at the outset on the influence of religion which has been the foundation of the history and development of social work. Social work in Bhutan is guided by the timeless wisdom of helping others in the form of volunteerism. Volunteerism has always been at the heart of the Bhutanese cultural ethos and everyday life since time immemorial. These values continue to influence the practice of social work in Bhutan. The essence of social work in Bhutan is based on the ancient profound wisdom of compassion for all sentient beings. Therefore, action that one commits is driven by volunteerism and guided by the concept of karma.

Keywords: social work, compassion, civil society, volunteerism, social change, wellbeing

A Brief History of Social Work in Bhutan

Social work education was formally taught by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel in 1637 to a group of 30 monks in a monastery known as Cheri, located in the north of Thimphu. The institution of social work in Bhutan was established in the monastic setting. Monks and nuns were trained in meditation, embroidery, painting, sculptures, and Buddhist philosophy to provide service to all sentient beings (Khenpo Bumden, personal communication, 28th September, 2017). However, there is a dearth of literature to support most of the social work concepts and practices which are passed down orally from one generation to another. The essence of Buddhism still permeates into the social fabric and has the dominating

influence in shaping traditional values and culture and psychology of the Bhutanese people. Religious rites and prayers are considered essential parts of everyday life (Dorji, 2008; Pelzang, 2010; Wangyal, 2001). Bhutanese seek advice from Buddhist monks and nuns in matters related to: sickness, marriage, business, construction, career and naming babies.

Durjardin (2000) states that, in Bhutan, religion is the mediating factor that unites and integrates all aspects of culture into a distinct whole which becomes clear and definite in material culture (p.152). Social services in Bhutan existed since ancestral time, but the concept was formalized in the 1980s in the form of 'civil society' (Dorji, 2017). During the ancestral time, contributing labor, kind, and materials based on principles of reciprocity and rotational obligations linked the people to each other in the rural isolated communities. Such traditional practices are still prevalent today in the villages to cater for communal needs such as management of irrigation and drinking water, organizing community rituals, taking care of the village temples and footpaths (Dorji, 2017: Phuntsho, 2017). These strong norms and values of caring, trust, and cooperation have enabled the communities to overcome natural calamity and labor shortages. Resource sharing and managing conflicts have contributed to the development of altruism and a sense of volunteerism as one of the key components of social work in the past (Galay, 2001). In the same tone, Dorji (2013) claims that these social values were built upon the idea of reciprocity, known as *drinlen jelni* (repaying kindness) and *loteg hingteg* (trustworthiness), and are implemented through *pham puencha* (parents and relatives), *ngen nghew* (kith and kin), and *cham thruen* (networks and friends). These values and ethos are the basis of social work, which is enhanced through a social network, norms of reciprocity, and trust in people. Such values are further enhanced through Bhutanese values such as the joint family system, a tradition of gift giving and extending support to disadvantaged relatives through education of their children and care of the elderly (Wangyal, 2001).

Most of the social work during ancient time was based on religion, education, and art. In Bhutan, all religious objects such as statues and paintings are considered as the body of Buddha, books, his words and stupas, his mind (Pommaret, 2015). The literature of any religion encompasses helping mankind. It is evident that even before the professionalization of the social work, there were individuals around the globe addressing the need of the vulnerable people in difficult times (Mathew, 1992; Nanavatty, 1997). According to Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse, the Third Druk Gyalpo was a visionary social worker who gave voice to the population by involving them in decision making, abolishing slavery and capital punishment and instituting National Assembly, National Library, national archives, dance, painting, music, and sculpture and introduced modern education to Bhutan. His holiness further mentioned, "Bhutan is the only country that has

yogi and practitioner who chant mantra on the payroll, and this was very much because of the Third Druk Gyalpo (Khyentse, 2015, para. 9). Although Bhutan is progressing and evolving in all spheres of lives, despite the wind of materialistic seeping into the society, the culture of volunteerism, giving charity, serving people in need, are still prevalent and timeless (Phuntsho, 2017). The cultural institution known as *Kidu* (welfare) was established by His Majesty the King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck in 2009 as royal prerogative to look after the well-being of the people.

Buddhist Monasteries Engaged in Social Activities in Bhutan

The *Zhung Dratshang* plays a significant role in the lives of Bhutanese people. The three major key areas of social service they provide are on the three wheels; (i) the wheel of meditation; (ii) the wheel of studying and teaching; and (iii) the wheel of activities. The first two wheels are basically for the monks and nuns to prepare them to fulfill the *Jangchupsem gei dompa* (Bodhisattva vow), a vow taken by Mahayana Buddhist to liberate all sentient beings. The third wheel of activities guides the monks and nuns for the social welfare activities for all sentient beings (Bumden, personal communication, 28th Feb, 2018). According to Dorji (2016) most of the social work provided by the *Zhung Dratshang* or private monasteries is related to religious activities. The main function of the *Zhung Dratshang* is to exercise religious traditions, rituals services, and social services, institutions for education and administration, finance and religious disciplines. Some of the social work activities under the wheel of engaging activities include providing scholarships to poor, orphan and disabled children for their education, provide shelter and food to elderly people. The monks and nuns also provide spiritual guidance and services, visit household to perform rites during birth, marriage, sickness, death, construction of houses, consecration ceremonies, promotions, and inaugural ceremonies. Besides providing services to the community, the monasteries also make several contributions to Bhutan trust fund, to support free health service to the public, participate actively in fundraising activities and take the lead in preserving culture and language (Dorji, 2016). The current *Je khenpo* (chief abbot) of the *Zhung Dratshang* travelled across the country and conducted twenty-one *Moenlam Chenpo* (mass gathering teachings) with the pure intention to bring the minds of the people towards dharma.

Similarly, Chokyi Gyatso Institute in the eastern part of Bhutan, founded by Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche has a unique approach to social work. The institute offers training and involves the community to promote organic farming, youth engagement, creates an opportunity for the youth to meaningfully engage and cultivate a sense of volunteerism. The institute is one of the first monastic institutes to successfully initiate zero waste policy in the country. The institute also provides

opportunities for the farmers to go on study tours and organizes mindfulness meditation for the Bhutanese educators, and others (Gyeltshen, 2018).

Social Work in Bhutan

Social work (*Mi dhey Drelwa*) in Bhutan is unique and has its own approach and principle guided by *Jangchup Sem*, the Buddhist philosophy of compassion. According to Dorji (2017) the institution of social work in Bhutan was established in the monastic setting and social work is profoundly based on *Jangchup Sem* and to be of service to all sentient beings. The core philosophy of compassion is also aligned with the philosophy of Gross National Happiness, and the spiritual practice of compassion is authentic and undiluted and the practices are embedded in the culture and tradition of the country (Thinley, 2017). The literature of any religion encompasses helping mankind. It is evident that even before the professionalization of the social work as a profession, there were individuals around the globe addressing the need of the vulnerable people in difficult times (Mathew, 1992; Nanavatty, 1997). Literature shows that religion played a significant role in the birth of social work in the early 20th century. Most of the charity givers were religious volunteers or affiliated with religious institutions (Dudley, 2016). The concept of volunteerism is noticeable in almost every part of Bhutanese community. For example, in one of the remote communities of Ngangla Trong in the Kheng region, there is a local tradition of engaging and holding the three main tribes such as *Brela*, *Lhamenpa* and *Bjarpa* together. Each tribe takes turns to take care of the temple and organize the annual festival. Such traditional practices are basically passed down orally from generation to generation, which contribute to unity and peaceful coexistence within the communities (Phuntsho, 2013). Traditionally, youth in the village grow up observing the roles played by the elders. They observe and participate with their elders in conducting religious and funeral ceremonies and providing voluntary services in kinds and labor for the development of the whole community. Such practices help youth to appreciate and preserve traditional values, practices and skills and knowledge from the older generation (Phuntsho, 2017).

Social work in Bhutan is deeply influenced and grounded in its traditional religious belief system of understanding that one must care for the wellbeing and happiness of all sentient beings without any expectations in return. It is considered profound and practiced at the different level (Choden, 2003; Galay, 2001; Phuntsho, 2017; Thinley, 2017). These understandings laid the foundation for the profound culture of volunteerism in Bhutan (Thinley, 2017). During the first Five Year Plan in 1961, Bhutan opened its door to the establishment of the schools, health centers, and irrigation channels, where the government provided the money and materials, while people in their respective community provided free labor

(Asian Development Bank, 2013). Similarly, in the early 1990s, few graduates offered to serve as volunteers to teach in the remote parts of the country (Dorji, 2017).

Even today religious piety, volunteerism and giving still flourish in Bhutan (Phuntsho, 2017). Askeland and Dohlie (2015) describe religion as a cultural aspect, which influences people and society, creating common values and ethics, and rituals in the society. Religion is a component of self-understanding of a society and cannot be treated as an isolated factor (p.264). According to Phaholyothin (2017), charity or donation in Thailand is influenced by Buddhism and driven by the concept of Karma, which means good actions for the accumulation of good deeds, which determines the kind of rebirth in the next life (p.187). Similarly, in Bhutan, the act of volunteerism is influenced by the concept of compassion and accumulating good karma. Such acts of volunteerism are carried beyond the individual or personal level. For example, there are some traditional practices where the elderly people, lay practitioner, and retired people in the community would intervene and provide guidance to people who need support in marital disagreements, land disputes, alcohol issues or extramarital affairs (Galay, 2001).

Fast-forward to twenty-first century, Bhutan has officially endorsed the Civil Society Organization (CSO) in 2010. Currently, Bhutan has about 42 registered civil society organizations catering to various social needs of the people in the country. However, some of the civil society organizations like the Youth Development Fund (which was a brain child of the Fourth King Jigme Singye Wangchuck) was one of the first Non-Governmental Organizations established in 1999. Its mandate is to address youth related issues such as drug addiction, rehabilitation, special education and empowerment of youth through skills development programmes (BCMD,2017). Similarly, Tarayana Foundation was established in 2003 by Her Majesty the Gyalum Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck with its core value of compassion to serve the most vulnerable people in remote villages (BCMD, 2017). Similarly, Respect, Educate, Nurture and Empower Women (RE-NEW) was established by Her Majesty Gyalum Ashi Sangay Choden Wangchuck in 2004 with the vision to create gender-based violence-free happy society in Bhutan. Similarly, Chitheun Phendhey Association (CPA) was established in 2007 funded by His Majesty the King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck with the vision to create a drug and alcohol-free society in Bhutan. Her Majesty Gyaltsuen Jetsun Pema Wangchuck is the patron of Bhutan Ability Society, with the vision to empower individuals with diverse abilities to live independently and with dignity within the Bhutanese society. Likewise, the Bhutan Nun Foundation (BNF) was founded by Her Majesty Gyalum Ashi Tshering Yangdon Wangchuck in 2009, with the vision to empower nuns through education and economic self-sufficiency.

Although Bhutan is progressing and evolving in all spheres of lives, despite developing into a materialistic society, the culture of volunteerism, giving and charity are still prevalent and timeless (Phuntsho, 2017). People working in the civil society organizations are recognized as social workers, although they do not possess formal education qualification in social work. For example, Baikady, Cheng and Channaveer (2016) in their study on *Social Work Students' Field Work Experience in Bhutan: A Qualitative Study* report that Bhutan has no social work education and trained social workers. However, social workers are experts in providing services especially in the field of rehabilitation and disability services. Currently, every individual is of the view that she/he is a social worker in Bhutan. Social workers are more recognized as voluntary workers, and volunteers can be from government agencies, lay people, monks, housewives, counselors, teachers, religious teachers, and the list is endless. The perception of offering service for the welfare of others is embedded in the culture. Most Bhutanese people are not aware that social work is a profession mainly because there is no job cadre assigned in the Royal Civil Service Commission, the only employing agency in Bhutan. However, people who are working in the civil society organization are paid and recognized as a social worker. According to Tshering Dolkar, Director of the Bhutan Board Certification Counsellor, trained counsellors working in the rehabilitation centres, hospitals, civil society organization and schools are more valued as social workers (personal communication, 14th March, 2018). Bhutan is yet to open its door towards instituting Social Work Education.

Recently, Samtse College of Education (SCE) of the Royal University of Bhutan (RUB), with support from the United Nation Children's Fund (UNICEF), Bhutan introduced the first certification course in social work. This certification course was based on the philosophical idea of right view (*Ita-ba*), right contemplation or understanding (*Sgom-ba*) and right action (*Spyod -pa*) leading to right fruition (*Bras-bu*). According to UNICEF's representative, Rudolf Schewenk, UNICEF has been working with SCE since 2016 to develop social work programmes, based on 'service to others', which is one of the most profound cultural components of the Bhutanese society. This positivity influences social relationships, the values of help and reciprocity, community vitality, sustainable well-being and happiness (as cited in Zangmo, 2018, para 4). The main purpose of offering the certification course to the existing social workers working in various civil society organization is to upgrade and prepare them for the Bachelor Social Work Education, which was offered from 2019. Currently, most of the social workers working in various civil society organizations are graduates from various disciplines and some of them do not have a graduate degree, but have abundance of experiences. In order to make them eligible, short trainings are offered by Samtse College of Education. The Bachelor of Social Work Education is developed in partnership with: UNICEF, Asian Research Institute for International Social

Work, Shukutoku University, and Don Bosco University, Guwahati. The degree is underpinned by the core Buddhist philosophical view of *Ita-ba*, *Sgom-ba* and *Spyod-pa* and *Bras-bu*.

Who are the Social Workers?

While the term Social Work has been developed in the context of Western societies, the concept of social work practice exists in Bhutan. There are a number of Bhutanese expressions that mirror the form of social values. For example, Bhutanese often use the term *Tha damtshi*, which denotes moral values such as trust, honesty, respect, loyalty, kindness, and gratitude. Similarly, *Jangchup Sem*, denotes compassion, showing kindness, affection, a sense of obligation for the benefit of all sentient beings (Thinley, 2017).

The range of social work types is well established including the continuum of practice from micro to macro, numerous fields of practice and diverse approaches to practice. Social workers in Bhutan encompass of volunteers working in the Government agencies, civil society organizations, monasteries, policy makers, police and army personnel, *De Suung* (Guardians of Peace and Harmony) and individuals from all walks of life. All these people are actively involved in providing social services without monetary benefit but fundamentally guided by the philosophy of compassion (Phuntsho, 2017; Thinley, 2017).

Based on the description of Social Work in Bhutan, Choden (2003), Galay (2001) and Thinley (2017) define social work as a traditional act of generosity and understanding that one must care for the wellbeing and happiness of all sentient beings.

From the western perspective, Social Work means recognized practice setting, licensing board and procedures, accredited training and education, professional association and research within the professional called social work, historically founded in the Western world and articulated in the International Federation of Social Work (IFSW), International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and American Association of Psychiatric Social Workers (AAPSW).

In the West, Social Work is defined as per the definition approved by the International Federation of Social Work (IFSW), and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), (2014) which states:

Social Work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge,

social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. However, the definition may be amplified at the national and/or regional levels. (as cited in www.ifsw.org).

Whereas in the Bhutanese context, social work means the practice of voluntary service, which includes traditional elements such as neighbourly helping, Buddhist intervention and practices, guided by the philosophy of compassion, and tasks carried out by counselors, health practitioners, layperson, civil society organizations, Bhutanese civil service organizations and Buddhist monasteries, in response to the need of the people of Bhutan. Bhutanese social workers are individually defined as a Bhutanese person who works in the country whether a lay person or professional, engaged in providing voluntary service, to all sentient beings, guided by the philosophy of compassion, without expecting anything in return. In the context of this paper, social work means an act of generosity which is provided through voluntary service, with an intention to help others in need selflessly.

In other words, Social work is defined as practices-based profession, infused with academic discipline and skills that promotes social change, cohesion and empower people to address life changes and enhance wellbeing (DuBois & Miley, 2013). In addition, social work is recognized as professional social work if executed by a professional with a certificate from a well-established social work institute. Therefore, in Bhutan, the essence of social work is based on the ancient profound wisdom of compassion for all sentient beings, and action driven by volunteerism and guided by the concept of karma. Bhutan's social work is unique and has a religious and philosophical origin and it is contextual (Choden, 2003; Thinley, 2017).

Conclusion

Social work in Bhutan is indigenous and unique in nature, and different from Western professional work in several ways. Social work in Bhutan has not managed to transcend the boundary of prescribed social relations, belonging and not belonging to the norms of Western social work. However, it also shares similar fundamental belief and goals of Western social work like promoting wellbeing and happiness, recognizing that every individual has basic inherent goodness thus bringing social change, development and empowering individual to live a happy life. One major difference which makes Social Work in Bhutan unique is its non-academic nature, where the emphasis is based more on time tested Buddhist values of compassion, driven by the motivation of serving others in the form of volunteerism. This is similar to the Pacific social work, which is drawn from its indigenous values and practices, that has been developed over hundreds of years (Mafile'o & Vakalahi, 2018). Another distinction is that social work in Bhutan is

not taught as an academic discipline, relatively learnt through observation and participating in the culture and tradition as practiced in the family system (Thinley, 2017). In Bhutan, the essence of social work is based on the ancient profound wisdom of compassion for all sentient beings, and action driven by volunteerism and guided by the concept of karma. Bhutan's social work is unique and has a religious and philosophical origin and it is contextual (Choden, 2003; Thinley, 2017). The highlights of the unique approaches are visible and practiced even today (Phuntsho, 2017). Thus, in Bhutan, the approach to social work is unique and distinct, as Bhutan's first priority is to preserve its age-old tradition and culture, which is the strength of the country. Thus, it defines Bhutan as a sovereign and independent country against all the giant countries that neighbor the small kingdom.

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