

Strong and Vibrant Social Sector is *sine qua non* for Social Development

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Abstract

As the largest country, India faces several social issues, and all governments— central or states, have supported several welfare and developmental programmes and schemes. Unfortunately, many of these programmes were politicised and resulted in politicising *interest* and *farewell* to *welfare*. As a result, the social sector expenditure has grown just 7.7% of the GDP between 2015 and 2019, and of the total 7.7% GDP expenditure, 3.1% went to education, 1.6% to healthcare and the rest to other social services segments. India has a large social sector compared to many other countries having around 3.9 million NGOs and a substantial social service workforce. While India has announced its vision 2030 to become and is poised to become a five trillion-dollar economy in the next five years, it needs to emphasise that a healthy, strong and vibrant social sector is essential necessity to ensure its citizens' quality of life and happiness.

Keywords: Social Sector; Civil Society Sector; Social Development; Sustainable Development Goals; Social Service Workforce

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Introduction

India is the second most densely populous country globally and the most populated democracy in the world. Due to India's diverse nature, it faces several social issues ranging from poverty, hunger, malnutrition, low school enrollment, lack of access to education for girls, child labour, religious intolerances, addiction issues such as alcoholism, drugs, tobacco disparities, discriminations, inequalities, etc. The Government of India has several welfare and developmental initiatives, both at the central and state level and through multilateral agencies. To gain political power, many political parties have politicised welfare schemes for different target groups. The politicisation of welfare has unfortunately resulted in these schemes becoming a marketable product, and now over time, we have observed that the State has bid farewell to welfare. Politics, elections and voters' attitudes are highly complex in India. "Elections contested on electoral promises and parties believe that social welfare strategies are their best bet in consolidating voter bases. From giving land rights to the landless to pension schemes for farmers to bringing in a right to health care, parties across the ideological spectrum have made numerous promises to voters. While welfare-driven poll promises are common in state-level elections in India, many believe the opposition parties' use of welfare schemes to wrest power from an incumbent is a novel strategy in the general elections (Purohit, 2019).

Addressing a virtual global investor round table a year ago, the Prime Minister of India made a bold statement:

Today, each sector in India is looking up manufacturing, infrastructure, technology, agriculture, finance, and even social sectors like health and education. India is the place to be if you want returns with reliability, demand with democracy, stability with sustainability, and growth with a green approach (Modi, 2020).

As per the Economic Survey (2019-20), the social sector expenditure has grown just 7.7% of the GDP between 2015 and 2019, and of the total 7.7% GDP expenditure, 3.1% went to education, 1.6% to healthcare and the rest to other social service segments. The Economic Survey said even if it underlined that social sector spending has a "profound impact" on India's "demographic advantage of a large young population in the productive age group" (Nanda, 2020). There is insufficient data to separately determine the actual spending, reach, efficiency, and effectiveness of these welfare schemes. However, the bigger question remains—do these schemes reach the intended beneficiaries and have the proposed impact? Though governments claim the achievements of their sponsored schemes in terms of their reach, coverage, and increased expenditure, yet these schemes cannot create preferred impacts. India has a large social sector in comparison to many other countries. There are a total of around 3.1 million NGOs in 26 states. Besides, more than 82,000 NGOs are registered in seven Union Territories (Anand, 2015).

Social Sector Manpower

As far as the social service workforce is concerned, India has big, bold numbers. In the past eight years, it has added around 0.36 million Bachelors of Social Work (BSWs)/Masters of Social Work (MSWs), averaging forty-five thousand professional social workers per annum professionally qualified skilled social workers in the country (Bhatt, 2021). With over 500 schools of social work, there is a renewed appeal for indigenisation of the curriculum in social work. In addition, India has one million para social workers like Anganwadi workers and ASHA workers working under government-supported projects. All the above factors need consideration while formulating Social work educational needs per the National Education Policy 2020. Launched in July 2020, NEP suggests drastic changes in the country's education system, including reverting to its earlier name, the Ministry of Human Resource Development, as the Education Ministry. This

policy is different from its earlier two policies of 1968 and 1986, as it aims to become a global knowledge superpower by bringing changes in schools to the higher education system. Both Central and States governments have huge staff for welfare, education, and health. At the same time, India's social sector expenditure seems to grow at a snail's pace.

The Lagging Social Sector

Moving on to the point to understand why the social sector is lagging in comparison to other sectors, it is necessary to understand its nature. In India, the voluntary sector draws its strength from humanitarian values rooted in religious philosophy, with a greater role of social institutions and communities to respond to needy people. The voluntary sector is also synonymous with the people's sector, referred to as the third sector, and more popularly, civil society. It appears to be systematically marginalised by both the market and the Government. The social sector thus became dependent on private charities, and foreign contributions than government grants. With the more improved push of corporate social responsibility funds (CSR) which seem to take on welfare and development programmes, the free market mechanisms are taking over the social sector through specifically designed programmes of transferring public services to private sector such as public-private partnerships, user-pay models, performance based contracts etc. The Governments, therefore, are relieving themselves from their welfare responsibilities, need not unduly worry about funding or where funding is associated; there appear to be poor statutory mechanisms and limited supports.

Moreover, it is tightening the noose of the sector through complex bureaucratic processes, delays in sanctioning projects and releasing funds, unrealistic project costs, unattractive tax provisions etc. In addition, the public funds, which can be used effectively for the social sector, are being used by the governments to distribute 'freebies' to specially targeted groups under welfare cover. These freebies like free electricity, water, and transport are not

designed only for the poor people but also for their political gains, which has ramifications for the social sector.

A strong and vibrant social sector is *sine qua non* to social development anywhere and everywhere. The UN has developed several standards of human development needs and aspirations, especially with the 17 structured & well designed Sustainable Developmental Goals, popularly known as SDGs which were endorsed by 193 countries, including India. SDGs are simple, easily explainable comparative indicators across the globe (UNDP, 2020). To implement these SDGs, the Government of India introduced VISION 2030, which states that:

we will create an India where poverty, malnutrition, littering and illiteracy would be a matter of the past. India would be a modern, technology driven, high growth, equitable and transparent society. India is poised to become a five trillion-dollar economy in the next five years and aspires to become 10 trillion-dollar economy thereafter (GOI, 2019).

Among its various dimensions, the vision includes physical and social infrastructure for ten trillion-dollar economy, digital India led by the youths, pollution-free India, rural industrialisation using modern technologies, clean rivers and safe drinking water, healthy India, self-sufficiency in food production, distress free health care and wellness system, minimum government maximum governance nation etc. FICCI has also prepared a report *Envisioning India 2030- Innovative India with shared prosperity (Saajha Samridhi Ke Saath Abhinav Bharat)*, which charts out an agenda of reforms and programmes (FICCI, 2018).

While governments express their commitment to achieving a constitutionally envisioned equal society, it is not possible without investment in the social sector. A trained, educated, passionate, and qualitative social service workforce at various levels is required for better social service delivery. The Government has a obligation to ensure a strong, vibrant, and responsive social sector that efficiently produces operative results. An ideal for the Government

to pursue would be to create similar conditions for the social sector as it has for markets, particularly in terms of ease of doing business.

Recently, a community of professional social workers of India brought out a Nagpur Declaration 2020 after the 9th Indian Social Work Congress held at Nagpur. This Declaration envisages the need for the quality of education and training of social workers, ensuring effective and efficient services for improving human welfare, the quality of life and well-being of people, and thus responding to changing social scenarios. It urges the Government of India to establish a statutory body (National Council for Social Work Education) to ensure the quality of social work education and a qualitative social service workforce with decent work standards for the well-being of people and society (NAPSWI, 2021).

I suggest that the Government may undertake a few quick steps. The existing National Policy on the Voluntary Sector requires revision, preferably with a consultation with civil society organisations. There is a need for more focused legislation to govern the civil society sector in general and the voluntary sector in particular. Domestic and foreign funding require government attention in terms of exploring new funding avenues for nonprofit organisations; modifying the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act on the pattern of the Foreign Exchange Management Act; constructing people-friendly Social Stock exchanges, and more straightforward ways for listing nonprofit organisations; easier access to government grants, Social Venture Funds and other output-driven social impact funding, and the issuance of Social Impact Bonds. A healthy social sector is *sine qua non* to ensure its citizens' quality of life and happiness. The vigilant participation of citizens is very likely to change India's Happiness index status, particularly in its six parameters to overall happiness: GDP per capita, social support, life expectancy, freedom to make choices, generosity, and perception of corruption. The Happiness Index measures life satisfaction, the feeling of happiness, and other

happiness domains: psychological well-being, health, time balance, community, social support, education, arts, and culture, environment, governance, material well-being, and work (Happiness Alliance, 2014).

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