

Editorial

Sociology and Social Work: Mapping Differences and Similarities

Artha—the journal exclusively dedicated to Social Sciences and Humanities from Christ University, Bengaluru—has entered into its 15th year of life in 2016. It is indeed a long period considering the delicacy of the publishing industry in social science academia. This intervening period has also been quite turbulent and volatile, to say the least, for the paradigmatic changes it has seen in the domains of global politics and social thinking. There has been a rupture in the social existence of human beings as new technologies and ideas invade and occupy our surroundings on rampant scales. While economic reforms and neoliberal policies of states have a central role in generating these changes their impacts on the social, cultural, and political surroundings have been massive and clearly outside the immediate domains of economics. Mapping these social changes and structural realities then become a major task where other social science disciplines like Sociology, Anthropology, and Cultural Studies have a major stake.

This is the larger background against which the current edition of *AJSS* is launched. As such it involves writings from the ‘twin disciplines’ of Sociology and Social Work and covers a wide range of issues. Having articles from these disciplinary platforms in the same space has its own merits and risks. Interestingly, when one of the editors of this volume had a discussion with a renowned professor, who, also happens to be the editor’s teacher, regarding the issue, the professor did not conceal his unhappiness over universities and higher educational bodies still treating these disciplines as two sides of the same coin. “Their differences are not sufficiently respected” was what he had to say. The statement is indeed problematic in an era of interdisciplinarity. Also, several universities, both in India and abroad, and the one from where this journal emerges subscribe to a view that is diametrically opposite. However, we would be at a loss, if we were to dismiss the view altogether; It specifically addresses why an edition for these two subjects alone. A member of the NAAC committee, during one of their usual quality assurance visits, in a slightly nettling tone,

suggested that it is high time these departments be merged into one. Thus, the statement made by the professor is not a misplaced one.

On the one hand, both these disciplines have an existence of their own with different genealogies of emergence and different thematic frameworks for addressing the issues they usually address. This is despite the commonalities in their points of origins (Soydan 1999; Olesen 2011). On the other hand, however, there exist a few lines of convergence regarding disciplinary concerns and areas of interests where there is an ongoing, and possibilities for, creative exchanges between both these disciplines. Both are concerned with problems and issues emerging from our social existence as human beings—issues that rather reflect upon the structural constraints operating on us. However, as it emerges, there has been a consistent ambiguity about these differences and commonalities throughout their respective existence. In 2012, at a conference in Oslo, Norway, scholars from both the disciplines negotiated on this issue to the extent that these disciplines also raise questions about the ongoing debate on the dichotomy between theory and practice. The organisers of the conference openly expressed their surprise over the continued existence of this dichotomy which, for them, is a contrast that has far outlived its utility as against what was originally proposed in the 1940s by the American psychologist Kurt Lewin that “. . . there is nothing as practical as a good theory” (1947)¹.

In the early 20th century there were live discussions about the possible contributions that these disciplines can make to each other (Karpf 1925 & 1929; Bodenhafer 1928; Virginia 1957). However, having said that, the major focus tended to be on the possible contributions that Sociology can make towards Social Work; in other words, theory making a professional practice possible. This conscious or unconscious privileging of theoretical enterprises over practical ones has reigned the realms of social sciences for long. In Virginia, we find this paradigm neatly articulated. In an article published in 1957, she had said that “social work, *relying on the findings of the sociologists*, apply their helping methods to bring

¹Also see the conference website for a brief discussion: www.hioa.no.

about the reconstruction or betterment of society” (1957, p 58: emphasis added). These paradigms have evidently led to tensions between these disciplines although their interconnections continued to prevail even through uneasy relations. Thus Oslen, in 2011, attempts to take stock of this current situation by bridging the “ontological, epistemological and methodological differences” between these two disciplines. This is achieved by demarcating the links between (again) the theoretical (for instance quantitative sociology) and the practical paradigms (like evidence based practice) in social work (2011, p 2).

Outside of these continuing divides and interconnections ,both these disciplines have achieved a considerable amount of freedom and have well-established existence in their respective domains. They both have a clearly defined epistemology of their own with intellectual and action-based projects. Their mutual interactions have continued to exist outside of their mutual exclusiveness. University departments are stark examples of this, as they consistently negotiate for an independent existence, but at the same time carry out projects that are mutually fulfilling. Nevertheless, it is not uncommon to meet people (especially in administrative positions and bodies of higher education) who believe that both the disciplines should be clubbed in to one department, not just for administrative convenience but because of the ‘similarities’ in their disciplinary concerns and areas of inquiry. Thus, even while their paradigms are clearly defined, their practical existence has to negotiate with such mundane binaries of similarities and differences, and theory and practice. However, this is specific to their institutional and geographic locations.

It is through these shaky differences that another area in Sociology, Applied Sociology, emerged as a field to negotiate the distance between Theory and Practice, as it is often discussed in Sociology. It has also emerged as an area where the distance between Sociology and Social Work perse become more thin and elusive. For all practical reasons then, they remain very close to each other often overlapping and drawing more or less from the same theoretical grids, than any other subjects. Although their academic orientations are very much similar, their ‘practical’ orientation is inclined to remain slightly different. It is this difference that has lent

itself to justify the rigidity in our university systems where these disciplines are more or less always function as two different departments.

The current edition includes papers written from the vantage of Applied Sociology as well, although, as editors, we have avoided a strict categorization along those lines. When it comes to research and publishing, these are not questions one needs to be concerned about in the current era of interdisciplinarity. But they definitely become issues as an edition of a journal allocates its space singularly to fit in papers from these disciplines, just from them. The whole ambiguity about similarity and separation revisits, in turn, demanding another set of justification that would make their existence in the same space plausible.

Well, the contributors and editors of this volume believe that this divide and unity is both a myth as well as reality. They are real to the extent both disciplines operate in the same realms, are organized around same or similar concerns and anxieties. The conditions of social existence are what drive both the disciplines. Structural inequalities that exist in different realms of our society are one of their central concerns, which is addressed albe it in different ways. However, from this foundational ground both disciplines have grown in different directions where they focus on areas that are mutually exclusive and where they both draw from different sets of disciplines. It becomes a myth in this respect. Sociology is more anxious about regimes of knowledge that operate through specific cultures which are again conditioned by historical, political and economic circumstances. Going beyond the classical empiricism, there is a growing awareness among sociologists to trace the emergence and circulation of ideas that are deep rooted and through which inequalities are reproduced in an endless cycle. On the other hand, Social Work has grown to become a completely professional field where it remains in close contact with fields like management and psychology for the effective implementation of its projects. Social welfare gets a more or less unconditional acceptance within its domains whereas the same is often suspected and criticized by sociologists as an instrument of power and as an instance of welfare capitalism.

For an informed reader, the current volume then shall regenerate some of these anxieties and uncertainties in a rather implicit fashion. However, the volume is not intended to address this frame at all. The papers in the volume deal with issues that are divergent both thematically and issue wise. Their coexistence in the same space shall be mediated by one's intellectual eclecticism and a prior knowledge of those elusive differences. With this caveat, we invite the reader to this volume of Artha.

About the papers

As specified already this edition of Artha has papers from Sociology and Social Work and addresses issues that are different both thematically and practically. Some of the papers emerge from Applied Sociology as it emerges and mediates the space between Sociology and Social Work as discussed above. As such the papers are not organized around one particular theme. However their concerns about the emerging socialities, changing socio-cultural landscapes, questions of development and so on connect them with each other and well justify their coexistence in the same space.

In his article, Dev Pathak discusses the question of angry youth in a context of volatile democracy against the South Asian background. Dev places the question of youth and its differing perceptions in the popular and statist imaginations; the pragmatic politics of development and globalization, coupled with the 'guidelines' of policy making have invented a new, albeit, "sanitized" notion of youth as the ideal one. The article foregrounds the changes at all levels of our cultural existence where the angry youth is no longer a tolerated phenomenon. On the contrary, the angry youth generates hostility on the part of both administrators and corporate leaders who consistently look for a submissive, productive workforce. The article also stretches to the realm of social media and the agency it enables for the youth where people, especially the youth, articulate their feelings albeit incognito.

Sunandan's paper on caste and educational reforms in Keralam highlights the issue of the ongoing debate on the dichotomy between mind and body and mental and manual labour. This dichotomy, he argues, has a central role in the ongoing debates on

educational reforms since the 90s and 2000s. He points to the problems involved in the modern education which by default has targeted the realm of mind as a space for renovation and where a set of 'skills' get prioritized. In a sense, the "whole concept of "[s]chool" as a place of learning is normalized based on a fundamental binary between mental and physical labour". His article both traces the concept of knowledge in the modern history of Keralam and revisits the space of debates in the 90s to contextualize and make sense of the binaries that implicitly and explicitly drive our concepts of education.

"Locating Bengaluru as India's Silicon Valley" gives a comprehensive picture of Bengaluru's emergence as a major IT city with a particular focus on the historical factors and situations. In this article the author, Suparna Kar looks at both the losses of the city in this evolution from its traditional backgrounds as well as the policy shifts that have accompanied this transition through various phases in history. The article provides a narration of these historical events that also includes the contemporary; simultaneously it also reflects critically upon the 'forces' that consistently operate shaping "the unique character of the city and its culture."

In a unique analysis of the not so well known side of the revolutionary nationalist Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, Anuplal Gopalan reflects upon his contributions towards social reform in India and Indian industrial relations – primarily as an outside trade union leader and champion of labour welfare. The once President of TATA Steel Workers Union & All India Trade Union Congress, Subhas Chandra Bose's contributions in these fields are often neglected as his heroic image as the revolutionary leader has always blocked a neatly configured and scholarly constructed sociological imagination of his persona and contributions. Even within INA, Bose's interventions were unique as he was primarily preoccupied, addressed and took measurements to eradicate, the gender and caste prejudices that operated in the Indian contexts. His role in foregrounding the 'national' identity as opposed to the caste, gender, and religion-based identities is often not discussed in the postcolonial scholarships.

In their paper on the changing dynamics of health communication, Sudhansubala Sahu and Preethi highlight the gaps in knowledge in this field, particularly when contexts and regions outside the standard urban societies are considered. The authors suggest that patients, doctors, health experts, and administrators may benefit if we address certain inherent flaws that persist in the field. The paper also makes the suggestion that we may benefit considerably if health communication is developed as an independent discipline altogether. In an era where technologies of communication are drastically changing even to the level of mediating the doctor-patient interactions, the suggestion sounds very relevant as health remains an exclusive realm per se.

The heavy dropout rates in the schools of Mahbubnagar district in Telangana state is studied by Deepak Kumar Dey using standard methods of sampling and surveys. The paper looks into the socio-economic scenario of the district and attempts to map it clearly with regard to the specific *mandals* constituting the district. The phenomenon of school dropouts then is addressed in the article against the specific human development indicators and the gender, family, location and other internal dynamics of the situation.

The paper on Elderly care and the possibilities of interventions from Social Work perspective look into the various methods already adopted in this area and the possibilities of some alternative methods. The author, Minimol, elaborates on the already available paradigms of Bio-Psycho-Social perspective in the assessment of aged people's issues and emphasizes on the possibilities opened by strength-based assessment. Focusing on the heterogeneity of the elderly population and the need for a sensitive approach, Minimol claims that "differences are celebrated in the strength-based model." The strength-based model also positions the social workers such that they may address the question of risks involved in the lives of aged people while also attempting to create a safe and supportive living environment.

Rajeev Kumaramkandath
Issue Editor

References

- Bodenhafner, W. B. (1928). The Relation of Sociology to Social Work. In *The Southwestern Political and Social Science Quarterly*, 9(1), 38-56.
- Karpf, M. J. (1925). The relation between sociology and social work. In *The Journal of Social Forces*, 3(3), 419-427.
- Olesen, S. P. (2011). Sociological approaches as perspectives on and in social work. Paper presented at International Seminar on Sociology and Social Work, Lisbon, Portugal. Retrieved from <http://vbn.aau.dk> on the 27th of February, 2016.
- Soydan, Haluk (1999). *The History of Ideas in Social Work*. Birmingham: Venture Press.
- Virginia, M. M. (1957). The Relation between Sociology and Social Work. In *Philippine Sociological Review*, 5 (3/4), 58-68.