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## **Role of Yoga in Social Work: Review and Relevance**

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### **Abstract**

*Social work as an informal support system established its roots in India a long time ago and eventually got formalised and recognised. While the theories, principles, methods and approaches have been taken from the west, its efficacy and relevance in Indian setting is often questioned. A lot of work have been done around the indigenisation of social work including the various aspects to make it more appropriate in Indian context. Yoga, which is believed to be originated in India, has also been gaining attention as a practice that brings harmony to mind and body and its potential to be embodied in social work. It is central to attaining a blooming health and is considered science and art of healthy living. It seeks to sway body, mind and soul of an individual. Yoga involves a practice of certain breathing techniques, also known as pranayama, that calms the mind. There are numerous benefits of yoga and how it can have a positive impact in every aspect of an individual's being. This paper looks into the significance and relevance of yoga and its usefulness in social work. It is based upon a review of literature of articles and book chapters, chiefly focusing on yoga and social work, exploring and reviewing the role of yoga and its embodiment in social work.*

***Keywords- Yoga, Social Work, Education, Practice, Indigenisation***

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**Introduction:** Social work as an informal support system established its roots in India a long time ago and eventually got formalised and recognised. While the theories, principles, methods and approaches have been taken from the west, its efficacy and relevance in Indian setting is often questioned. A lot of work have been done around the indigenisation of social work including the various aspects to make it more appropriate in Indian context.

Yoga, which is believed to be originated in India, has also been gaining attention as a practice that brings harmony to mind and body and its potential to be embodied in social work. It is central to attaining a blooming health and is considered science and art of healthy

living. It seeks to sway body, mind and soul of an individual. From physical viewpoint, it eases ailments. The postures (asanas) builds up the body, strengthens muscles and enhances flexibility and body tone. At psychological level, it improves mind and enhances concentration as well. It focuses on improving the stability and steadiness of emotions and helps in managing stress and anxiety. Yoga involves a practice of certain breathing techniques, also known as pranayama, that calms the mind. It is also considered a source of manifesting spirituality, experiencing inner peace through meditation. There are numerous benefits of yoga and how it can have a positive impact in every aspect of an individual's being.

This paper looks into the significance and relevance of yoga in social work. It is based upon a review of literature of articles and book chapters, chiefly focusing on yoga and social work, exploring and reviewing the role of yoga and its embodiment in social work.

### **Prospects in Social Work:**

In Indian context, social work education and profession is still regarded to be in its developing stage. Inadequate indigenous knowledge foundation followed by lack of constructive linkages allying theory to field practice is one of the reasons for it (Verma, 2003; UGC Curriculum Development Report, 2001; Kulkarni, 1994; Singh and Srivastava, 2003). Like any other social science discipline, social work being a service profession mandates to respond to the social and cultural realities and make societal needs a part of its curriculum (Vijayalakshmi, 2004). Shetty(1996) and Pathak (2000) also highlighted the need to update the curriculum and make it indigenous for social work profession.

Cameron and McDermott (2007) pointed out the dearth of acknowledgement of the experience of body in social work and could be immensely imputed to the origin of the profession. This led to the emphasis on expanding theoretical and practical aspects of human being which focus separately on mind and body, aiming to ease the body making it rarely problematised. Saleebey (1992) signified, a few years back the distinction of body and mind augmented the profession towards technicism and rationalism, taking confidence in hegemony of science which also created a distance of social work from body and its legitimacy in practice, focussing more on technicality. He further rallied social workers to form a reference frame that should be inclusive of biological and aesthetic knowledge infused with social work theory and practice in order to get the better portrayal of the realities of profession. However, social work being evolved and adopted from the west has often pointed out and emphasised on a paradigm shift that is required embracing body as a valuable source of understanding (Peile, 1998).

Yoga has gained its popularity and is efficiently documented in the west yet there is a paucity of research emphasising on mind-body connection and its relation with social work (Mensinga, 2011). An awareness of the body lets us interact and familiarise with our inner self intimately (Van der Kolk, 2014). It increases our admiration of sensation of the body and helps us connect sincerely with one's oscillating emotional state and helps to effectively manage it.

**Yoga in Mental Health services:**

In the recent years, there has been a significant increase in mental health issues and the importance of mental and social health and the emphasis on non-pharmacological, safe, clinically effective and cost efficient treatments that are acceptable by clients. With this prospect, individuals have started turning to yoga (Balasubramaniam, Telles, & Doraiswamy, 2013). Social work being a profession that focuses on all the aspects of an individual's well-being is pivotal to embracing yoga in a systemic and organised manner. There is plethora of literature available that points out towards yoga as a form of therapy and its usefulness in mental health cases. It's is being used in many western countries as a "complimentary and integrative medicine therapy" (Cramer et al. (2016), p-230). Yoga synchronises the body and breath , helps us have control over the respiration rate, lower blood pressure and controls and regulates nervous system (Somerstein, 2010). As Yoga is getting popular, its utility in mental health is being highlighted and is being explored to understand the extent to which it could influence psychiatric symptoms (Mitchell, et al., 2014). Studies have been conducted to understand the influence of Yoga in trauma conditions, depression, anxiety and psychosis and the surfacing literature has supported the findings and pointed out towards Yoga as a beneficial tool for improving overall well-being of an individual (Rao, Varambally & Gangadhar, 2013). Social worker specifically case workers deals with clients that may have severe mental health conditions and yoga can play a crucial role in equipping the social worker as well as the client in dealing with the such problems.

**Yoga for Social workers:**

Yoga focuses on self-knowledge and considers it as a basic part of life for serving humanity. In the code of ethics proposed by National Association of Social Work (2008), they advocated that the practice of social work should focus on cultural competency. It emphasises on taking into account the cultural nuances and promote interventions having cultural acceptance. A competent social worker is supposed to understand the cultural background of the client as well as be aware of their own cultural milieu which might be different from the setting in which they are working. Ferguson (2009b) pointed out that social work practitioners while working with the clients can elicit sensual and tactile experiences that can prevent or reduce the capacity of practitioner in implementing the standards framed as per the accrediting organisations. Social worker works as a catalyst in helping individuals attaining and enhancing the overall well-being of individuals where working with the clients can become stressful and complexed process and requires social worker to be stress free and not be surrounded by their own sufferings in order to help the individuals in best possible way.

Kaushik (2021) have aptly put forward the connection between yoga and social work by citing the great social reformers Buddha, Kabir, Nanak and others who after getting spiritually enlightened, attacked many social evils prevalent in the society at that time including- untouchability, Sati pratha, caste system etc. and thus concurred that social

workers need to be distressed and reduce their own suffering in order to do better for the society and principles of Yoga and its practice could act as an important tool for them. Therefore, practicing yoga is also important and fruitful not just for clients but for social workers as well and can play a crucial role in reducing the sufferings and mental stress and enable them being a better professional.

**Yoga as a reflective practice:**

Reflection is all about understanding one's experiences in a more meaningful manner and this act of reflecting which involves deliberate thinking of one's own actions, thoughts and ideas, contemplating on it and understanding the experiences, different perspectives connected to it is called reflective practice (Jasper, 2013, Minimol, 2016, Ramsey, 2006). Dewey (1910) and Schon (1987) had extensively wrote about reflection and reflective practice and its importance in attaining meaningful knowledge. Social workers are supposed to be reflective practitioners (Sheppard, 1998). As they deal with problems where they are supposed to use theories, therapies and models they have read, however, at times they may also face situations where just the technical knowledge and learnt tools won't be suffice and they'd need to go beyond, use their presence of mind and reflect on the situations in order to deal with it. In India, Union Grants Commission (2019) framed LOCF(Learning outcome-based Curriculum Framework) and put forward some reforms for social work where it emphasised on including critical thinking, reflective skills etc as some important attributes that social workers should demonstrate and provided guidelines for graduate courses for fostering these attributes.

Australian Association of Social Workers' (AASW) Education and Accreditation have asserted that social work education aims to equip students with opportunities that helps in potentially developing reflective skills, skills to think critically and develop them with virtuous and professional behaviour (AASW, 2000, p. 6). Although social work programmes supply learners with similar opportunities however the programmes are primarily focussed on meeting the academic standards rather than exploring the embodied depiction of these standards in practice. Despite the increasing attention of the person-in-environment approach and focus on the capacity of brain in undergraduate courses of social work, bio-social experience of body entwined in human activities gets ignored. Saleebey also pointed out in 1992 that the quality and standard of theory and practice is compromised due to the ignorance and inattention to the body however there has been change in the approach (Shapiro and Applegate, 2000; Tangenberg and Kemp, 2002; Cameron and McDermott, 2007).

Since ywoga not just enhances one's mental or physical well-being but also tends to soothe our nerves and clear our minds, it has a potential to enhance reflective skills of social work professionals. Integrating yoga as a practice for social work students and professionals will help in enhancing metacognitive capabilities of learners, girding their loins for novel and challenging environment.

### **Indigenisation of Social Work Education:**

India, being a country of diverse culture, have people of different socio-cultural background, different ethnicity, region, caste and geographic locations and their lives and problems. Ejaz(1991) and Kulkarni (2000) presented their views and emphasised on indigenisation of social work education and practice. Similar views have been presented by Narayan (2008) and Singh (2006) who focussed on advocating indigenisation of social work and pointed out the incompatibility of western model in addressing India's multi-dimensional aspects of socio-cultural milieu. UGC curriculum report (2001) and NAAC Self Study Manual (2005) also maintained that professionals in the field of social work need to embody the socio-economic, political and cultural issues of Indian society in teaching and field practices.

The profession of social work has traditionally motivated practitioners to recognise and contemplate the psychological, biological and social aspects of development and their interactions (Grossman, 2019). An interdisciplinary framework inclusive of all the aforementioned aspects equip social workers to focus on the overall well-being of individuals (clients) i.e. on physical, mental, social and spiritual level (Haight & Taylor, 2013). Although social work is rooted in this approach, its existence and applicability in social work education and practice is still lacking and need to focus more on importance of the experiences of the body and its interconnection with sociological and biological processes (Mensinga, 2011).

The profession of social work is evolving and committed to recognise the differences, conflicts and other aspects to enhance the profession and demands to expand the social workers' apprehension of "mind-body-spirit approaches" in order to enhance their ability making it useful for clients and benefit them. (Raheim & Lu, 2014, p.288). The role and importance of yoga and its benefits are well documented and is considered a rudiment that serves humanity and provides a complete guide for individuals to maintain and promote physical as well as mental health, calm their mind, body and soul. Based on the literature it can be said that social work promotes harmony and focuses on overall well-being of individual and even yoga strongly advocates it. Integrating the practices of yoga in social work education will help in equipping the students with better practices in the field and will even help the learners in dealing with the stress and instability of mind and body. It will not just enhance the quality of social work education but is a step forward towards indigenising the social work curriculum, making it more relevant in Indian context.

### **Conclusion:**

This paper attempted to explore and describe the potential of yoga in the field of social work especially in enhancing the profession and indigenising social work education and practice. The principles, philosophies and practices of yoga can immensely enhance the education as well as practice in social work. In Indian context it can prove useful in embodying the diverse cultural and geographic aspects and can help in making it more relevant in Indian setting and can lay a step forward for social work from being a borrowed

concept from the west to a more indigenous one. While yoga has started gaining more and more attention over the years and is being advocated as a practice that aims to increase self-awareness, knowledge and stabilise body, soul and mind of individuals, its importance and recognition in social work is still a work in progress. However, there is no denial of the fact that its(yoga) demand has been increasing with time and educational institutions, organisations and different professions are taking a step forward in inculcating practices of yoga. Various workshops, conferences and seminars are being organised all over the world to advocate about yoga and its benefits which definitely hints towards the potential integration of yoga and social work in better and formal manner in the near future.

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