

Role of Social Work in Building ethnic harmony through religions practice

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Introduction

Social work is a profession among the social sciences that endeavors to improve the lives of individuals, groups, and societies. It incorporates and uses other social sciences as a means to improve human conditions with practice based. This paper attempts to present an overview of the ethnic harmony through religious practice based on the Social Work intervention. It is important as it promotes understanding, tolerance and friendship among human beings in their diversity of religion, belief, culture and language, and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, regardless of their race, gender, language or religion.

The term ethnic harmony can be defined as a condition where different ethnic communities could co-exist peacefully. When it comes to country, ethnic harmony is related to development without which the overall development of a country might not be achieved.

The main objective of this article is to explain an effective plan and strategies to enhance ethnic harmony in order to prevent the future ethnic crisis and develop the country. This article also defines ethnic harmony and role of Social Work. And it will also explain Social Work methods and tools which can be used to build ethnic harmony. Finally, I will explain my own work experience as a Social worker in this field; Intervention strategies, our role and function as a monk.

Historical background of ethnic harmony

Sri Lanka comprised of variety of ethnic groups. People belong to different cultures, religions, caste and tribes. These differences formed large ethnic diversity in Sri Lanka. The people have different thoughts, traditions, languages, cultures and own believes. Their attitudes, decisions and activities mainly depend on the ethnic diversity. The peace

and violence, happy and sadness, smile and tears and the development and non-development of Sri Lanka is directly depend on the situation of ethnic harmony in Sri Lanka. Based on my personal experience it is understood that Sri Lanka is not having an effective strategies to build ethnic harmony national policies and systematic proper plan. Therefore requirement of standard and systematic planning and policies to enhance the ethnic harmony are utmost important.

Since ancient times in Sri Lanka, there is a large variety of ethnic groups. From the king Vijaya, Sri Lankans were under the rule of one flag and one king. Since then, peace and harmony among different ethnic groups such as Sinhalese and Tamil was maintained. Then Tamils came from south India as a result of invasion, marriages and other diplomatic relationships. The arrival of the Muslims from Arabic countries for economic and merchant purposes was cause to enhance the ethnic variety in Sri Lanka. In 1505 arrival of Portugueseto the coastal area of Sri Lanka, in 1656 invasion of Dutch people and in 1796 conquering of Sri Lanka as a whole by the British rule led to the origin of Malay and Christian communities. In this colonial period the status of the new comers created tension between Sinhala Tamil and Muslim communities due to discrimination in education, politics and other basic human rights. This tension played a crucial role in current day to day life in Sri Lanka. The unexpected moments such as Kotahena riot in 1883 and Sinhala Muslim riot in 1915 were some of the unpleasant testimonies of religious disharmony.

Though there were such relatively minor ethnic conflicts between different ethnic groups, due to dedication, courage and co-existence of Sinhalese Muslims and Tamils, in 1948 Sri Lanka as a nation got the independence from the British.

After gaining independence and peace, the brotherhood and harmony among racial groups was disturbed due to arbitrary acts of Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim political leaders. They wanted to increase the power vested upon each single individual to govern the country to achieve their betterment and increase benefits of their own ethnic group. Therefore development of the country after the independence was taken away from the citizen's who were looking for it. As a result the ethnic conflict began to originate.

Definition of ethnic harmony

Social harmony is a complicated concept to analyse: a literature search across various academic disciplines indicated that it is rarely explicitly defined. It tends to have broad implications; one well-cited article uses the term in conjunction with ‘community cohesion’, ‘inter-group empathy and mutual respect’ and ‘peaceful coexistence.’ No academic papers were found which defined or discussed social harmony in Sri Lanka directly.

Yet in the current Sri Lankan context, it is clearly an ideological term. Broadly speaking, the term social harmony fits within the current government’s post-war narrative of national unity and social integration in Sri Lanka. In the report of the Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission of November 2011, the terms ‘harmony’, ‘disharmony’, ‘community harmony’, ‘communal harmony’, ‘ethnic harmony’, ‘religious harmony’ and ‘social harmony’ are commonly used in random with those such as ‘unity’ and ‘national reconciliation’. A variety of government and international donor initiatives apparently aim to foster social harmony, for example through education or language rights programmes. A recent policy framework published by the Sri Lankan Ministry of National Languages and Social Integration provides one of few explicit definitions of social harmony, as ‘peaceful interaction among members of social groups.

Based on this understanding finally ethnic harmony can be defined “as a condition where different ethnic communities could co-exist peacefully. When it comes to a country, ethnic harmony is related to development without which the overall development of a country might not be achieved”

Religions intervention for ethnic harmony

The world is heading to enter the 21st century, but is still trapped in more serious problems than ever before. The 20th century has been a century of challenge and development. The conflicts, wars and destructions are still continuing. In primitive human society people used to fight each other with bows and arrows; and with the passage of time they used guns and machines to defeat each other.

Whenever people have faced difficulties or challenges, their tendencies have been to take shelter under religion and spirituality, to seek solutions and remedies. Unfortunately, the most dangerous threat to the world is that religion itself is becoming a most powerful means for division and conflict within the human society. The phenomena of religious intolerance, fundamentalism and fanaticism have made society almost immune to any remedy, secular or religious. The medicine itself is becoming poisonous. It is, therefore, imperative to discuss the issue with all seriousness in the context of what harmony between religions can contribute.

A Buddhist Perspective

In accordance with the teaching of Buddha, each of the individual sentient beings are unique; each one is different from all others. Each one differs from the other in capacity, likes and dislikes, taste and temperament etc. Hence, any one single religious doctrine will not be suitable for every individual. Therefore, Buddha himself taught a number of different teachings within Buddhism itself.

A Islam Perspective

Islam is the universal order, the integral religion of harmony and the unique system which is able to harmonize the physical with the metaphysical, the rational with the ideal, and the corporeal with the spiritual. All dimensions of man's earthly life have particular places of their own within the matrix of Islam in such a way that each can perform its own function and enable man to be at peace with himself, his community and nature, and ultimately to gain happiness in both worlds.

Christianity Perspective

According to Christianity, reconciliation is an act of God and was initiated by him through the death of Jesus Christ. God is reconciling the world to Himself. All Christians are children of God. God has written the law in their hearts and they are commanded to love God and their fellow humans. Where disputes arise, the offended is commanded to take initiatives to reach out to the offender and sort out the differences. If no agreement is reached, the next step is to involve a third party, and if this does not work, seek support from the whole community. Christians are not to keep anger for the entire day; instead, they should seek

reconciliation. The offended party is therefore commanded to forgive an indefinite number of times. Christians should love God and God loved them by saving them through Jesus Christ.

What is Social Work?

Social work discipline is scientific in method and artful in manner that takes remedial action on problem in several areas in society. It helps communities to bring their welfare and related services in to good balance. Social work provides many services for people, especially for children, youth, women, family, aged, disabled, handicapped, displaced and dependents.

Defining Social Work

“The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance wellbeing. Utilizing theories of human behaviour and social system, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work,” (IASSW and IFSW, 2001)

According to the definition social work is merely on helping people who are not able to come up with themselves. But they need someone help in order to come out from various problems. The main aim of social work is to enhance human happiness in general and help people to help themselves.

The purposes of social work are: enhance human well-being and alleviate poverty, oppression, and other forms of social injustice, enhance the social functioning and interactions of individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities by involving them in accomplishing goals, developing resources, and preventing and alleviating distress, formulate and implement social policies, service, and programs that meet basic human needs and support the development of human capacities, to pursue policies, services, and resources through advocacy and social or political actions that promotes social and economic justice, develop and use research, knowledge, and skills that advance social work practice and develop and apply practice in the context of diverse cultures.

Role of the professional social worker

Professional social workers have a strong tradition of working for social justice, and of refusing to recreate unequal social structures. Thus means reaching beyond state sponsored practices which merely cater for individual needs, in order to transform society as a whole. Social work maintains this radical kernel and today many social workers internationally have strong connections with social and political movements for the emancipation of the oppressed.

The main tasks of professional social workers engaged are case management (linking clients with agencies and programs that will meet their psychosocial needs), medical social work, counseling (psychotherapy), human services management, social welfare policy analysis, community organizing, advocacy, teaching (in schools of social work), and social science research.

These professional social workers work in a variety of settings, including: non-profit or public social service agencies, grassroots advocacy organizations, hospitals, hospices, community health agencies, schools, faith-based organizations, and even the military. In addition social workers work as psychotherapists, counselors, or mental health practitioners, normally working in coordination with psychiatrists, psychologists, or other medical professionals. Some social workers have chosen to focus their efforts on social policy or academic research into the practice or ethics of social work. The emphasis has varied among these task areas by historical era and country, and some of these areas have been the subject of controversy as to whether they are properly part of social work mission.

My own work experience as a Social Worker

A discussion of my personal involvement in building religious harmony is understood as important by me. The child development projects in the Welikanda D. S Division of the Polonnaruwa district from the years 2001 to 2003 is important in this regard. Seven children's societies were formed by me In the Welikanda D. S Division-(recognized as a border area of Sri Lanka) in the villages of Nagasthenna, KuruluBedda, Mahindagama, Kadawathmaduwa, AselapuraPuunanni and Ransarateannena.

The Puunanni Childrens society consisted of Muslim children and there held 27 members. The children's society of Ransarathenna (a predominantly Tamil Village) consisted of 36

members. The other 5 villages were predominantly inhabited by Sinhalese- and in order consisted of 48, 37, 58, 18, and 40 children. Accordingly the numbers of Sinhala, Muslim and Tamil children in these societies totaled to 264. The main aim of this program was peace building via the development of racial and religious harmony.

The concept of peace in that era was a necessary and vital factor. In the times of the war, a divided and segmented environment had been created due to the misunderstanding and mistrust between the different ethnic communities caught in the midst of the conflict. Focusing on children in order to build peaceful and harmonious relations between the different ethnic groups proved a successful step.

The activities conducted under this project involved the creation of seven libraries for children, seven children's societies, seven early child development centers, seven parent societies- and via all these, the organizing of sporting events, discussions, seminars, religious festivals, folk games, exchange programs, awareness programs, income- generation programs, recreational tours and educational programs took a foremost place.

The results gained from the above programs and activities are as follows.

- The development of peace and harmonious relations amongst children belonging to different ethnic communities.
- The development of religious harmony
- The eradication of mistrust between the members of different ethnic communities.
- Respect towards religious beliefs, rituals and practices.

Keeping in view the above mentioned facts I would suggest the following course of action to bring harmony among the followers of various religious and ethnic groups.

1. Eliminate all violence which take place in the name of religion, race or language and condemn such violence.
2. Promote positive inter-ethnic relation by including the idea of unity among ethnic groups.
3. Accept the freedom of every individual to believe, practice and live by any religion.

4. Stop the unethical religious conversion, by coercion or by force.
5. Stop all publicity, literature and audio-visual presentations, admiration and erection of heroic-memorials which create anger, hatred and retaliation.
6. Take measure to erase bad memories of past violence but learn from the past mistakes to prevent any such hatred and violence in the future.
7. Accept the fact that present generation or future generations are not responsible for what is happened in the past, and they should not suffer due to the past mistakes.
8. Ban all support and unethical publicity for any individual or group trying to create ethnic and religious based violence.
- 9 Uphold the unity of mankind among people of all faiths.

Education System in promoting peace building, civic values and social cohesion

Encourages Governments to promote, through education, as well as the development of progressive curriculums and text books, understanding, harmony and friendship among human beings in all their diversity of religion, belief, culture and language, which will address the cultural, social, economic, political and religious sources of in harmony, and to apply a gender perspective while doing so, in order to promote understanding, harmony, tolerance, peace and friendly relations among nations and all racial and religious groups, recognizing that education at all levels is one of the principal means to build a culture of peace;

Encourage students to offer civics and citizenship education in the GCE O/L by making it a compulsory subject in the GCE O/L Examination.

Promote bilingual or trilingual education starting from lower secondary classes where children from different ethnic groups can study together.

Arrange seminars and workshops for the civics and citizenship Education, History teachers emphasizing the practical side of the subjects not just the concept and theories.

Teacher development programmes should be introduced to educate teachers in accepting the real nature of Sri Lankan society and to promote respect of diversity and equality.

Attitudinal changes

Following attitudes should be encouraged;

1. Enhance the national integration considering Sri Lanka as a sovereign state
2. Sri Lanka is a nation consists of several communal groups such as Sinhala, Tamil and Muslims.
3. Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic state where everyone is equal in front of law. It is a unity homeland of all of its citizens.
4. It is required to create patriotism in order to promote the national integration.

Summary

The countries like Australia and Singapore never had ethnic conflicts and every Individual tried their best to develop the country and achieved the goals in order to be a giant in the earth. Though just after the Elam war 4 and Sri Lanka will take a long time to achieve the development and prevent future crisis by enhancing the ethnic harmony under the prevailing situation in Sri Lanka.

Mainly Buddhism is not only a religion but also a philosophy, which is merely practice based. The Buddha teaches many practices which promote harmony within our self and among laymen in the society. In Buddhism, no human being is marginalized based on his/her race, gender, language and religion. Sri Lanka once was a victim of terrorism. Now the change is in the process of regaining its lost development; physical and social. In order to promote the harmony it is imperative to Monks in the temples, Priests in the churches, Hindu temples and mosques are learn the language of other ethnic group and dhamma.

Finally the importance in promoting understanding, tolerance and friendship among human beings in all their diversity of religion, belief, culture and language, and recalling that all States have pledged themselves under the Charter to promote and encourage universal respect through observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, regardless of their race, sex, language or religion.

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