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Sacred Connections in Practice: Bridging Spirituality, Ethics and Social Justice in Contemporary Social Work

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Abstract

This paper on Sacred Connections in Practice: Bridging Spirituality, Ethics and Social Justice in Contemporary Social Work explores the evolving significance of spirituality within the domain of social work practice, particularly in the Indian socio-cultural context. Social work is traditionally grounded in values of human dignity, equality and social justice; however, increasing recognition is being given to spirituality as a vital dimension influencing human behavior, coping mechanisms, resilience and overall well-being. The study highlights how spirituality, both in religious and non-religious forms, contributes to meaning-making, emotional healing and social support systems in times of crisis such as poverty, illness, trauma and social exclusion. The paper examines the historical shift in social work from faith-based charitable practices to secular, evidence-based approaches and argues for a balanced reintegration of spirituality within ethical and professional boundaries. It further discusses the distinction between religion and spirituality, emphasizing their role in shaping individual identity, cultural values and community life in India. Drawing upon strengths-based, person-in-environment and ecological perspectives, the study emphasizes that spirituality can function as a resource for empowerment, resilience and social transformation. At the same time, the paper critically addresses ethical challenges such as the risk of imposing beliefs, cultural bias and the potential misuse of religion to justify discrimination. It highlights the importance of maintaining professional neutrality, respect for diversity and commitment to human rights while engaging with clients' spiritual worldviews. The study also augured the need for integrating spirituality into social work education and practice through interdisciplinary learning, reflective practice and culturally competent training. Overall, the paper argues that spirituality should not be viewed as separate from professional social work but as an interconnected dimension of holistic practice. A balanced integration of spirituality, ethics and social justice can strengthen social work interventions, enhance community engagement and contribute to sustainable human development and inclusive social transformation.

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Introduction

Social work is a profession committed to promoting human dignity, social justice, equality and the overall well-being of individuals and communities. Human life is shaped by multiple interconnected dimensions such as social, cultural, psychological, economic and spiritual experiences. Among these, spirituality plays a significant role in helping people understand their existence, cope with difficulties and develop a sense of purpose in life. In India, where religion and spirituality are deeply embedded in everyday social life, these dimensions strongly influence people's values, relationships,

decision-making and coping mechanisms. For many individuals, spirituality is not limited to religious rituals but is closely linked with emotional strength, hope, resilience and inner peace. During times of crisis such as illness, poverty, grief, addiction, family conflict, or social exclusion, people often turn toward spiritual beliefs and practices for comfort and guidance. Therefore, understanding spirituality becomes essential for social workers who aim to provide holistic and culturally sensitive interventions. Ignoring the spiritual aspect of human life may lead to incomplete assessment and ineffective professional practice.

Historical Development of Spirituality in Social Work

The relationship between spirituality and social work has evolved over time. Early forms of social welfare and charitable activities across the world were largely connected with religious institutions and faith-based organizations. Temples, churches, mosques, *gurudwaras* and other religious bodies played an important role in providing food, shelter, education and care for vulnerable populations. In India as well, spiritual and religious traditions historically encouraged values such as charity, compassion, service and collective responsibility. However, as modern social work emerged as a professional discipline in Western societies, there was a gradual shift toward scientific methods, secular administration and evidence-based practice. In an effort to separate professional social work from religious charity, spirituality received limited attention within academic and professional frameworks. This distancing was considered necessary to maintain neutrality and professionalism. Although this approach strengthened the scientific identity of social work, it also resulted in the neglect of an important aspect of human experience. Over time, practitioners and scholars realized that excluding spirituality from social work practice created barriers in understanding clients' cultural realities and emotional needs. Contemporary social work now increasingly recognizes spirituality as an important dimension of holistic practice. The profession acknowledges that clients' beliefs, values and spiritual identities significantly influence their behavior, coping patterns and social relationships.

Understanding Religion and Spirituality in the Indian Context

Religion and spirituality are closely related yet distinct concepts. Religion generally refers to organized systems of beliefs, rituals, traditions and institutional practices associated with the sacred. It includes collective expressions of faith and is often guided by scriptures, customs and religious authorities. India is home to multiple religious traditions such as Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism and Jainism, all of which influence family systems, social norms, cultural values and community relationships. Spirituality, on the other hand, is broader and more personal in nature. It refers to an individual's search for meaning, connection, purpose and inner peace. Spirituality may or may not be linked with organized religion. Some individuals may identify strongly with a religion, while others may consider themselves spiritual without belonging to a specific faith community. Spirituality can be expressed through meditation, prayer, yoga, reflection, ethical living, service to humanity, or connection with nature. In the Indian socio-cultural context, religion and spirituality continue to shape people's daily lives and social interactions. Festivals, rituals, family traditions and moral values are often influenced by spiritual beliefs. As a result, social workers operating in India encounter clients whose decisions and coping mechanisms are deeply connected with spiritual worldviews. Understanding these perspectives is essential for culturally responsive and respectful practice.

Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam and the Global Vision of Social Work

One of the most influential spiritual concepts from Indian philosophy is "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam," a Sanskrit phrase meaning "the world is one family." This idea originates from the Maha Upanishad and emphasizes the unity and interconnectedness of all living beings. The philosophy

encourages individuals to look beyond personal interests and work for the welfare of humanity as a whole. This concept strongly aligns with modern social work theories and principles. The Person-in-Environment perspective in social work highlights the relationship between individuals and their social surroundings. Human behavior cannot be understood separately from family systems, culture, community and environmental conditions. Similarly, ecological systems theory emphasizes interdependence between individuals and various social systems such as families, schools, institutions and communities. The strengths perspective in social work also reflects the spirit of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam by recognizing the inherent dignity, potential and abilities of all people. Rather than focusing only on problems and deficiencies, this approach encourages empowerment and resilience. When social workers adopt the philosophy of "the world as one family," they develop a broader sense of social responsibility, empathy and global citizenship. This perspective promotes compassion toward marginalized groups, environmental responsibility and commitment to sustainable social development. The concept also supports the practice of cultural humility. Social workers must respect diverse cultural and spiritual perspectives while remaining open to learning from different communities. Cultural humility encourages self-reflection, respect for diversity and awareness of power dynamics in professional relationships. In today's interconnected world, where societies face challenges such as climate change, migration, inequality, conflict and mental health crises, the philosophy of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam offers a valuable ethical framework for social work practice and social transformation.

Dharma, Compassion and Ethical Responsibility in Social Work

Another important spiritual concept relevant to social work is "dharma," which refers to duty, responsibility, righteousness and ethical conduct. In Indian thought, dharma is not limited to religious obligations but includes moral responsibility toward society and humanity. Social work practice is deeply connected with the idea of duty toward vulnerable populations. Social workers are expected to uphold human dignity, social justice, equality and service to others. The concept of dharma reinforces these professional responsibilities by emphasizing collective welfare and ethical action. Ancient Indian scholars highlighted that service to others contributes not only to social welfare but also to personal growth and fulfillment. The practice of "seva" or selfless service encourages humility, compassion and empathy. These qualities are essential for building meaningful relationships between social workers and service users. Spiritual values such as "karuna" (compassion) and "maitri" (warmth and kindness) also play a significant role in social work practice. Compassion allows practitioners to understand the suffering of others with empathy and sensitivity. Social workers who develop personal values such as integrity, compassion and responsibility are better equipped to promote justice and equality within society. In community practice, these values encourage collective participation, cooperation and mutual support. Spiritual principles can therefore strengthen both individual interventions and broader community development initiatives.

Ethical and Professional Dimensions of Spirituality

Although spirituality can be a positive resource in social work practice, it also presents ethical and professional challenges.

Social workers must maintain neutrality and avoid imposing their personal beliefs on clients. Professional ethics require respect for client autonomy, cultural diversity and freedom of belief. Clients should have the choice to discuss or avoid spiritual matters according to their comfort level. In some situations, religious beliefs may reinforce harmful practices such as caste discrimination, gender inequality, child marriage, or social exclusion. Social workers have a responsibility to critically examine such issues and advocate for human rights, equality and social justice. Balancing cultural sensitivity with professional ethics can be complex, particularly in societies where religion strongly influences social structures. Social workers may also face situations where clients prefer spiritual healing instead of medical or psychological treatment. In such cases, practitioners must engage in respectful dialogue rather than dismissing clients' beliefs. Ethical practice involves understanding the client's worldview while ensuring informed decision-making and professional support. Self-awareness and reflexivity are equally important. Social workers must continuously examine their own values, biases and assumptions to prevent personal beliefs from influencing professional judgment. Maintaining professional boundaries is essential when integrating spirituality into practice.

Spirituality, Secularism and Cultural Sensitivity in India

India follows a unique model of secularism that emphasizes equal respect for all religions rather than complete separation between religion and public life. In such a diverse society, social work practice must remain inclusive, impartial and culturally sensitive. Completely ignoring spirituality within Indian social work practice is neither practical nor culturally appropriate because spiritual beliefs significantly influence people's lives and community relationships. In rural and urban communities alike, religious institutions often function as centers of social interaction and welfare support. Temples, mosques, churches and gurudwaras frequently participate in charitable activities, disaster relief and community development programs. Social workers may collaborate with these institutions to improve outreach and encourage participation in social welfare initiatives. However, such collaboration must always remain inclusive and rights-based. Social workers also play an important role in promoting social harmony and interfaith understanding in culturally diverse communities. Through peace-building activities, awareness campaigns, youth engagement and community dialogue, practitioners can contribute to reducing prejudice and strengthening social cohesion.

Need for Integrating Spirituality into Social Work Education and Practice

Regardless of its growing relevance, spirituality continues to receive limited attention in many social work education programs. Training often focuses on technical and administrative skills while providing insufficient guidance on addressing spiritual concerns ethically and professionally. As a result, many practitioners feel uncertain or uncomfortable discussing spirituality with clients. There is a growing need to integrate spirituality into social work education, field training and professional practice. Students should be trained to conduct spiritual assessments sensitively, understand cultural diversity and recognize spirituality as a potential source of strength and resilience. Educational programs should also help students develop critical thinking skills to identify situations where religious beliefs contribute to oppression or

inequality. Interdisciplinary learning involving psychology, sociology, philosophy and religious studies can strengthen understanding of spirituality in human behavior and social systems. Field placements and supervision should encourage reflective learning and ethical engagement with clients' spiritual concerns. A balanced approach is necessary—one that respects spirituality as an important dimension of human life while maintaining professional ethics, inclusivity and commitment to social justice. Integrating spirituality into social work practice does not mean promoting any religion; rather, it involves recognizing the role of beliefs and values in shaping human experiences and social realities.

Spirituality represents a significant dimension of human experience that cannot be ignored in social work practice, especially in culturally diverse societies like India. It influences how individuals understand suffering, cope with crises, build relationships and search for meaning in life. Through acknowledging the spiritual realities of clients, social workers can provide more holistic, empathetic and culturally responsive services.

Review of Related Literature

Sheffield and Openshaw (2009) emphasize that integrating spirituality into social work education enhances students' ability to align personal and professional values while promoting culturally competent practice. They argue that spirituality helps students identify both strengths and distortions in clients' belief systems, supporting holistic assessment and intervention. The authors further highlight that structured classroom discussions, spiritual assessments and collaboration with faith leaders strengthen students' practical skills. This integration also aligns with CSWE and NASW standards that encourage respect for clients' religious diversity and self-awareness among practitioners. It is concluded that spirituality in social work education fosters ethical awareness, reflective practice and a more comprehensive understanding of clients' lived experiences, ultimately improving professional effectiveness and client-centered care.

McKernan (2004) explored the significance of spirituality in social work practice and emphasized that spirituality is an essential dimension of human life that cannot be separated from social work interventions. The study highlighted the growing public and professional interest in spirituality and argued that social workers must recognize clients' spiritual beliefs as important resources in healing and coping processes. The study further explored that spirituality enhances holistic practice by promoting empathy, connectedness, healing and client empowerment. It also identified practical applications such as prayer, mindfulness, ritual and spiritual assessment in social work. The author concluded that integrating spirituality into social work strengthens both professional practice and client well-being by addressing emotional, psychological and existential needs together.

Rabari (2026) examined the role of religion, spirituality and professional values in contemporary social work practice, particularly within the Indian socio-cultural context. The study emphasized that spirituality and religion are important dimensions of human identity, resilience and coping mechanisms. Drawing upon theoretical frameworks such as the person-in-environment perspective, strengths-based approach, ecological systems theory and anti-oppressive practice, the author highlighted how social workers can integrate spiritual dimensions into practice while maintaining

ethical standards and client autonomy. The study is concluded with the practical applications in areas like mental health, disaster response, domestic violence and community development.

Hodge *et al.* (2025) explored the significance of spirituality in social work practice and argued that spirituality is an essential component of ethical and effective service delivery rather than a myth. Using a modified domain-based review of literature, the authors highlighted seven major reasons for integrating spirituality into practice. The study emphasized that spiritual assessment helps social workers uphold ethical principles, respect client autonomy, identify clients' strengths and provide culturally relevant interventions. It further noted that spirituality-based interventions can improve client well-being, support social justice and align with professional standards of social work. The authors concluded that social workers should receive proper training to address clients' spiritual and religious beliefs sensitively and professionally. The study strongly supports the inclusion of spirituality in social work education and practice to ensure holistic, client-centered and culturally competent service provision.

Importance of the Study

This study is important because it highlights spirituality as a vital yet often underexplored dimension of social work practice in India and other culturally diverse societies. It provides a comprehensive understanding of how spiritual beliefs influence human behavior, coping mechanisms and social relationships. The study also emphasizes the need for ethical integration of spirituality within professional boundaries to ensure inclusivity and social justice. While connecting spirituality with social work values, the study contributes to developing holistic, culturally sensitive and person-centered interventions. It further supports social work education in preparing practitioners to address complex human needs effectively and compassionately.

Objectives

- To Critically Examine the Role of Spirituality as a Major Dimension in Holistic Social Work Practice, particularly in Understanding Human being, Coping and Resilience in Diverse Socio-Cultural Contexts.
- To Analyze the Ethical Challenges and Professional Responsibilities Involved in Integrating Spirituality into Social Work Practice while Ensuring Respect for Human Rights, Cultural Diversity and Client Autonomy.
- To Explore Strategies for Integrating Spirituality into Social Work Education and Practice through Culturally Responsive, Strengths-Based and Person-in-Environment Approaches for Sustainable Social Development.

Research Design

This study adopts an exploratory research design using data and facts, collected from books, peer-reviewed journals, research articles, policy documents and previous studies related to spirituality and social work. The qualitative analysis helps in understanding conceptual relationships between spirituality, ethics and social justice in contemporary social work practice.

Spirituality beyond Economic and Material Development

Across the world, people aspire to fulfill common human needs such as access to food, clean water, safety, healthcare, education, dignity and opportunities for growth. Traditionally, nations have been categorized according to economic and

political indicators such as Gross Domestic Product and Gross National Product. These measures primarily focus on financial growth and industrial productivity. However, they often fail to capture deeper dimensions of human well-being such as emotional fulfillment, social harmony, ecological balance, cultural identity and spiritual satisfaction. The classification of countries into categories such as "developed," "developing," and "underdeveloped" has historically reflected a narrow economic understanding influenced by Western models of progress. Such classifications frequently ignore cultural and spiritual realities that shape the lived experiences of people. Therefore, any meaningful understanding of human welfare and development must include spiritual dimensions alongside social and economic indicators. For social work practice, this perspective is highly significant. Social workers engage with individuals and communities not only at material or psychological levels but also at emotional, cultural, moral and spiritual levels.

Understanding Spirituality and Its Relevance to Social Work

Spirituality and religion are related but distinct concepts. Religion generally refers to organized systems of beliefs, rituals, traditions and practices centered on a higher power or sacred authority. It involves institutions, scriptures, customs and collective forms of worship shared by communities. Spirituality, in contrast, is more personal and universal. It relates to the search for meaning, purpose, inner peace, moral values and connection with humanity, nature, or the divine. Not every spiritual person follows a formal religion and not every religious individual experiences spirituality in the same way. Spirituality can be expressed through meditation, prayer, compassion, mindfulness, ethical living, service to others and connection with nature. It represents an inner awareness that differs from person to person but remains a fundamental part of human experience. Human problems such as poverty, trauma, addiction, illness, grief, discrimination and social isolation often involve emotional and existential dimensions that cannot be addressed solely through technical or material solutions.

Indian Spiritual Traditions and Social Welfare

India has a long history of linking spirituality with social responsibility and welfare. Ancient Indian philosophy emphasized collective well-being, compassion, duty and service to humanity. Concepts such as "kalyan" (welfare), "seva" (service) and "dharma" (duty) formed the ethical foundation of social life and community support systems. The spiritual tradition of Sanatana Dharma promoted the idea that human beings are interconnected and responsible for one another's welfare. Welfare activities were not viewed merely as charitable acts but as moral and spiritual duties. Ancient Indian society encouraged care for the poor, sick, elderly and vulnerable through family systems, community networks and religious institutions. These traditions continue to influence social welfare practices in modern India. Temples, mosques, churches, gurudwaras and other faith-based organizations regularly provide food distribution, shelter, healthcare, education and disaster relief services. During emergencies such as floods, pandemics, or economic crises, religious institutions often mobilize resources and volunteers rapidly to support affected communities. The Indian approach to spirituality also emphasizes harmony between the individual, society and nature. Such values are highly relevant to social

work practice, which focuses on human relationships, social justice and community empowerment. Integrating these spiritual principles into social work does not mean promoting any religion. Instead, it involves recognizing culturally meaningful sources of strength, resilience and ethical responsibility that contribute to social well-being.

Toward a Spiritually Sensitive and Sustainable Social Work Practice

The integration of spirituality into social work practice offers opportunities for developing more humane, inclusive and sustainable approaches to social welfare. Spirituality can strengthen resilience, foster compassion, encourage community participation and support emotional healing. It can also motivate collective action for social justice and environmental sustainability. However, spirituality must be integrated carefully and ethically. Social workers should respect clients' freedom of belief and avoid imposing personal religious views. Professional boundaries, inclusivity and cultural sensitivity are essential. Spirituality should be used as a source of empowerment rather than control or exclusion. Social work education in India should provide greater attention to spirituality, indigenous knowledge systems and cultural competence. Training programs should help students understand how spiritual beliefs influence coping, identity, relationships and community life. Students should also learn how to conduct spiritual assessments ethically and respectfully. Interdisciplinary learning involving psychology, sociology, philosophy, anthropology and religious studies can further strengthen professional understanding. Field training should encourage reflective practice and critical thinking regarding spirituality and ethics.

Spirituality represents an important dimension of human life that significantly influences well-being, identity, relationships and social responsibility. In India, where spiritual and cultural traditions remain deeply connected with daily life, spirituality has immense relevance for social work practice. Concepts such as Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, dharma, seva, compassion and collective responsibility provide valuable ethical foundations for professional practice. Modern social work increasingly recognizes that human welfare cannot be understood solely through economic or material indicators. Emotional, cultural, ecological and spiritual dimensions are equally important for achieving holistic development and social justice. Integrating spirituality into social work practice allows practitioners to engage more effectively with clients' lived experiences and cultural realities. At the same time, ethical responsibility remains central.

Suggestions for Social Work Education

Importance of Spirituality in Social Work Practice

Spirituality has emerged as an important dimension in social work practice, particularly in culturally diverse societies like India. Human well-being is not limited to physical, social, or economic conditions alone; it also includes emotional, moral and spiritual aspects of life. Social workers often interact with individuals facing stress, illness, poverty, trauma, grief and social exclusion, where spiritual beliefs may significantly influence coping mechanisms and decision-making. Therefore, understanding spirituality enables social workers to provide holistic, culturally sensitive and client-centered services.

Need for Holistic and Person-in-Environment Approach

The profession of social work is based on the person-in-

environment perspective, which recognizes that individuals are shaped by their family, culture, beliefs and social surroundings. Spirituality forms an important part of many people's identities and everyday experiences. A holistic approach to assessment and intervention requires social workers to consider clients' spiritual beliefs, faith traditions and personal values while planning support services. Ignoring these dimensions may result in incomplete understanding of clients' needs and challenges. In India, where religion and spirituality are deeply connected with social and cultural life, integrating spirituality into practice becomes even more relevant. Social workers must therefore develop the ability to engage respectfully with diverse belief systems while maintaining professional ethics and inclusivity.

Role of Social Work Education

Regardless of the growing recognition of spirituality in professional practice, many social work education programs still provide limited training in this area. Most curricula focus primarily on technical knowledge and administrative skills, while discussions on faith, spirituality and cultural beliefs receive inadequate attention. As a result, students may feel unprepared to address spiritual concerns during field practice. Social work education institutions should incorporate spirituality into teaching, training and fieldwork experiences. Students need opportunities to learn about the relationship between spirituality, mental health, coping, resilience and community life. Classroom discussions, case studies, workshops and supervised field practice can help students understand how spiritual beliefs influence human behavior and social interactions.

Promoting Cultural Competence and Self-Awareness

Knowledge of spirituality also strengthens multicultural competence. Social workers serve people from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds and understanding spiritual diversity helps practitioners communicate effectively and respectfully with clients. This contributes to trust-building and more meaningful professional relationships. At the same time, social work students must develop self-awareness regarding their own beliefs, values and biases. Students who understand and reflect upon their personal views on religion and spirituality are less likely to impose their beliefs on clients. Educational institutions should therefore encourage reflective learning, dialogue and critical discussion on issues related to faith, ethics and professional boundaries.

Ethical Responsibility in Practice

Integrating spirituality into social work practice requires strong ethical commitment. Social workers must respect clients' autonomy and ensure that spiritual discussions remain voluntary and client-centered. Professional practice should never involve promoting personal religious beliefs or discriminating against individuals based on faith or non-faith identities. Instead, spirituality should be used as a supportive and empowering resource that promotes resilience, dignity, hope and social inclusion. Ethical and culturally sensitive engagement with spirituality can strengthen intervention outcomes and improve overall well-being.

It is explored that, spirituality is an important aspect of human experience that deserves greater attention in social work education and practice in India. With integrating spirituality within a framework of professional ethics, cultural competence and social justice, social workers can provide more compassionate, holistic and effective services. Preparing

future social workers to understand and engage with spirituality responsibly will contribute to stronger professional practice and more inclusive social development.

Conclusion

It is concluded that the integration of spirituality into social work practice offers a transformative pathway for enhancing human well-being, ethical sensitivity and culturally responsive interventions. This study highlighted that spirituality is deeply connected with human meaning, resilience and social relationships, especially in diverse societies like India. However, its integration must be guided by professional ethics, respect for diversity and commitment to social justice. Therefore, Social workers must balance spiritual sensitivity with critical awareness to avoid discrimination and bias. Finally, it is summarized that bridging spirituality, ethics and social justice strengthens holistic practice and enables social work to address not only material needs but also emotional and existential dimensions of human life.

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