INTRODUCTION

Fieldwork practicum is an integral component of social work education and occupies a central role in the social work curriculum worldwide (Maidment, 2000; Papouli, 2014; Walsh et al., 2019). It is considered the signature pedagogy of social work education (Lyter, 2012; Wayne et al., 2010). Fieldwork practicum connects students to the practical world. It provides real-time experiential learning wherein they can apply theoretical knowledge, skills, values, and classroom learning to their social work practice and acquire skills and competencies necessary for the profession (Azman et al., 2020; Lager & Cooke Robbins, 2004). Besides professional learning and development, fieldwork education also enhances the personal development of the students. Fieldwork practicum provides them with real-time exposure to social realities. The experiential learning which they gain in agencies of fieldwork shapes their professional outlook and also contributes to the acquisition of practical and interpretative knowledge (“know-how”) required for any care profession (Papouli, 2014).

Fieldwork in social work in Indian universities and colleges is incongruent with the UGC Model Curriculum for Social Work Education, 2001, wherein 40% is allotted to the fieldwork practicum/fieldwork education/field placement. Students are placed for their concurrent field work either in open communities or agency settings under the well-coordinated professional supervision of social work educators and professionals in the agencies, both at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels (Anand & Adusumalli, 2020). Besides this, students have to undertake a block placement or summer placement. Although fieldwork education/practicum is a core aspect of social work education worldwide, it has many challenges and crises. According to Slocombe (1993), fieldwork is more vulnerable to mediocrity, lack of standardization, poor quality control, few resources, and myriad frailties prevalent in today’s welfare and educational climate (Slocombe, 1993, p. 49). Similarly, Ayala et al. (2018) asserted that fieldwork education in social work in Canada is in a state of crisis due to an unusual increase in social work programs nationally coupled with the neoliberal context in higher education and health and social service sectors. Lack of fieldwork opportunities and indigenization of social work knowledge and practice (Chen & Fortune, 2017), inadequate preparedness, insufficient support and supervision, and difference in the conceptualization of social work practice in the international social work practice (Matthew & Lough, 2017) becomes obstacles to the fieldwork learning and practice worldwide.
These crises have been further exacerbated globally in the context of COVID-19 (Davis & Mirick, 2021). COVID-19 has brought unprecedented crises and challenges to social work education and practice (Kourgiantakis & Lee, 2020). Following the public health guidelines and protocols to contain the COVID-19, Higher Education Institutions worldwide are forced to replace face-to-face learning with e-learning. This, in turn, has significantly impacted the fieldwork practice in social work education worldwide. The norms of social distancing have also seriously threatened traditional social work’s ‘relationship-based skills’ (Golightley & Holloway, 2020a). deJonge et al. (2020) argued that the measures such as social distancing and disconnection from professional practice had far-reaching consequences for social work education. The lack of mutual reinforcement of academic and practice learning may lead to erosion of the learning environment for social work students. Similarly, few had discontinued social work placement prematurely, impacting learning outcomes (MacDermott & Harkin-MacDermott, 2021). Moreover, the shift to virtual learning has also widened the inequality and threatened the students’ progress and potential delays in qualification (McLaughlin et al., 2020).

However, existing literature on field education in social work during COVID-19 also suggests a positive digital learning and practice outcome. Pink et al. (2021) argued that COVID-19 had led to the emergence of hybrid social work practices such as video calls, WhatsApp messages, texting, email, and face-to-face in-person interactions. It has facilitated digital social work wherein social workers could establish digital intimacy and meaningful rapport with the clients, a sense of trust, and constant engagement with them. This has all resulted in successful digital child protection social work practice. Similarly, Archer-Kuhn et al. (2020) have discussed COVID-19 forcing them to innovate and create a new technology-enabled fieldwork placement-self-directed field practicum for rural and remote students learning with the blended online work model and hours of voluntary service in the community agencies. The Stony Brook University School of Social Welfare in New York developed the alternative field placement model to cater to the pressing demands of social work students and clients needing interaction and support amid COVID-19. They have created an alternative intervolunteer call-based companion coordinated project named GiftsOfGab.org. Social work students get an opportunity to gain experience in community-based fieldwork. These alternative fieldwork projects have created a learning opportunity for students to empower themselves as leaders by promoting co-learning, mutual respect, and a critical reflection model (Morris et al., 2020).

Csoba and Diebel (2020) reported that social work students and social workers had experienced a new direction in working with different clients during the lockdown period. Despite the initial rejection of digital social work, the gradual adaptation and acceptance of digital tools and techniques were seen. This has brought innovations in terms of extension of environment, more efficient time management, extended toolsets and forms of work, and increased independence and initiatives of students. Similarly, Fargion et al. (2020) asserted that the COVID-19 lockdown forced various universities in Italy with social work programs to design and use digital platforms to foster student learning. Morley and Clarke (2020) have found various innovative activities in field education at the Queensland University of Technology in Australia, including the Zoom supervision and engagements with various stakeholders and organizations working on the advocacy and rights-based approach to addressing the issues of the human rights of the oppressed. Zuchowski, Cleak, et al. (2021) have delineated that COVID-19 has shifted the traditional mode of field placements to e-placements in Australia. Initial reports of students on e-placements suggest a greater need for well-being and quality of remote learning. However, students’ experiences highlight the increased flexibility with more challenges, autonomy, developing specific skills and missing out few, and driving self-learning with such e-placements. The available literature underlines various innovations and changes in field education across the globe due to COVID-19 (Azman et al., 2020; Golightley & Holloway, 2020b; Henley et al., 2021; Lomas et al., 2022; Maddock & McCusker, 2022; McFadden et al., 2020). These include both digital and field-based innovations.

Fieldwork in social work education faces many challenges and crises in India. Singh (1985) finds that due to the lack of commitment and conviction, fieldwork in social work in India has always remained a peripheral activity despite being an integral part of social work education. Many scholars have asserted that the lack of indigenous social work literature on methods, skills, and competencies further compounded fieldwork practicum and social work education in India (Dash, 2017; Johnson et al., 2012; Sunirose, 2013). The lack of trained fieldwork supervisors in the agencies and the disconnectedness of field education from social realities also impacts the quality (Devi Prasad & Vijayalakshmi, 1997). The quality concerns and problems in fieldwork education in India result from broader issues, including the proliferation of social work programs and the non-existence of accreditation standards. These apparent issues prevailed before COVID-19 further exacerbated India’s fieldwork education standards during the pandemic. Fieldwork practicum in social work education in India was also greatly influenced due to COVID-19. Some social work schools in India have adopted innovative methods for field training during the pandemic, while most schools faced challenges in field placements. A large chunk of students underwent online fieldwork practice (OFP) in the absence of other options. However, the current literature does not document students’ experiences undergoing OFP. Against this backdrop, the present study examines the OFP in social work education in India from students’ perspectives.

2 | METHODS

2.1 | Design

In this study, we adopted a descriptive qualitative design (DQD). This design is ideal for the present study because it provides an uncomplicated description of participants’ experiences and perspectives (Sandelowski, 2010). DQD generally has an explorative and inductive nature (Kim et al., 2017) that matches the present study’s broader purpose as it explores social work students’ perspectives and experiences on OFP during COVID-19, which is one of the first kinds of the knowledge of authors.
2.2 | Participants and recruitment

Participants of this study were social work students studying in five north Indian universities—two of them were private and three were publicly run institutions. The selection of participants was purposive and based on two inclusion criteria. Firstly, students enrolled in the Master’s programme (Master of Social Work) were only considered. Secondly, those students who have undergone offline and online fieldwork were only chosen as the samples. In essence, those students who had done their field placements in any agency or community before the COVID-19 outbreak and underwent OFP during the COVID-19 were only considered. We have considered this criterion to better understand the unique experiences of OFPs compared to their offline experiences. We could find and connect many students who fit into the criteria. Our professional networks helped to reach the potential participants from different universities. Social work educators from these universities provided a list of potential participants for the study who fit into the inclusion criteria. We have contacted these participants one by one. We initially approached around 40 students from all five universities, and all agreed to participate in the study. We have fixed the interview at a convenient time for the participants. We could achieve the code saturation by the 32nd interview, and further participants were not contacted for participation in the study.

2.3 | Interview

We did all the interviews in virtual mode through computer-mediated communication. Video conferencing was preferred because of the prevailing social distancing measures implemented due to COVID-19. Also, the participants were scattered over large geographical localities, making it difficult to access them for face-to-face interviews. A semi-structured interview schedule facilitated the computer-mediated interviews with the participants. The interview questions have focused on exploring the experiences and perspectives of social work students on undergoing OFP and the major differences they felt from their previous placements, which were directly in the field. We did all the interviews in English since it was convenient for both researchers and participants. The interviews were videotaped and 60–90 min long.

2.4 | Data analysis and rigor

The reflexive thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021) guided the data analysis. The analytical process underwent the six-stage analysis method. Initially, the researchers carefully watched and listened to the videotapes many times and transcribed the data verbatim. This helped to familiarize ourselves with the data. Further, we did the coding on transcribed data. After coding all the individual transcripts, we generated the initial themes from the codes. The initial themes developed were then reviewed following the checks at the codes and entire data set. The developed themes are then refined and named in accordance with the underlying characteristics of each theme.

Reflexive thematic analysis was a good fit for this study because of its potential for an inductive analytic process and the suitability for analyzing interview data and addressing questions on individual experiences and views (Braun et al., 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2021). This method also enables the reflexive engagement of researchers with the data and its interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2021). We have adopted Braun and Clarke’s (2006) 15 criteria for ensuring the quality of the analysis process. In addition, we did the member check, in which 11 participants were approached again to confirm whether or not the developed themes corresponded to their experience.

2.5 | Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations to research with the human subjects are strictly followed in the present research. Before the interview, the researchers have briefed on the purpose, eligibility, benefits, and risks of participation in the study. We sent the participants an online informed consent form and requested their signature before the interview. The interview was scheduled after receiving signed informed consent forms from the participants.

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Participants’ profile

The study participants were social work students enrolled in the Masters’s programme in various north Indian universities. At the time of the present study, all of them were studying the third semester of their Master’s programme. This is because we have specifically chosen only those students who underwent fieldwork for at least one semester each in offline and online mode. The COVID-19 outbreak and closure of
educational institutions throughout India happened in March 2020. All the participants had to discontinue their offline fieldwork and pursue an OFP. Also, some of them did their summer placement/fieldwork (18) in OFP mode. The age of the participants was between 21 and 29 years. Most of the participants were females (23). Most participants reported that they had identified the agency for fieldwork on their own, while few (6) reported that their institutions and teachers rendered support. We could find that the agencies where students enrolled for fieldwork were not very known for engaging social work students for fieldwork. Some students reported that they had paid a fee for the OFP while it was free for others. Students identified most of these agencies as NGOs (22), clinical setups/hospitals/counseling centers (6), and industries/HR (4).

3.2 | No social work components

Fieldwork plays a critical role in the making of professional social workers. It facilitates equipping the necessary skills and competency through hands-on experience in the field. The classroom learning aligned with the field practice provides students with the experience of applying theories, values, and methods in real-life circumstances. Efforts can be seen in curriculum frameworks to expose students to social work practice in various fields. Students are expected to involve in the day-to-day tasks of the organization/agency to ensure their competency building. Practice settings are chosen with due consideration to the learning opportunities. However, sudden disruptions due to COVID-19 have brought several challenges for schools of social work in India to locate fieldwork agencies that provide online placement opportunities for students.

Many civil society organizations that are the obvious choice for field work practicum in India were not digitally and technologically equipped to offer online fieldwork placement. Few who provide such opportunities are limited in their scope and fields of practice. Many students in our study reported that they had no choice except to choose whatever the minimum options available. This theme is evidence of the participants’ experience of having not enough social work components in the fieldwork practice.

My classmates and I have found one agency for remote field work with great difficulties. On the first day of our fieldwork, we were asked to involve in the organization’s fundraising activities. The agency didn’t ask about our course requirements. We did only fundraising and promotional activity during the entire semester’s field work. Last semester, we used to practice casework, group work, and community organization. In online fieldwork practicum, there were no such practices available ... I felt neither it had social work components nor experiential. (Saveena, a third-semester student)

Most students said they did not learn anything concrete in OFP. One of the students reported:

There is a conflict of interest in online field practice-what we as social work trainees wanted and what the agency needed were quite different. I have been assigned to prepare e-flyers for various events throughout ... it adds nothing to my professional learning. I didn’t have the opportunity to improve any social work skills and competency in virtual fieldwork practice. (Suhas—III Semester student)

The critical constraint and challenge for students in online field placement were how to integrate theories into practice. As it is evident from students’ experience, most of them were engaged in peripheral tasks such as fundraising, making flyers, content writing, and so on, which lacked the social work components. Moreover, OFP lacks in providing professional training to enhance skill-based learning.

3.3 | Disconnected field

The “field” in fieldwork facilitates insightful learning through real-time exposure to various social realities, issues, agencies, and its work culture. The connectivity between the students and agency, the people, community, and various social structures is highly expected in fieldwork practice. The real-time exposure to the field realities helps social work students to equip with the necessary skills and competencies for the professional social work practice. However, participants of the present study experienced disconnectedness from the field due to OFP. Many students have expressed their distress about being disconnected from the field. Suhasini, a semester I student, narrated her experience as:

You know, field and fieldwork is our strength ... Social Workers are supposed to be in the field ... helping people address and cope with their issues. If you remove fieldwork, but COVID-19 has snatched ‘field’ from us. I felt disconnected from the field ... I think the field is our laboratory. How can we learn about social reality without having real-time exposure? (Anamika, III semester student)
Similarly, another student has also mentioned:

Virtual fieldwork lacks the essence of the actual field. We did a lot of activities in the rural localities and worked with village-level organizations in the first semester ... I felt cheated now as I never got a chance to interact with people. We learn from the field by observing, interacting and discussing ... virtual reality cannot give us real-time exposure and connectedness. (Shaumik, a semester III student)

The feelings of being disconnected from the field were quite apparent among most participants. Field and field work constitute an integral component in social work education and practice. Exposure and connectedness to the fields provide students to identify and examine the social reality. It also enhances their reflexive learning besides providing an opportunity to integrate theory into practice to be clear on theoretical frameworks in real-time situations and get real-life experiences. However, 2-m social distancing norms induced students to adopt virtual learning and practice. Eventually, it disengaged students from the fields. Moreover, students' disengagement with the clients and service users in various fieldwork settings was heightened.

3.4 | Superficial supervision

Supervision has paramount importance in students' learning in fieldwork placement. Supervisors are involved in teaching the students skills, competencies, interventions, and other administrative strategies. It also shapes students' perspectives and professional attitudes toward social realities. In Indian universities and colleges, students benefit from multiple supervision-social work educators and the agency supervisors involved in supervision. The agency supervisors guide and train the students to accomplish the tasks allocated to them in agencies, while social work educators strive to ensure the accomplishment of curricular requirements. In most Indian Universities and Colleges, the concept of Individual Conference/Group Conference is evolved in fieldwork supervision. A supervisor spends 1–2 h a week with students to provide guidance and expert input in fieldwork. The OFP has posed challenges to the supervisor-supervisee relationship. The "superficial supervision" theme corresponds to the participants' experience of unsatisfied supervision in OFP.

A student narrated the difference she felt in supervision in OFP as:

I have assigned some work as soon as I joined the OFP. I have not been briefed about anything about the agency. However, this was a practice in the last semester's fieldwork. The kind of supervision I had for the last semester was quite a different-I mean, I learnt a lot from him (mentioning supervisor). I am very sure in OFP, and we had no solid discussion with the supervisor. It was for just namesake. We had discussion once or twice. (Mukesh, III semester student)

Similarly, another student has reiterated the missing link of the conducive learning environment and coordinated supervisor-supervisee relationship:

We had at least one hour to meet our faculty supervisor weekly in our offline fieldwork. There were always supervisory, emotional, instrumental and appraisal supports. However, such supports were missing in online supervision. I feel that online supervision is highly superficial. (Leena- MSW III Semester student)

Adequate and professional supervision is inevitable to imbibe skills, competencies, interventions, and administrative strategies. Many students have expressed that the supervisor-supervisee relationship was highly superficial due to a lack of time and professional input. The students' experience underlines a significant gap in fieldwork supervision. Almost all participants felt ineffective supervision from the agency supervisors and social work educators. Also, students reported that very few agencies had professionally qualified social workers acting as supervisors. Many agency supervisors lack an understanding of social work education and practice. Resultantly, it leads to shallow and insufficient learning. Similarly, participants have reflected that their supervisor's trustworthy and collaborative learning relationship was limited in OFP, making it superficial.

3.5 | Ethical dilemma

One of the evident issues of fieldwork is dealing with ethical issues about clients and service users. The prevailing norms of social distancing have stood as one of the challenges for social work students to tackle. The sudden shift to the virtual world and contacting clients through digital platforms raised concerns about the ethics and values of social work practice. Many students have reported ethical dilemmas while...
The study's findings underscore the students' no real-time exposure to the social work field practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. The general and significant ethical issues were maintaining privacy and confidentiality, building trust and honest relationships with clients, balancing professional discretion and service users' rights and needs, and so on.

One of the students working with the issues of women in informal sectors reported:

It is always a great challenge to maintain the privacy and confidentiality of clients in video conferencing ... I struggled a lot on this part. Lockdown and subsequent work from home norms have confined and limited our space. During my counselling over video conferencing to the victims of domestic violence who used to live in one room with her family, her children used to come in between and sometimes husband also... which intruded client's privacy and confidentiality ... I felt helpless. (Paakhi-III semester student).

The most-reported ethical issue while working online was students' inability to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of clients due to the presence of family members of clients and students. Besides, many participants have expressed their inability to build trust and honest relationships with clients over the phone and on the internet. The norms of staying home and social distancing curtailed the opportunity to meet clients in person.

Shivani, a second-year student, has responded:

Sometimes I feel whatever I am doing is not right. I have been involved in raising funds. But most of the time, I couldn't answer people's questions. I didn't know much about the organization and the kind of activities. Still, I had to do it. I felt conflicted whether should I do it or not. (Varuni, III semester student)

Students' ethical issues were heightened due to the COVID-19 crisis. They were particularly distressed knowing that they could not visit or see clients in person. Many felt contradicted with their ethics to decide what is right and wrong. The pandemic crisis heightens the ethical issues and complexities. The lack of clear guidelines on ethical issues while working in such an unprecedented situation further complicated and intruded on the social work practice.

4 | DISCUSSION

The study's findings underscore the students' no real-time exposure to the social work field practices during the COVID-19. The pandemic has significantly impacted the learning process in fieldwork education. Students were given adequate opportunities to interact and work with diverse populations in fieldwork education. In traditional field settings, fieldwork was planned and supervised. The students were given a chance to apply theoretical knowledge and social work methods to enhance their understanding and equip them with core competencies and skills required for a social worker. However, such opportunities were limited in virtual settings.

The studies have found creative and transformed learning, improved skills (McLaughlin et al., 2020; Simanovic et al., 2021), and practice group work in online and blended modes (Zuchowski, Collingwood, et al., 2021). However, it is vivid from the study that opportunity and exposure to practice the core social work methods such as casework, group work, and community organization were missing. It provides the least opportunity to enhance and upgrade social work skills. One of the critical issues that emerged during COVID-19 was the engagement of students with clients and the community to instill creative and constant learning. This engagement is crucial in field education to promote reflexivity, creative thinking, and adaptation skills (Crisp & Hosken, 2016; Panwar et al., 2014). Virtual field placement has disrupted such engagement and results in non-relational practice. This disengagement from the field results in stagnation and sudden hiatus in learning. They felt disconnected from the field and their peers, which influenced their learning process, which is inconsistent with the study (deJonge et al., 2020; Mitchell et al., 2021). Conversely, few studies have shown positive aspects in students’ engagement with service users, mutual aid, and fostering a sense of connection among participants (Azeez, 2015; De Fries et al., 2021; Morley & Clarke, 2020; Papouli et al., 2020; Pink et al., 2021; Wilke et al., 2009).

In the COVID-19 enforced virtual field placement, supervision of students has come to a hiatus wherein the one-to-one supervision model was limited, and Zoom supervision has become the norm. Supervision is heightened by the influential and meditative interaction process, mutual support, and prolonged engagement during the course. However, such interaction is reduced greatly, resulting in superficial supervision while using digital platforms. Moreover, students find online supervision less productive in harnessing skills and competencies required to practice. The study also highlighted that online supervision lacks qualitative and objective assessment and evaluation. Such findings can also be located within available literature (Davis & Mirick, 2021; Marsick & Watkins, 2001; Sarbu & Unwin, 2021).

One of the pertinent issues with the pandemic-induced virtual field placement is an ethical dilemma in dealing with clients and Information Communications Technology (ICT). The pandemic has brought challenges in dealing with the ethics and values of the social work profession. Students and social workers faced these issues while providing client services using ICT. Betteridge (2012) emphasized the importance of
ethical education and awareness for social work students, especially while using ICT in practice. Similarly, Taylor (2017) has underlined the gaps in ethical knowledge, understanding, and digital literacy among students using digital platforms. Such inadequate awareness and knowledge are also vivid in the study. The challenges in dealing with ethical issues such as maintaining privacy and confidentiality, decision-making, balancing service rights, and so on, were apparent inconsistent with the available studies (Banks et al., 2020; Mishna et al., 2021). Moreover, inadequate knowledge of ethics on using ICT resulted in a great dilemma affecting their practice, parallel with the other studies (Reamer, 2013). Many respondents have also reported the lack of clear guidelines to deal with such ethical issues from their institutions has further aggravated the situation.

5 | LIMITATIONS

This study has some limitations. Firstly, the results cannot be generalized because this is a qualitative study. The study is based on a small sample chosen conveniently. Secondly, this study is based on five north Indian universities. Hence, results capture OFP the students’ experiences from these universities only. Students from other regions were not studied. Thirdly, we have chosen all the students who have undergone OFP without looking at the agency profile. Few students have undergone OFP in very experienced organizations, while most have done it from new agencies to offer fieldwork. We have not considered these aspects while choosing the sample. The nature of the organization is one aspect that may influence the students’ experience in OFP.

6 | CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought face-to-face learning to an inevitable hiatus. Resultantly, online education has quickly become the norm for educational institutions across nations worldwide. Social work field education, a signature pedagogy for social work education, has severely been affected as many agencies have closed their field operations. Field education has now been conducted through digital platforms. The present study was conducted to bring forth and highlight the issues of fieldwork education and practice in virtual mode via digital platforms in the context of India. Students’ experiences in virtual fieldwork highlight gaps in online and offline fieldwork placements.

The closures of social service agencies and communities have severely shrunk the students' learning space. The norms of social distancing influenced face-to-face relational-based practice. Connecting with the clients or service users through virtual platforms in a developing country where internet connectivity and possession of android mobile and high data cost is a challenge. Besides, field-based learning was severely impacted due to a lack of guidelines and provisions relating to online field practice. Students' inability and lack of guided supervision and the scarcity of agencies that provide online placement with equipped and trained human resources evolved as emerging challenges in India regarding virtual/online fieldwork practice. This highlights the need for technologically well-equipped fieldwork agencies and opportunities to collaborate during the pandemic, making virtual field practice more experiential. This also implies the need for pedagogical innovation to cater to learning needs and equip students with digital skills to combat such situations in the future. In addition, the study findings highlight the necessity of including the skills and competencies required in digital social work practice in the curriculum.

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ENDNOTE

1 UGC (University Grants Commission) is India’s apex regulatory body of higher education. The UGC model curriculum is a comprehensive document that remains a model to be followed for the curriculum in the various subject by the universities/colleges in the country. This outlines the courses to be offered in a particular discipline and program prepared by the experts.

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