

# RE-HUMANISING RELATIONSHIPS, ONE ACT AT A TIME A CASE STUDY OF CENTRE FOR COMMUNITY DIALOGUE AND CHANGE.

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**Abstract :** Removing the stigma associated with mental health issues that prevent people from seeking help can only be removed by creating awareness. Adopting an innovative and multidisciplinary approach towards creating awareness about mental health issues is the need of the hour. This case study was undertaken to understand the work done by the Centre for Community Dialogue and Change (CCDC), a Bangalore-based NGO in this field. This case study's main aim was to gain a better understanding of the work done by CCDC and the impact of their workshops, which uses a unique tool called The "Theatre of the Oppressed. ". The case study is exploratory and illustrative in nature. Traditional case study method of interview, participant observation, direct observation, verification of physical artifacts, archival records, and documents was undertaken to collect the data. The study found that the Centre for Community Dialogue and Change (CCDC), through its workshops, has been very effective in initiating social dialogues on mental health issues. Their Workshops empower the oppressed to regain their voice and help them express and release their internalized oppression.

*Index Terms - NGO Case Study, Theatre of the Oppressed. CCDC, Conversations on Mental Health, Medical Humanity.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

"In a deeply polarised world, creating space for meaningful dialogues is surely a worthwhile goal to pursue, ". Dr. Radha Ramaswamy, founder of CCDC.

Any form of weakness is looked down upon in your society; hence we are taught from a very young age to hide and deny them in order to be accepted and respected in society. The societal stigma and taboo attached to mental health issues makes it difficult for people to admit that they are dealing with problems, let alone ask for help. Often, we get so caught up in our fast-paced life and in our effort to be polite or not hurt and offend others we do not voice or address the many, big and small things that bother us. Things that make us feel taken advantage of or oppressed. These unexpressed emotions and resentments get pent up in our bodies, making it and us rigid over time. We do not realize when we lose our ability to communicate our true feelings or lose the humanness in our actions. Becoming silent, withdrawing from such situations, people, and society seems to be the only way to deal with the issue. This withdrawal leads to many emotional and social problems. Suicide has become the societally accepted way of escaping the burden of daily life. The only way to counteract the mental health crisis that our society faces today is by creating awareness and educating people on mental health issues. There is an increasing need to normalize and encourage conversations on mental health issues. Emphasizing on the preservation of mental well-being and addressing mental health issues before they become a disorder should ideally be the central focus of any mental health awareness campaign. Prevention of mental health disorders is the key. While there are many Government run awareness drives using traditional methods, the need of the hour is to have an innovative and multidisciplinary approach to create awareness and to educate people more effectively. Scenarios in which the people feel more involved in the learning process. Ways where the agenda is to highlight the issue and encourage people to express, react, and seek or suggest solutions. It is vital to help the sufferers or the oppressed to regain their voice and communicate their issues in a society that is willing and patient enough to take notice, listen and initiate change.

Through this case study, we aim to find out more about an organization called Centre for Community Dialogue and Change founded by Dr. Radha Ramaswamy, its methodology (Theatre of the oppresses ), its modus operandi(workshops and plays ), its tools (games and exercises ), area of operation (includes but is not limited to schools, colleges, NGO's, hospital, corporates ) and the impact that it is creating in the society (feedback from benefactors).

Radha says, "As humans, we often get trapped in our patterns of behaviour, this hinder real communication. Theatre of the Oppressed gives us some tools to break some of these patterns, to 'unfreeze,' become aware of our full potential for dialoguing with our fellow human beings. The ability to express ourselves with our bodies, is innate to all of us" [4] .

**1.1 Theatre of the Oppressed, hereafter (T.O):** - Created by the Brazilian theatre legend and visionary Augusto Boal in the 1060s, T.O. is a form of popular community-based experimental education where people learn by doing, not just sitting and theorizing. Here theatre is used to generate community dialogue and change rather than for entertainment or for propaganda. It is based on Paulo Freire's landmark work on education, "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" [3]. In his book "Pedagogy of the Oppresses 'Paulo Ferire attempts to help the oppressed fight back to regain their humanity, starting with acquiring knowledge about the concept of humanization itself.

## 1.2 Components of Theatre of the Oppressed

Using a wide variety of theatre games and exercises, T.O. helps build community, communication skills and deepens our understanding not only of others but ourselves as well. A few of the more popular and frequently used games and exercises are explained below.

**Colombian hypnosis:** – explores the dynamics of power between the players (pg 51) [4]

**Carnival in Rio:** – through the use of sound and action, provides insight into how individuals and groups understand and negotiate notions of unity and diversity (pg104) [4]

**The Glass Cobra:** – the glass cobra is played with the eyes closed and often becomes a deep and powerful journey into (pg 56)[4]

**Rainbow of Desire:** - Analyses the conflict in relationships. It aims to bring out the battles hidden within oneself (pg 54) [4]

**Cop-in-the-head:** explores the self-inflicted oppression by the voice of the cop in our heads, telling us how to act, react and behave. This helps people to confront internalized problems (pg 52) [4].

**Image theatre:** Where participants make shapes (images) with their bodies in response to a theme without using languages is central to the theatre of the oppressed. This is where the essence of much of the philosophy lies.[4]

**Newspaper Theatre:** Here, the message from a newspaper article is converted into a play and enacted. This is followed by a discussion on the article. [4].

**Invisible theatre:** I Here actors create a situation in public the audience does not realize that its a play and think that its a real-life situation and unknowingly become involved. An actual social experiment [4].

**Legislative Theatre:** Boal would conduct plays on social issues, and whenever there would be a discussion on what people wanted or saw as the solution to the problem, they would take notes and present them to the authorities. In this way, Boal succeeded in getting 13 legislation passed in Brazil. This is as participatory as governance could get [5].

**Forum Theatre:** A public problem-solving technique that is perhaps the most widely used. Here the group creates a short scene which we term forum. Forums are full of unexpected magical moments of learning [4].

## II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The researcher has adopted the traditional case study method of interview, participant observation, direct observation, review of physical artefacts, archival records, documents, news articles, and related materials available online to collect the data. Considering the lockdown, the interviews were conducted virtually, online, and over the phone. The interviews were semi-structured and in-depth interviews with open-ended questions. Other than the interviews, most of the information was collected from the website of CCDC. The organization's archives were searched, and recordings of the workshops conducted earlier were studied in detail to observe and understand how the workshops were organized, structures, and executed. The feedback register and testimonials recorded after various workshops were reviewed to understand the impact and effect of the workshops on the participants. Due to the pandemic, their current workshops are being organized virtually; the researcher participated in a webinar to experience the workshop personally. Previous interviews given by Dr. Rahda to various media channels and published news articles were also reviewed. The findings are discussed in the section discussion and findings.

**2.1 Research Type:** Case study.

**2.2 Research Design:** Qualitative, Illustrative case study.

## III. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

**3.1 Centre for Community Dialogue and Change** hereafter ( CCDC ) is an NGO based in Bangalore, India. CCDC's primary mission is to combine the philosophy of the T.O. with mainstream education while utilizing the techniques to promote meaningful dialogues and changes through a better understanding of self and others.

**Their Motto:-** Breaking Patterns, Creating Change[2].

**Their Mission:-** To make the conversation not oppressive but truly dialogic.[2]

(1)To promote the practice and use of T.O. for community building, enhancing sensitivity and understanding in human interactions, encouraging and developing critical thinking, and applying the insights gained to explore multiple strategies or solving problems of the community.[2]

(2) To use Theatre of the Oppressed with diverse populations involved in mainstream education in India to bring about a qualitative change in the nature of the educational process. [2]

**3.2 About the founder:** - CCDC was founded by Dr. Radha Ramaswamy in 2011. Dr. Radha has 25 years of teaching experience in educational institutions in Mumbai, Pune, and Bangalore. She found a way to integrate and effectively use her expertise in education, interest in theatre, and passion for social justice work through Theatre of the Oppressed. Radha received her training from Marc Weinblatt at the Mandala Centre for Change located in Seattle, Washington.

**3.3 How did it start:** “As a teacher, I always encouraged my students to think beyond the classroom, and looked for ways to engage them”, says Radha.” The life-changing moment came when I happened to attend a workshop by Dr. Shekha Seshadri a self-taught T.O. practitioner at the Mahindra United World College Pune. The way T.O. integrated theatre, social justice work, and education amazed me,” says Radha. Radha decided to get formally trained in the methodology of the Theatre of the Oppressed. After completing her training under Marc Weinblatt in June 2010, Radha launched the Centre for Community Dialogue and Change (CCDC), an organization committed to promoting T.O. in education in 2011.

**3.4 About the Team:** CCDC has two trustees Radha and Ravi Ramaswamy, who are also the chief facilitators and trainers. They are supported by a three-member team who help with the daily functioning of the organization and the facilitation of workshops. Ravi Ramaswamy has a Master’s degree in Social Work and 10 years of experience working in the development sector. Ravi also received his training in Theatre of the Oppressed in 2010 from Marc Weinblatt of the Mandala Centre for Change. Since 2014 Ravi’s major focus has been in the field of Medical Humanities. Using T.O. to draw attention to the need of humanizing healthcare is one of CCDC’s pioneering activities [2].the

**3.5 CCDC’s Workshops:-** Every workshop takes the participants through a process of discovery that starts with a series of games. The facilitator is called the ‘Joker.’ The joker encourages participants to put their bodies to work, and through their bodies, learn about themselves and the world around them. The novelty of working with the body rather than the mind is a trigger for the mind to relax and allow new feelings and thoughts to enter. The games also serve to awaken the senses so that the mind is not only relaxed but also alert and sharply aware of the minute fleeting sensations and feelings generated in our body as it engages in the game. Working without using words, participants learn to use the language of images to tell stories of conflict.

“Our bodies are a storehouse of experiences and feelings. In life, we often do not get to express our feelings or share our experiences, and these get deeply buried as memories in our bodies. In a T.O. workshop, participants respond to themes by making images. “says Radha. Telling their stories through images provided the artistic distance necessary for unflustered expression; the distance also promotes critical thinking so that participants can reflect on the insight they have gained into themselves and their relationships. This reflection often creates a desire for change, to see what is possible instead of settling for what is. Participants are encouraged to surrender to the game and not ‘stay in their heads’ or try to analyse what the game means. The game helps to bind the group and create a safe environment for everyone to express themselves freely. The audience is then introduced to their roles as “spect-actors,” wherein they are invited to suggest and enact solutions. It demonstrated to all how the community could provide answers to its own problems. The workshop’s intention is to make people look at themselves and at each other with great sensitivity and understanding. “From here, it was only one step to better communication, to exploring ways to change oneself and adapt to the changed circumstances, “says Radha. The goal is to create a greater motivation and sharpen sensitivity to our inner impulses, to provide opportunities for growth and self-exploration, and through these, to explore the possibilities for changing our world.

**3.6 Challenges:-**Recalling her journey Radha Says, “A healthy living environment allows its members to express themselves freely. We perform many roles in our lives and get trapped in our own interpretation of these roles, and lose our freedom of expression. When perception of hierarchy dominates communication between two individuals or groups of individuals, what passes for dialogue is really only a monologue. Breaking the barriers of one-sided monologues and create a free and meaningful dialogue is very difficult. The dilemma to create spaces for conversations around mental health, and exploring ways to initiate these difficult conversations within families, with friends, and in workplaces is a challenge.[2] Incorporating psychosocial or neuro-diverse scenarios in T.O. is much more complex than using it for other disabilities or medical scenarios because the issue of agency and consent is often a huge grey area for survivors”.Radha adds, “I encountered my first challenge as a Joker in the classic forum, there is a single protagonist (the oppressed) and an antagonist (the oppressor). When you work in mental health, this dichotomous model becomes problematic. Almost every character in the play is experiencing a struggle because of the presence of another ‘oppressor’ (the mental health crisis). It becomes important then to look at the different struggles around mental health, including societal or environmental factors, without letting the story become too diffused ‘[2]. “We don’t aim for educative drama or use theatre as entertainment,” explains Radha. “We aim for the middle.” [2]

**3.7 Their reach:-** In the 10 years of its existence, CCDC has reached out to more than 5000 people through its workshops, training, and forum theatre performances. A wide spectrum of people, individuals, and communities have participated in 250+ workshops that CCDC has conducted across different cities in India and abroad. Over 300 facilitators - artists, activists, educators, and health professionals - have completed CCDC’s training and are now spread out worldwide. Dr. Radha has worked with diverse communities of people: parents, students, women, activists, children, teacher-trainers, senior citizens, medical students, among others. Radha has been invited to give T.O. and Forum Theatre training in several communities across India and abroad, such as the National School of Drama, Theatre in Education centre, for the students of the Dramatics Society at Oxford University, at The Banyan, Chennai for their social workers and faculty, in Karur, Tamil Nadu for the women community leaders, and many more institutions in India and abroad. Radha has conducted numerous workshops in various cities in India, Nepal, the U.S., and the U.K., primarily for those from the field of education. They have conducted workshops on various topics related to mental health such as elder abuse, dementia, retirement blues, post-partum blues, domestic violence and abuse, work-life balance issue, gender inequality, anxiety, depression, and many more.

The impact that CCDC's workshop has on its participants can be understood through their feedback and testimonials, some of which are given below.

“As I participated in the Bangalore TO workshop, what struck me as refreshing and significant was that we were exploring human behaviour and its change, trying to understand oppression and freedom, using ourselves as subjects. We had to move out of the realm of theory and put ourselves under the scanner. Even our experiments with creative communication had to be based on our recent experiences as human beings and not in the context of the roles we play in our lives.” [2]

” T.O. was an appropriate emotional release. It was a new way of finding my voice, and I felt a deep connect with myself. Through it, I found empowerment and a fresh outlook to empathize with others or the portrayed ‘oppressed’ T.O. is all about thinking and rethinking, breaking barriers and oppressive structures, and setting yourself free” [2]

**3.8 The way forward:** More workshops, of course! says Radha. Radha's primary focus is to develop T.O. based curriculum for mainstream schools and colleges in India. “Until now, we have focused on reaching as many people as possible. We are now seriously planning long-term engagements with educational communities, schools as well as teacher training institutions. When we say school, we are looking at the entire community that it represents. Parents, children, teachers, non-teaching staff, and the management. We would like to see T.O. in every school in India. CCDC is now actively trying to get into the field of medical humanities as well. “The idea is to try and de-mechanize young doctors and to re-humanizing the medical profession to see the patient as not just a body, but as a person.” says Radha.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The impact of some social change initiatives can be seen immediately and can be quantified through the study of different variables. Whereas some other methods make a profound qualitative impact on its benefactors. When it comes to creating awareness about mental health or the appropriate way to educate the public on mental health issues, no one method fits all. The study has revealed that CCDC, through the use of its unique tool called the “Theatre of the Oppressed,” has not only been successful in initiating social conversation and community dialogues regard various invisible emotional issues prevalent in the society but also gives a platform for the oppressed to regain their voice. Empowering them to take control of their respective situation and narrative and initiate change rather than settling for what is.

Through their workshops and the inspiring medium of theatre, CCDC is empowering people who are struggling with psychosocial disabilities, particularly communication difficulties, to reclaim a sense of control over their narratives. The workshops assist them in forging relationships, enhancing their self-confidence, developing self-esteem and self-worth. The workshops create a sense of community in dealing with the issue. The workshops thus become instrumental in re-examining and reinterpreting normative practices, ideas, and approaches towards psychosocial disability. Initiating social change and normalizing dialogs on mental health issues, and re-humanizing humans is a vast reservoir that will need every drop to be filled. CCDC is definitely contributing towards creating a steady stream that will fill this reservoir one act at a time.

#### V. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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