When Dance Saves Lives: The Kolkata Sanved Approach to Moving Against Human Trafficking
A Case Study by Sydney Skov

Preface

I am self conscious as I eat rice with my hands; I want to do it perfectly. Attempting to arrange each finger in a precise formation to keep sauce from spilling out, I glance discreetly at my friend sitting beside me, copying her motions. I delude myself into thinking I look as if I have been dexterously handling lentils all my life.

My friend cracks a joke in Bengali and the whole room laughs. Panicked, I think the girls around me are giggling at my inability to separate fishy flesh from the tiny white bones. I have already swallowed a few of these in an attempt to look natural. Glancing up through my blush I ask, “What happened?” in Bengali. My friend explains, “I am a vegetarian. Someone asked me why I am not eating my fish. I answered that I do not eat what could bite me.” I laugh into the silence, tickled by the joke and entirely relieved. As a group we rise from the floor and clear our silver plates to the kitchen. The small room situated on the outskirts of Kolkata, India becomes a dance studio once again.

It is difficult to believe that these cheeky, spontaneous and self-assured young women, my dance students, are survivors of various forms of trauma, from human trafficking to varied experiences of physical, emotional, and sexual violence. Having flown from my home state of Oregon in the U.S., I am in Kolkata to volunteer with Kolkata Sanved, an NGO using dance to save lives. The organization believes that survivors of trafficking and violence can live lives of dignity and respect and that Dance Movement Therapy is a powerful way to help survivors heal and move out of cycles of violence. The strength of my students, and the fact that I am often learning more from them than I could possibly teach, speaks volumes about the power of movement to heal.

A life-long love of dance has brought me to this room and to Kolkata. Intensive training in ballet from the age of four led to performing internationally with a pre-professional contemporary dance company as a high schooler. Earning an undergraduate degree at New York University and subsequently studying movement and international development in tandem while
living in Senegal broadened my understanding of dance. I was once blinded by an obsession over perfection, technique, and competition but as I experienced dance in new places, I realized that dance was my window to the world, an entry point to new cultures. Dance became my vehicle of understanding and being understood. We are all dancers, in one way or another. I became determined to learn how dance can be bigger than the stage, how the art can become a catalyst for social change and peace. I flew to Kolkata to learn from Kolkata Sanved and the organization’s dynamic and tenacious Founder and leader, Sohini Chakraborty.

**Kolkata Sanved History**

In 1996, a young Sohini Chakraborty was a post-graduate student of sociology as well as a professional actress and dancer living in Kolkata, India. Sohini was more than a performer; she wanted to know how her work could move beyond the stage and impact the lives of people around her. She felt an invisible bridge connecting dance and sociology and was searching for the way across.

One day, while browsing through the endless shelves of books at the annual Kolkata Book Fair, Sohini was struck by a black and white poster. It read, “They sell me, my own blood, for gold and silver. I rinse and rinse my mouth but the taste of treachery remains,” (Kolkata Sanved, 2013). Sohini walked into the book stall to learn more about the girl on the poster and found the entrance to her invisible bridge.

For nine years, Sohini experimented with combining traditional Indian dance movement with rehabilitation for survivors of human trafficking, realizing that when used sensitively, movement is a powerful tool for healing and transformation (Kolkata Sanved, 2013). After spending several years working in the research department of a non-profit focused on anti-human trafficking work, Sohini decided to teach a dance class to a few girls living in a local shelter. Although the organization found the idea silly, Sohini convinced them by explaining that the courses would be free. She began to witness a transformation taking place within her students; they blossomed from oppressed victims to proactive advocates for the rights of women and children (Kolkata Sanved, 2013).

“I have been fighting against the mainstream understanding of dance as entertainment or an art form for the elite,” said Sohini (Kolkata Sanved, 2013). On principle, Sohini will not judge dance competitions. Although she is often invited to sit on a panel of judges, she does not believe
that children should be judged. Instead, they should be supported and empowered to build upon their own strengths. Every child, no matter their circumstances or the trauma they have faced, has the power to be their own agent of positive change. While she believes that everyone can and should dance, Sohini also believes in striving to be the best one can be artistically as well as personally. About her students, Sohini says, “What I fight for is not just to teach them dance, but to make them strong individuals in society with dignity and self-respect,” (Kolkata Sanved, 2013). In 2004, the NGO Kolkata Sanved was created along with five survivors of violence who had been training under Sohini. Currently, the organization works with over 30 partner organizations across Kolkata and within the neighboring country of Bangladesh, teaching a unique curriculum called Sampoornata. The curriculum blends traditional Indian movement styles with principles of Dance Movement Therapy, a movement based psychosocial rehabilitation method in use in the West since the 1960’s (ADTA, 2009).

The Sampoornata curriculum is taught by Kolkata Sanved instructors in movement classes on a weekly basis to youth across Kolkata. Certain students who show promise and aptitude for movement are selected by the Sanved team to become trained Dance Movement Therapy instructors. After completing a two year training program, these trainers become the instructors that implement the Sampoornata curriculum, earning a livelihood through their talent and dedication. These trainers also form a professional performance company that holds rehearsal hours at the Sanved office, choreographs original works based on social issues, and performs across Kolkata in partnership with other organizations to draw attention to various issues. Kolkata Sanved has worked with thousands of young girls and boys in shelters, hospitals, mainstream schools, railway platforms, and orphanages and has pioneered the use of Dance Movement Therapy as an alternative form of rehabilitation in Southeast Asia (Kolkata Sanved, 2013).

**Human Trafficking**

Kolkata, formerly known as Calcutta, is located in the region of West Bengal on India’s Eastern edge. The port city is near India’s border with Bangladesh, and the larger region of West Bengal shares borders with Nepal and Bhutan. The fact that Kolkata is both a port city and a location bordering some of the poorest countries in the world contributes to the high incidence of human trafficking occurring within the city (Sari Bari, 2013).
Human trafficking is the third largest global crime generating approximately $10 billion per year (UNODC, 2013). According to the 2011 trafficking in persons report, the crime affects up to 27 million people worldwide; 80 percent of these victims are female and up to 50 percent are children (U.S. Department of State, 2011). Particular circumstances make certain populations vulnerable to trafficking: economic deprivation, illiteracy, family breakdown, low self-esteem, and gender discrimination (UNODC, 2013). In slum areas, girl children are often discriminated against which can place them in vulnerable situations. Young girls are sometimes sent to work in, or sold to, richer families as servants; sexual violence causes girls to run away from these exploitative situations and find themselves on the street. Many girls are trafficked across boarders, from Bangladesh and Nepal, with the promise of employment. Kolkata is home to several red light areas including one of the largest red-light districts in Southeast Asia; approximately 20,000 commercial sex workers live in these areas along with their families (Sari Bari, 2013).

**Kolkata, A History**

Kolkata is sometimes referred to as the cultural capital of India; the vibrant history of the city has created an enthralling atmosphere of Indian tradition mixed with European philosophy that endures to this day (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2013). The Bengali Renaissance, a socio-cultural and religious reform movement that took place at the end of the nineteenth century and lasted until the death of famous Bengali artist Rabindranath Tagore in 1941, swept across West Bengal and Bangladesh (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2013). The intellectual awakening also addressed issues of social justice, using the ancient Indian text the Upanishad to speak against traditions including self immolation (Sati), infanticide, polygamy, child marriage, the caste system, and dowry (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2013). Bengali writers, poets, and artists flourished. Rabindranath Tagore, a self-taught musician, dancer, and writer, heavily influenced the region’s taste in literature and music. He became the first non-European to win the Nobel Peace Prize for literature and his influence on Bengali art and culture has imbued the region with a deep appreciation for historical art forms, writing, and performance (Nobel Prize, 2013). Dance is considered a high art but with the rise in popularity of Bollywood dancing, the art form has become more accessible to a wider audience and has remained a culturally relevant and socially important aspect of Indian life.
In 1947, India gained independence from the British imperial authority and the country was divided into two nations along religious lines. In the province of Bengal, the majority Muslim area became part of Pakistan and later became the nation of Bangladesh. The majority Hindu area remained a part of India and is situated in the state of West Bengal. A history of religious violence exists within this divided area. In 1946, Muslims celebrating the imminent division of the country attacked several Hindus who then retaliated; over only a few days, approximately 4,000 people were killed (Encyclopedia Britannica 2013). Communal violence was sparked again in 1947 by the announcement of the Radcliffe Line, which officially divided the region into India and Pakistan (Encyclopedia Britannica 2013). Millions of people were displaced and religious violence was widespread.

**The Kolkata Sanved Approach**

It is within the context of this rich and at times violent history that present day Kolkata is set. Despite a history of religious violence, the city’s divisions seem to disappear when one enters through the doors of Kolkata Sanved. Inside the bright office sit anywhere from five to ten young women, chatting jovially and eating lunch from shining silver plates. Music plays in another room and the girls know it is time to return to rehearsal. They work together creating choreography for an upcoming show with intense focus and careful attention to musicality. Working together transcends the differences of each of the dancers. The group of girls that gather at the office for afternoon rehearsals are both veteran performers and new trainees, halfway through the training process that will allow them to work as Kolkata Sanved Dance Movement Therapy trainers, earning livelihoods as instructors and becoming role models for hundreds of young girls. Sohini gives this group of leaders a direction: what does it mean to be a woman in society? She asks them to compile a list of words that describes the prompt and then to come up with particular poses and individual movements that represent these words. Individually the dancers then string their movements together, creating short solos. They experiment and practice individually, each dancer moving about the space, creating shapes and caressing the air as if in a trance. When Sohini returns, each dancer performs her solo for the group. The soloist then sits to hear both positive and negative feedback about the quality of the performance, engaging with the audience to discuss how to improve. These snippets of choreography serve many purposes; not only do they present a directed creative outlet but they help to hone the dancers’ individual
voices as movers. These small pieces of choreography are also learning tools, allowing the
performers to see the aesthetic quality of their art through the eyes of their peers. The
choreography pieces are cataloged away to be returned to, strung together into group
choreography, and used to form a larger work. The dancers also work with international teachers
and choreographers who come to impart teachings from diverse dance styles and to learn how
better to incorporate stories and themes of human rights activism into their own art. Dance
Movement Therapy trainers also visit Kolkata Sanved to hold intensive trainings for the new and
up and coming instructors to continue a healing process while enhancing their skills.

The Kolkata Sanved dancers perform on many occasions throughout the year. Such
performances may celebrate holidays or pay tribute to a cause including Children’s Day and the
16 Days to End Violence Against Women (Kolkata Sanved, 2013). Performances may also be
used to raise awareness of issues like women’s rights or may be conducted in collaboration with
other non-profits to gather crowds within communities. Kolkata Sanved dancers have performed
on grand theater stages from Kolkata to London, in villages, and on railway platforms. Through
performances, the group of dancers -- all survivors of trafficking and violence -- advocate for
human rights and use their art to speak against the international crime of human trafficking.
Through choreography, honed talent, and energetic movement, they dispel negative stigmas
attached to those who have experienced violence and become symbols of inspiration and
strength.

These versatile performers and choreographers are also teachers. Having been through
the Kolkata Sanved curriculum and healing process themselves, these instructors are particularly
attuned to the experiences and needs of their students. This understanding coupled with
organizational policies on how and when to steer unruly students minimizes the risk of harm to
youth. The classes they teach take place in shelters and schools across the city. Large groups of
children eagerly await their teachers, ready to begin class with a song followed by an energizing
warm up. For one hour the children are rigorously engaged in dance, guided constantly by their
diligent and disciplined teachers. These classes are a needed escape for many of the young
students who are orphans or who live with the trauma of past experiences. The dance classes are
designed to allow for trauma release, to harness excess energy into something positive and to
give children ownership over their own bodies and their own creativity through improvisational
exercises (Kolkata Sanved, 2013). Such activities help to repair mind and body connections that
have been severed by physical and emotional trauma. Slowly, the body becomes something a child can feel confident living within instead of associating it with shame and pain from the past. Said one Kolkata Sanved student, “Through the Kolkata Sanved process, I felt my freedom rise,” (Kolkata Sanved, 2013). The dance courses help to transform traumatized youth into confident and proactive members of society. In this way, Kolkata Sanved is addressing the lack of important psychosocial rehabilitation programs available to children who need them.

**Context of Dance as a tool for Peacebuilding and Social Justice**

The field of dance and peacebuilding has been growing, expanding, and capturing more public attention in recent years. Socially minded movers are realizing from their own experiences the power that dance holds to help others. Some are harnessing entrepreneurial skills to work for social justice. On the East Coast of the United States, an NGO called Move This World uses creative movement to work against bullying by giving youth the skills to transform conflict and build empathy. Based in New York but operating internationally, the Rebecca Davis Dance company creates combined dance and education programs to empower street youth in post-conflict and developing countries including Rwanda, Guinea, and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Movement Exchange perpetuates sustainable dance programs for orphans and at-risk youth in developing countries by conducting dance exchanges with U.S. dancers in training. Kolkata Sanved remains the only organization specifically using dance as a tool to address the global problem of human trafficking and the trauma it inflicts.

Beyond social entrepreneurship, several works of literature are shedding new light on the ways in which dance and dancers engage with human rights issues across the globe. *Dance, Human Rights, and Social Justice*, a compilation of essays edited by Naomi Jackson and Toni Shapiro-Phim, explores the treatment of dancers within the profession, the engagement of dance as rehabilitation and as a means to fight oppression, and the role of human rights based choreography from a variety of viewpoints in varied cultural contexts. Dance Movement Therapist and dance activist Bonnie Bernstein, who authored a chapter in *Dance and Other Expressive Art Therapies*, has written extensively on the physical, mental, and healing abilities of movement, especially for individuals who have experienced sexual abuse. Bonnie travels to Kolkata annually to hold Dance Movement Therapy trainings with the Kolkata Sanved dancers.
The recently published *Choreography of Resolution: Conflict, Movement, and Neuroscience* edited by Michelle LeBaron, Carrie MacLeod, and Andrew Floyer Acland examines the connections between movement, the body, and conflict dynamics. Such fascinating literature explains the effects of dance on the body and brain scientifically, adding legitimacy to the embodied approaches to rehabilitation and peacebuilding used by organizations like Kolkata Sanved and proving the power of movement to wider audiences.

Organizations using dance as a tool for peacebuilding face the challenge of legitimizing and mainstreaming their work within the worlds of peacebuilding and international development. Dance is often seen as an elite art form, inaccessible to the masses. It is relegated to studios and stages, its influence on the acquisition of important skills like discipline, kinesthetic awareness, rhythm, self expression, confidence, strength, cooperation, and self reliance lost behind stylized images of ballerinas and spotlights. Dance and peacebuilding focused research and non-profit organizations are laying bare the universal importance and healing power of movement and are changing this perception. To grow their impact both locally and within the international field of dance and peacebuilding, Kolkata Sanved should continue expanding services within shelters and other partner organizations. More vulnerable youth will be reached if new teachers are trained and financial resources are available to support these new instructors. As the organization bridges humanitarian work and dance, attracting large scale funding remains difficult as foundations usually support initiatives in only one of these categories.

Kolkata Sanved’s approach to rehabilitation for trauma survivors is incredibly unique, not only within the context of Kolkata but on a global scale. It was only in 2008 that the United States passed a law protecting youth under the age of 18 who are victims of commercial sexual exploitation or sex trafficking (U.S. Department of State, 2013). Victim-centered policies that protect teenage victims and survivors from arrest and prosecution on prostitution charges is a relatively new concept within the U.S. as is the provision of age appropriate and trauma sensitive services for this population. Kolkata Sanved is founded on the belief that survivors can become proactive individuals, artists, and advocates when appropriate, human rights based healing options are available.

The Kolkata Sanved program is culturally specific and provides economic as well as artistic opportunities for vulnerable youth. The program allows for creative expression, healing, and confidence building through an adaptive and innovative curriculum. Kolkata Sanved
recognizes that one of the most effective methods of healing from physical trauma is through physical means; dance provides exactly this healthy outlet. The organization helps children to become self sufficient individuals who can change and build their own lives, and uses art to help dispel negative stigmas attached to orphaned children. When audiences witness works of art created by children they consider worthless, their perceptions are powerfully changed. Kolkata Sanved is loyal to the belief that every individual should live a life of dignity and self respect. Through the healing of Dance Movement Therapy and the art form of dance, this small organization is changing lives for the better.

References


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