



# Working with young people in residential care in India: Uncovering stories of resistance

by Maya Sen



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## Abstract

This paper describes narrative therapy interventions with young people living in residential childcare institutions in Kolkata, India. It presents an analysis of the contexts of poverty, violence and oppression that shape young people's experiences before entering care, and the ideologies that shape their experiences within residential institutions. It then demonstrates the application of a narrative framework for working with young people in residential care through the stories of four young women.

**Key words:** *re-authoring; residential childcare institutions; India; narrative practice.*

## Introduction

I met Ria while volunteering with an NGO that works with children in need of care and protection in Kolkata, India. She was living in a residential childcare institution (CCI) because of violence in her family. Ria came to the notice of authorities when she started stealing. She disclosed that she was being bullied and that she stole with the intention of getting expelled from the CCI. She missed her family and wanted to return home. However the authorities diagnosed her with 'conduct disorder'. When I left the NGO to undertake my master's degree, I lost touch with Ria. I heard that over the years she had had many run-ins with the authorities until they decided she no longer qualified for help. Earlier this year I learnt that Ria was found mutilated on a street corner. Due to political corruption, her assailants were not caught. As a result, Ria was forced to return to the site of risk, while her assailants ran free. Since it was suspected that Ria knew her attackers, the community painted a picture of Ria as a 'bad girl' whose 'promiscuity' led her down this path. The protective authorities were reluctant to keep her, being unsure of her 'victim status'.

As I got more deeply involved with the social sector, I met many people with experiences like Ria's and wondered if there was a better way to respond to these situations.

This paper describes my exploration of the applicability of narrative practices in my work with young people living in residential childcare institutions in India. It describes the contexts of poverty and oppression that lead children to residential care, and the models of assistance and reintegration they are subjected to in care, particularly behavioural and skills training interventions that seek to prepare young people to live a 'functional' life, despite contexts that don't allow the exercise of these skills. The paper presents the stories of four young women who have been working to reclaim their lives from violence and oppression, and shows how narrative practices helped to honour their acts of resistance and bring forth their skills and knowledges for survival, presenting an alternative to the pathologising accounts of their lives.

Before moving onto describing my practice, it is important to locate myself and highlight the parts of my identity that might affect my work. I am currently volunteering with a local CCI as a counsellor. I am also working as a Project Co-ordinator with Kolkata Sanved, an organisation using Dance Movement Therapy to work with survivors of gender-based violence. One

of my roles within this organisation is to do casework with participants who are facing problems within the DMT sessions.

Along with that, I am a part of the economically advantaged section of Indian society as well as a part of the Savarna castes<sup>1</sup>. Although I don't identify with any religion, I am located within the religious majority<sup>2</sup>. Along with this, my identities as a woman and a survivor of traumatic experience colour my perspective.

## *The contexts of children in need of care and protection: Naming oppression and violence*

The lived experience of young people who are living in residential childcare institutions are shaped by the difficulties they encounter before coming to live in a CCI, and by issues that affect them after placement, notably the processes of institutionalisation and reintegration.

### **Pre-placement factors**

Pre-placement factors are vulnerabilities that lead children to be institutionalised in the first place. There is a common myth that most children in institutions are orphans. There are, in practice, a variety of factors that lead to young people entering CCIs. Many children come to CCIs as a result of being exposed to traumatic experiences, including violence and abuse, family rejection, traumatic grief, commercial sexual exploitation, and community conflict (Vasudevan, 2014). Most children in CCIs have come from economically disadvantaged families. Families facing abject poverty find it difficult to care for their children, and some send them to CCIs to access resources like food and health services. Gender interacts with poverty to compound difficulties for girls. The birth of a son brings another earning family member, but the birth of a daughter is received as an added expense, especially because dowry<sup>3</sup> is still practiced in certain sections of Indian society. This leads to families rejecting their daughters and placing them in institutional care.

The table on the following page provides information on the categories of vulnerable children recognised by the Indian legal system for placement in CCIs. Legally these children are referred to 'children in the need of care and protection'. (Juvenile Justice Act, 2015, India)

Children in the need of care and protection
Children without family support/guardians
Children forced into labor
Children facing abuse and exploitation
Children who are victims of trafficking
Children affected by substance abuse
Children in conflict areas
Children working on the streets
Children infected with HIV
Those at risk for child marriage

Table 1: Categories of vulnerable children for placement in CCIs

### Post-placement factors

#### Institutionalisation

Exposure to risk factors doesn't cease with placement in a protection home. Adjusting to institutional settings is often challenging, mainly because of the nature of institutions themselves. In his essay 'Total institutions' (1961), Erving Goffman discussed the dehumanising effects of institutional life. Despite developments within the child protection sector in India, many of these institutionalising effects are present in CCIs: All activities are strictly regimented, there is hierarchical separation between staff and children, and a strict system of surveillance ensures that dissent is arrested. A system of privilege and punishment is used to ensure compliance (Goffman, 1961). Sometimes hierarchal separation within institutions intersects with class, gender, sexuality, caste, religion, ethnicity and ability, creating discrimination. Cultural attitudes towards children<sup>4</sup> also influence the ways authorities respond to them. These factors enable various forms of structural violence.

Children in CCIs are often subject to abuse and maltreatment inflicted by the authorities and by other children.

The reasons for the current situation can be found in the broader structure of the social sector. The child protection sector is characterised by a lack of resources, poor monitoring mechanisms and ineffective legal protections (Centrone, 2014). The worst affected are frontline workers who shoulder most of the responsibility but have the least access to training and infrastructural support. The vulnerability created by this situation allows apathy, corruption and unaccountability to flourish (Kapoor, 2018).

#### Reintegration

Institutions aim to prepare children for life after residential care (people over 18 years can no longer stay in a CCI). Reintegration can occur either through reunification with family or through training for employment. In recent years, state policies have stressed reintegration, in a move towards deinstitutionalisation<sup>5</sup> (Pande, 2013). However, this effort has not had the intended results because it has not focused simultaneously on building community capacities to ensure effective reintegration. Due to government pressure, many institutions focus on speedy reintegration into family contexts. However, this is often done without ensuring that the family is in a position to receive and care for the young person. With limited work opportunities, those who do not return to their family can find themselves unemployed even after attending training programs. Often, the jobs that are available do not pay sufficiently to break the cycle of poverty. In some situations, when there are no options available, young women are married off as a form of reintegration. Marriage in this situation is not a matter of choice but one of compulsion.

There are many laws and services designed to protect children, but protective services are under no obligation to serve people who are over 18. It is assumed that they have the ability to take care of themselves. However, in most situations, the transition between childhood and adulthood is a process, and not just a matter of attaining a certain age. A child who enters an institution because of a situation in which they are vulnerable will often return to a context of vulnerability and risk, fighting a never-ending cycle of oppression and violence.

#### Responses from the mental health sector

Being subjected to oppressive contexts effects the mental health of children in CCIs. Feelings of isolation, anger and sadness manifest in various ways. This invites 'violence' 'aggression' and 'self-harm' into the lives of young people (Elegbeleye, 2013).

However, responses within the sector focus primarily on behavioural elements of mental health. Even when methods work with other dimensions of mental health, the aim is still the same: to make these children better adjust to the expectations of society. In certain situations, counselling is used as a disciplinary technique.

This fits in with the broader discourse of ‘mainstreaming’ within the development sector, in which there is an effort to make people from the target community ‘more like us’. This brings to mind Mickey de Valda’s observation that learning about counselling often seemed like learning about ‘middle class manners’ (2003, pp 17).

The discourse on mainstreaming interacts with the neoliberal discourse of individualism (Cain, 2018) to further complicate the matter. Mainstreaming intersects with neoliberal culture’s obsession with productivity and functionality (Dhar, Chakrabarti & Banerjee, 2013): children who have mental health concerns but are seen as functional are completely erased from consideration. Another major influence of neoliberal ethics in the field of mental health has been moving away from collective action to a focus on the individual (Dhar, Chakrabarti & Banerjee, 2013). In the field of child and adolescent mental health, this results in the burden of recovery being placed on the child. It is believed that recovery can be brought about by the individual, if only they are given access to certain skills in order to gain what is called ‘empowerment’. This results in children being given the skills to live a functional life in a context that is uncondusive to the exercise of those skills. Since the problem is located within the skill-deficient individual, this is attributed to the characteristics of the client when interventions fail, with distinctions being made between the ‘good survivor’ and the ‘bad survivor’.

This erasure of context from mental health work is also a result of the hierarchical separation of psychiatry and social justice. In our context, mental health work is dominated by psychiatry, which primarily employs structuralist approaches. These approaches uphold conventions of objectivity and neutrality. Engaging in social justice work is seen as putting these considerations at risk.

Mental Health is judged by strict parameters based on an ethic of control without considering the relations of power that enable effective action<sup>6</sup> (White, 1997). This results in mental health services reproducing marginalisation. Interventions seem to serve the needs of the system rather than the needs of clients.

## *Narrative approaches to engaging with young people in CCIs*

One of the key tenets of narrative practice is that people, including young people (Yuen, 2007, 2009), always respond to hardship (White, 2006). Alongside

every history of oppression there runs a parallel history of resistance (Wade, 1997). However, in oppressive contexts, overt resistance often has dire consequences; resistance can be subtle and covert and hence remains un-storied (Wade, 1997). Narrative practice seeks to attend to micro-level expressions of resistance and reclaiming (Pederson, 2015) – what Wade calls ‘small acts of living’ (1997, p. 23) – and to make them more richly known.

Through double listening (Freedman & Combs, 1996; White, 2007) I began to notice that while young people were speaking of their hardships, they were also providing rich accounts of their acts of resistance. In therapeutic work with children, there is hardly any talk about resistance. Young people’s acts of resistance are often labelled ‘defiance’ or ‘indiscipline’. I became interested in exploring how young people’s acts of resistance have helped them to reclaim their lives from violence and oppression.

Resistance is complicated for young people in CCIs, for who even the smallest act of resistance might trigger violence. In my experience, therapists’ responses to the risks young people face have ranged from paternalism<sup>7</sup> to indifference<sup>8</sup>. It has been important for me to find a balance between these two extremes so that I am able to ‘stand with’ my client without restricting their autonomy. I attempt to do this by working in collaboration with my client and offering support when given permission (Reynolds, 2014). This includes enabling those I work with to access support outside the therapeutic space. These ideas are drawn from work on practices of ‘structuring safety’ while honouring resistance (Reynolds, 2014). Being able to work with complexity is also important in navigating this work (Berndt, 2007).

Another key feature of a narrative approach is refusing to render invisible the larger context of oppression. This is done through externalisation (White, 2007) and deconstruction. Practices of naming injustice (Dolman, 2011) and rejecting neutrality (Reynolds, 2014) are also crucial.

Guided by these understandings, the stories presented below highlight young people’s acts of resistance and reclaiming. The following accounts are drawn from my one-to-one work with girls living in CCIs, and individual and collective work with students of Kolkata Sanved’s<sup>9</sup> dance movement therapy (DMT)<sup>10</sup> sessions. In addition to honouring acts of resistance and bringing to light the wider context of oppression, these accounts show the use of narrative practices including:

- therapeutic documents
- outsider witnessing
- attending to the absent but implicit
- Re-membering (Denborough, 2008; Russel & Carey, 2002; White, 2007).

## *Kyra's story: Moving away from injustice*

Kyra, who was living in a CCI, was a participant in DMT sessions. She was referred to me as she was not totally involved in the dance sessions.

### **Responding to anger**

During our first meeting, Kyra shared that she wanted to work on her issues with 'Anger'. She felt that she was an inherently angry person and that her behaviour was alienating others. In my initial sessions with Kyra, I used externalising conversations (White, 2007) to generate a richer description of the problem story, and to allow Kyra to separate Anger from her own identity. It was also important for me to incorporate a feminist analysis into my responses to Anger to avoid minimising Kyra's experiences of violence. I learnt that Anger was a response to a larger context of injustice. Although Kyra was 25, the CCI authorities had trouble reintegrating her because her family context was a site of sexual abuse. As she had dropped out of school, she could not access the already limited options for livelihood. The CCI authorities viewed her as a burden on their resources and constantly reminded her of it. Along with this, she faced various other abuses within the CCI. By locating the absent but implicit (Freedman, 2012) in Kyra's story, we identified that she valued justice.

Through the course of these conversations, Kyra took a stand on Anger, stating that although it had emerged as a response to injustice, it wasn't effective in moving towards justice. This enabled us to seek alternative pathways to justice.

At this point in our conversations, although we were making good progress, I felt somehow stuck in my work with Kyra. I realised that this was because I was following White's (2007) conversation maps too closely and thus limiting Kyra's expressions. I decided to allow Kyra's stories to guide the conversations and to adopt a stance of curiosity. Taking this step was significant as it

helped me to elicit a richer description of all the factors sustaining problems in Kyra's life, and to uncover a rich history of Kyra's resistance to these problems.

### **Loneliness**

Another theme present in Kyra's accounts was 'loneliness' due to rejection from her family. For this, we worked on deconstruction exercises (White, 1991). We tried to expand the meaning of 'family'. We determined what one gets from family –that family provides love, support, care, and so on. Then we worked on identifying contexts in her life where she received these. We also discussed whether family needs to always be related by blood. This brought to life many significant relationships in Kyra's life, including with her friends and significant adults who had facilitated her growth. While this did not completely do away with the pain caused by the rejection, it did make Kyra feel less alone.

### **Academic failure**

Kyra felt that, since she had poor academic ability, she had limited opportunities to move ahead. She also felt that she was not smart, and that her intelligence was defined by her academic ability. Here I noticed a dominant cultural discourse. In India, academic ability is often given prime importance in the life of a child. However, in the course of developing her preferred storyline, we were able to identify many instances in which, despite not succeeding on the academic front, Kyra showed a lot of ability in other fields:

- Kyra was training to become an office assistant. This included writing reports that were graded on a numerical scale. Although she felt that she was not smart, she worked tirelessly at this and was able to complete the reports.
- At one point, Kyra had to travel a long way to access safe housing. However, she did not know the way. People had told her that she was 'dumb' and didn't have the intelligence to figure out the route. However, she managed to reach the accommodation on her own. When asked what made this step possible, Kyra said 'I used my brains. People say that because I am bad at studies I don't have brains, but I used my mind to get there'. This led to a deconstructive conversation on what we mean by 'intelligence'.
- A re-membering practice also helped Kyra to recognise value in her own skills. She shared how a teacher had told her that, although she was not good at academics, she had a great

talent for the arts. The teacher suggested she should use this talent to establish herself: 'Many people study very hard but don't make it, but what you have is raw talent'. This was of immense significance to Kyra. We worked on documenting these words.

### ***Thoughts of hurting myself***

The anger and the abuse often led to the arrival of 'Thoughts of hurting myself'. Our investigation of moments of resistance to these thoughts led to some powerful developments in Kyra's preferred storyline (Stout, 2010). When she found out that her father had tried to sell her when she was young, Kyra was going to hang herself. But after a phone call she decided not to. I asked her what made her stop. She said she realised what she was doing was ridiculous. She didn't want her life to end just like that. She had to make something of herself, she had a lot of talent in her, and she would try to move ahead with it. She would not give up that easily.

### ***Protesting gender-based rules and injustice***

By choosing to move ahead with her career, and not get married, Kyra was protesting gender-based expectations for girls in our society. This was extremely significant in the broader context. Patriarchal discourses define women in terms of relationships, primarily those of wife and mother. As discussed, girls from CCIs sometimes have no other option but to get married. In the economic climate this can be the safest way to access housing and resources. However this can lead young women to exploitative situations. Kyra had been facing immense pressure to get married so she would no longer be a 'burden'. She had been told that this would be the easiest way out. But she resisted, believing that it was important for her to rely on herself.

Talking about this uncovered Kyra's history of resisting injustice in her life. She spoke of situations in which she had spoken up against caregivers who flouted the rules. Recently, one of her friends was denied assistance with her studies. Kyra devised a plan to strategically draw the caregiver's attention to these problems.

We also uncovered her history of caring. Kyra spoke about how she looked after the children in her CCI. We also spoke about how her desire to stand on her own two feet was so that she could help others in difficult situations.

### ***Accessing safe housing***

One of the major impediments to Kyra's wellbeing was her lack of safe housing. Kyra was worried when she learnt that the CCI had decided to reintegrate her into her family, in spite of the risk this context presented. We worked on ways in which she could prepare for this, including identifying ways in which she had kept herself safe when the abuse was taking place:

- She stayed out of the house most of the time. When she had to return to her home, she insisted that her father – who had abused her – sleep in a different room. She used the excuse that she felt uncomfortable as it is not culturally acceptable for an unmarried girl to stay in the same room as a man.
- On some occasions, she went to stay with a friend. Her friend's uncle was abusive and under the influence of alcohol, so she stayed inside the house and kept herself locked up.
- She considered applying for housing. She worked to get her documents in order. While negotiating with her family she resisted the pull of Anger.
- For a while she went very far away from the city to access secure housing.
- She negotiated with CCI authorities to prolong her stay.

Therapeutic interventions were clearly not a sufficient response to this situation. Our safeguarding committee<sup>11</sup> was informed about Kyra's situation, and the committee actively advocated with the authorities on Kyra's behalf. As a result, Kyra is in the process of securing housing for herself. We documented Kyra's skills in tackling this issue, and this has enabled us to help other young women in similar situations.

### ***Re-authoring***

Over time, a rich account of Kyra's preferred story emerged. The unique outcomes were not isolated events, but rich histories of her efforts at reclaiming her life. This was traced against the re-authoring map (White, 2007).

Time period	Landscape of identity	Landscape of action
Remote history	Values standing on her own two feet.	Realises her passion for the arts.  Even though she doesn't receive funding from the CCI, she saves money to sponsor herself.
Distant history	Values standing on her own two feet.  Recognises that she has skills and value and something to offer society.	Was going to attempt suicide due to abuse, but stopped on account of a phone call from a friend that helped her to 're-member' her purpose.
Recent history	Values standing on her own two feet so that she can help others.	Completes her vocational training course and is under consideration for employment.  Protests injustice at the CCI.
Present	Values standing on her own two feet so that she can help others.	Gets her Aadhaar card. <sup>12</sup>  Makes a commitment to re-enrol in school.  Goes far away to access secure housing despite being unfamiliar with the route.  Speaks up about her story at a meeting.  Approaches CCI authorities to negotiate her stay.  Resists the call of Anger.  Plans strategically to help her friend.  Protests Injustice at the CCI.  Protests gender-based restrictions.
Future plans	Values standing on her own two feet so that she can help others.	Plans on getting her documents together.  Is in the process of securing housing.  Plans to establish herself so that she can help others in similar situations.

Table 2: Re-authoring conversations with Kyra

After tracing Kyra's storyline, we felt that it would be helpful if she could present her story to a wider audience. We used outsider-witnessing practices to invite Kyra's community into her healing journey. Kyra chose to invite two practitioners who had been taking sessions at her CCI and one of her classmates to the ceremony. The practitioners reported that Kyra's journey made them feel more hopeful about addressing struggle in their own lives. The experience was significant to Kyra as she never thought her journey could be helpful to others. At the end of the process, we used documents to commemorate Kyra's journey of resistance.

### *Siri's story: Standing up to bullying*

Siri, a 14-year-old girl, had registered for individual counselling sessions. Bullying was making Siri's life very difficult. Through the use of externalisation (White, 2007), we tried to uncover the tactics of Bullying. Bullying was sustained in Siri's life by Conflict and Jealousy. Siri's mother, a cook at the CCI, had got into a fight with the older girls living there. As a result, the entire CCI had turned against Siri's mother. Bullying in Siri's life was a consequence of this fight.

Bullying took many forms. Siri was isolated in the CCI which led to feelings of sadness. Bullying destroyed her friendship with a classmate, Shabha. The girls would tease her and Shabha about being romantically involved. Because of Bullying, Siri had given up many things she loved like kickboxing.

On uncovering Bullying's plans for Siri, we realised that Bullying wanted to get in the way of Siri's hopes and dreams. Siri was working towards becoming an actor. She was in the CCI so that she could study hard and secure her future, but Bullying wanted to force Siri to leave. Siri shared that she was afraid that Bullying would force her to change her path. In one of our conversations, Siri said that one day she had become frustrated with Bullying and spoke to Shabha anyway. Exploring this unique outcome, we realised that Siri had many ways of tackling Bullying. These skills and knowledges had enabled her to minimise Bullying's effects in her life. This was evident as she was still in the CCI, she had rejoined her kickboxing classes, and she was still thinking about her hopes and dreams. One of the major ways she tackled Bullying was by not responding to it. Tracing the history of this skill, we realised that many people, including her sister, had contributed to this understanding of Bullying: 'My sister told me that in the ring the fighter never screams; it's always the audience that is screaming. If the fighter screams she is no longer able to play the game. If you want to be a fighter, your sole focus should be on playing the game.' In response to this, Siri decided to approach Bullying like she would a challenge in the ring.

If she let Bullying distract her, she would lose sight of the bigger picture. Siri documented this tactic so that it could be passed on to other children (Fox, 2003). Through the course of re-authoring conversations with Siri, it became evident that it wasn't Bullying who had control over Siri's life but Siri herself.

### *Nilam's story: Challenging heteronormativity*

Although I only had one session with Nilam, I felt it was very significant. Children's actions are often subversive and challenge social structures. However, this subversion is rarely acknowledged.

Nilam came to the session asking, 'What is a Kinnar<sup>13</sup> and why are they kept separate from society?' We spoke briefly about how society often stigmatises

those who are different, and then I asked her why she wanted to know. She said that she had a friend who talks to Nilam and her sister on the local trains. The friend is often very sad and asks why God made her that way. Many people on the trains tell Nilam and her sister not to talk to the people from the Kinnar community and not to take food from them. Nilam's sister defends their friend and tells Nilam not to pay heed to people like that. She asks Nilam to remember that their friend is human and deserving of respect. Nilam shared that her own friends used to tease people from the Kinnar community as well, but Nilam had convinced them to change.

I noticed that Nilam was taking many steps to challenge social norms to make more room for different kinds of people. When asked what name she would give to this ability, Nilam spoke about valuing Acceptance. Tracing the history of Acceptance, Nilam stated that she had learnt it from her family who encouraged her to treat others the way they want to be treated. She said that she loves her friend a lot and always looks for her on the train.

Nilam resisted losing out on an important connection in her life due to heteronormative beliefs. Her story also represents a counter narrative to the treatment of the Kinnar community in India. Making her aware of the significance of this action was therefore very important.

### *Ruhi's story: Working together to resist violence*

Ruhi, a 13-year-old girl, had been attending sessions with me for a while. We had spoken a lot about 'Helplessness' with regard to protesting injustices and violence within her community.

One incident was particularly distressing. Ruhi went out with a group of friends to enjoy the festivities of Durga Puja<sup>14</sup>. On the way they were harassed by a drunken man. They stood up to him and went on their way only to find that he had boarded the same bus as them. The man was especially malicious towards Amrisha, one of Ruhi's friends. He kept trying to touch her. Ruhi pushed him aside and the girls quickly got off at the next stop. They were at the fair when the drunken man returned with a group of friends and kidnapped Amrisha.

After hearing about the incident we decided to work on highlighting Ruhi's responses to the situation. I drew

on Michael White's work on trauma (2006) and Angel Yuen's work on children's responses to trauma (2007). We were able to find many instances in which Ruhi had not been helpless:

- When no-one on the bus helped, Ruhi pushed the man away.
- Ruhi and her friends tried to help when Amrisha was being kidnapped even though their hands were bound.
- Ruhi and her friends went to the police station and gave a detailed description of the incident.
- The man was caught, but he and his friends denied the entire incident. One of the girls in the group had

been able to record the incident on her phone, and this evidence led to the men being arrested.

However, Ruhi was still haunted by the idea that Amrisha had not been able to prevent her being kidnapped. Ruhi wondered if the same thing could have happened to her. Hearing this, I highlighted for Ruhi that Amrisha had managed to survive despite the attack. I asked her if we could think of ways in which she could have done this. Uncovering her friend's responses enabled Ruhi to gain a new perspective on the situation. A story of collective action emerged: the girls were able to work together to keep violence away.

Amrisha's responses	Responses from the other girls
<p>She bit her assailants.</p> <p>She screamed.</p> <p>She tried to break free from their grasp.</p> <p>Her hands were tied but she made full use of her feet to kick her assailants.</p> <p>She asked passers-by for help.</p> <p>At one point she was able to break free and she ran towards the main road until they caught her again.</p> <p>Although the police were informed and went looking for her, Amrisha returned from her assailants on her own.</p> <p>She shared the details of the story with the police.</p>	<p>One of her friends recorded the incident on her phone.</p> <p>They resisted the attacks of the assailants.</p> <p>One of the girls called the police.</p> <p>When the assailants cornered Amrisha on the bus, Ruhi yelled at them and pushed them away. She slapped the man who was bothering Amrisha.</p> <p>As this caused a commotion and Amrisha was asked to leave the bus, all her friends alighted with her.</p> <p>When the men took her, all the girls made an effort to follow the assailants.</p> <p>They went to the police and presented the case in detail.</p> <p>When Amrisha presented her version of the details they corroborated her friends' testimony.</p>

Table 3: Responding to violence

Dominant discourses allow responses to violence to be storied only if the response is able to effectively prevent the violence. This borrows from the philosophy of 'Empowerment' which assumes an individual can develop the potential to respond to all sorts of violence if given the right set of skills. This ignores the contextual conditions necessary to enable an effective response to violence. Using a narrative framework to respond to Ruhi expanded the possibilities of defining responses to violence.

Responses to violence within mainstream frameworks also focus extensively on 'relying on one's self'. While this is helpful in certain situations, it leads to missing out on many opportunities for collective action. In Ruhi's situation, collective action ultimately enabled the girls to reclaim their lives from violence, a narrative framework allowed this to be richly described.

### Ways forward

Towards the end of our sessions, Kyra spoke about wanting to bring change to her CCI. Many of the other young people I work with echo these sentiments. There is potential for linking young people in their efforts to resist oppression and violence. This would require consideration of the significant risks faced by these young people, and ways to structure safety. There may also be opportunities to engage other staff in a collective effort to move away from individualising, pathologising and oppressive ways of working.

Young people from these contexts live in an extremely oppressive situation in which they cannot access the resources to reach normative standards of recovery. Focusing on their inability to perform effective action

leads to marginalisation of other facets of their experience, rendering invisible the ways in which they are resisting and reclaiming at every step. The conversations described in this paper created a space where these stories could be developed and honoured, enabling young people to reclaim a sense of agency. This presents an alternative to the pathologising discourses that characterise much work with young people in CCIs.

## Notes

1. Caste is a system of social stratification that is unique to India. The system is organised around concepts of pollution and purity. The Savarna or 'forward' castes are privileged; the Avarna or 'backward' castes face various forms of discrimination. Caste-based policies are being contested in modern day India; however, the idea that caste no longer exists is a misconception. Castelessness is a privilege afforded to only those from the Savarna castes. Others still face various forms of overt and covert discrimination, including the practice of untouchability.
2. Although India is a secular country, Hindus form the religious majority. Tensions between Hindus and members of other religions are on the rise. A surname that locates me within the religious majority gives me a certain amount of privilege that is not available to those from other communities.
3. In India, dowry refers to the durable goods, cash and real or movable property that a bride's family gives to the bridegroom, his parents or his relatives as a condition of the marriage.
4. In Indian culture, respecting one's elders is very important. Therefore, in relationships between adults and children, adults often have greater power. Sometimes this enables a situation of abuse.
5. Deinstitutionalisation started in the mental health sector after it was established that institutional care has negative effects on the wellbeing of patients and should be used as a last resort. Instead, the system turned to focus on community-based care. The child protection sector in India has also been pushing community-based interventions based on the belief that family life is essential for a child, and that child protection interventions should avoid destabilising the family.
6. Michael White's (1997) essay on de-centred practice describes how conventional models of therapy are often informed by an ethic of control. An ethic of control focuses on enabling effective action: reaching sought after ends in a timely fashion. However, what people often don't consider is that one requires great excesses of power to achieve these ends. People visiting a therapeutic setting often do not have this access to power. Therefore, work along these lines leads to a marginalisation of their experience. White calls for an ethic of collaboration in which therapists centre clients as experts in their own lives.
7. Paternalism places undue power in the hands of the therapist. It assumes that therapist has expertise. As Vikki Reynolds (2014) states, in situations of extreme risk it is often difficult for a therapist to give up this power. However, one must work in collaboration, with the client and the therapist sharing responsibility.
8. Another response to issues of risk is indifference. Often this indifference is presented through the discourse of empowerment. This discourages workers from getting involved in issues of risk, and instead focuses on building clients' skills. This strategy may be adopted to safeguard organisational interests and to prevent the loss of partnerships and collaborations. It ignores the contextual nature of risk and instead positions it as an individual skill deficit.
9. Kolkata Sanved is a local NGO in Kolkata that uses dance movement therapy to enable survivors of gender-based violence to reclaim their lives. Its work with CCIs has enabled many community-based practitioners to emerge from the field. This has led to a growth of their unique model: creating change makers out of survivors. This is a first in our context, in which the mental health sector is dominated by experts. (Kolkata Sanved. 2017. *Empowering lives through dance movement therapy*. Retrieved from [kolkatasanved.org/what-we-do/](http://kolkatasanved.org/what-we-do/)).
10. Dance movement therapy sessions, run by Kolkata Sanved, are based on 'sampoornata', which emphasises a holistic and community-based model of mental health care (Kolkata Sanved, 2017. *Sampoornata*. Retrieved from [kolkatasanved.org/what-we-do/](http://kolkatasanved.org/what-we-do/)).
11. The safeguarding committee within our work place aims to address risks in the lives of the children and vulnerable young adults accessing our services. However, its scope is restricted to the purview of our programs.
12. The Aadhaar is a 12-digit unique identification number issued by the Indian government. The Aadhaar project was initiated as an attempt to have a single, unique identification document or number that would capture all the details of every resident of India. The current government has placed a lot of emphasis on the Aadhar card, making it mandatory for all residents to register. This is difficult for many in marginalised communities as they do not have the documents required to register, and hence access the services of the state. In September 2018 the Supreme Court of India passed a judgement which no longer made this compulsory.
13. The term 'Kinnar' is used in India to refer to intersex people, transgender people and eunuchs. Those within the Kinnar community have a unique expression of gender identity that blends gender and culture. They are mostly men who undergo castration as an expression of their spirituality. They identify as neither male nor female. Due to discrimination, this community lives on the margins of society and is often forced into begging and prostitution.
14. Durga Puja is an annual Hindu festival that focuses on worshipping the goddess 'Durga'. The festival celebrates the goddess defeating 'Mahishasura', the demon king, and it symbolises the victory of good over evil. This is the main festival of West Bengal.

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