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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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Building a pedagogy around action and emotion: experiences of Blind Opera of Kolkata

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Abstract Contemporary knowledge systems have given too much importance to visual symbols, the written word for instance, as the repository of knowledge. The primacy of the written word and the representational world built around it is, however, under debate—especially from recent insights derived from cognitive science that seeks to bring back action, intent and emotion within the core of cognitive science (Freeman and Nunez in J Consciousness Stud 6(11/12), 1999). It is being argued that other sensory experiences, apart from the visual, along with desires (or intent) and emotions—like pain, pleasure, sorrow or joy—constitute equally important building blocks that shape an individual's cognition of the world around. This multi-sensory cognition colored by emotions inspire action and hence is valid knowledge. This is probably nowhere more apparent than in the world of the visually impaired. Deprived of visual sensory capability, they have to perforce depend on other senses. But the dominant discourse in wider society plays a major role in determining what they (the blind) can do. A society built around visual symbols and the written word underplays other elements of cognition and in the process undervalues them. This also gets reflected in the construction of social artifacts of various kinds, such as the educational certification system (The Braille system is an attempt to make the written world accessible to the blind through tactile signals—so that words are 'felt' and 'read.' But it is quite cumbersome. For instance, even a blind highly skilled at writing in Braille would not be able to match the writing speed of an ordinary visually endowed literate person. Effective and efficient computer-based voice–text–voice converters might solve this problem better.)-based primarily on skills over the written word. Linguistic ability becomes most valuable and at another level the written word gets salience over the spoken word. The blind hardly has a chance, therefore, except through concessions or piety. A practice built around the imagery of an empowered blind person, therefore, must depart from mainstream conceptualization—for power is derived from what one has rather than from what one lacks. It must begin by

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tapping and valorizing one's own endowments. This paper is an attempt to identify such a departure based on the experience of Blind Opera—a theatre group of the blind working in Kolkata, India. It seeks to provide an exposition in written word of an experience that can only be partially captured within the confines of a text. It is an incomplete account, therefore, and may be taken as an attempt to reach out and seek an exchange of experiences and insights.

Keywords Blind Opera · Knowledge systems · Contemporary education system · Pedagogy · Cognition · Body language · Emotional memory games · Skill formation · Action and emotion

> In a theatre auditorium in Kolkata, it is discomfortingly dark except for a beam of light in the middle of the stage. A play begins. A group of blind actors and actresses are sitting in a circle—their heads bent down touching the ground. A pensive background music fills the auditorium. Those on stage are crying—and their wail of sorrow soon overshadows the music. The audience is moved. The music changes—a slight change in rhythm changes the mood. The group on stage recovers—helped by the *common* background music that aids each of them in their *unique* journey through emotions from the depth of sorrow to joy. They hold each others hand—rhythm touches their bodies and music finds expression in their voice. They sing and dance in joy (*nache janma*, *nache mrityu pache pache*, *tata thoi thoi*, *tata thoi thoi... ki anondo ki anondo...*[1])—their synchronized movements choreographing into beautiful formations on stage. The audience is stunned. There is *magic* in the air. The stage is bathed in light now. For the audience that is a relief—to be in light again. But for those on stage—it hardly matters except for the warmth of the high powered spotlights that they must be feeling. The play of the blind continues...

Opening scene of Blind Opera's 'King of the Dark Chamber'

1 Introduction

We develop this paper on two main strands of argument building on two sets of practices of the group. Firstly, that skill formation is a multi-sensory experience and is far more effective if learning is built around action. This learning and skill formation through action is necessarily multi-sensory. We argue that this method of pedagogy (using the full sensory experience) is superior to current practices of education (especially in India now) that focuses on imparting literacy, thereby creating just an ability to dabble in some visual symbols whose connection to the actionable world often seems remote. For our purposes in this paper, it also effaces (at least to an extent) the difference between the blind and the visually endowed, if innovative techniques to tap

[1] A popular song composed by Rabindranath Tagore (in Bengali). Translated it would read something like—...there is dance of life and of death, one entwined with the other... dance to the beat of transcendental joy, *tata thoi thoi* (which is a simple beat or *bol* in Indian dance)

and hone non-visual cognitive capabilities of the blind are devised and perfected. This part of the paper, therefore, deals with skill formation and the pedagogy associated with it.

The second point we seek to make is that emotions constitute an important element shaping our cognition and hence learning (or education) has to take note of that. We deal in particular with a sense of stricken-ness that often characterizes socially marginalized groups. We argue that it is through a discovery of one's own emotions in memory that an emancipation is achieved—a sort of 'coming to terms.' We explore a method that partially lies beyond-linguistic reason—in music and drama and partially in a process of dialogue with the trusted. It is this emancipation that allows for a wider sense-making or a grasping of the subject's own surrounding reality. Emotions then can begin to act as springboards for action rather than as dampener of desires to act. The second strand, therefore, is not about skills but is about an attitude. The development of both of the above, i.e., skill and attitude lead to the attainment of the fruit of successful conduct of a pragmatic folk life.

The paper is organized as follows. The next section looks at practices of the group and provides a few instances of innovative techniques used to implement a 'teaching system' using multi-sensory cognition. Here we distinguish the practice of the group, rooted in traditional Indian thoughts on education, from discourses and practice of rehabilitation of the blind in Western societies. We then discuss the 'emotional memory games' and the process of dialogue involved in it, which constitute a central plank of Blind Opera's method, developing in the process a concept of trust between the teacher and student that makes such intense dialogue possible. Finally, we situate the experiment socially, speculating on supporting innovations in political economy that we think is required to sustain the initiative. We argue specifically that the experiment has to find support through local patronage mechanisms, deviating from current educational systems whose organization and administration reflects the primacy granted to the written word as a knowledge source.

2 Skill formation and the pedagogy

The dream of building up a professional theatre group of the blind is somewhat daunting, yet magical. Experience and received ideas suggest that the blind lacks an expressive body language as well as mobility. A blind person performing complex somersaults—vaulting through the air and making a perfect landing is not an image that the popular imagination about the blind can easily conjure up. Achieving complex coordinated motor movement of the body synchronized and related with the surrounding space appears difficult for the blind. Neither is blind persons too famed for expressive gesticulatory skills. Yet, theatre requires both these skills in abundance—for acting is an exercise of the mind and the body; the whole self in fact unfolds on stage. A body untrained in performing intricate movements on stage as well as forming itself into different poses and postures and a mind incapable of indulging in controlled emotions is not too effective on stage. The work of the group began,

therefore, as an experiment trying to explore the limits of what is possible. The group was woven around an expectation of a magic (a *chamatkar*) in the truest Indian theatrical traditions.[2]

The lack of a body language and mobility through space are important dimensions of the perceived disability of the blind as well. Lack of a body language makes communication by the blind appear stony, disinterested and mundane. It does not inspire or excite the other person engaged in a communicative dialogue, especially if it is with someone who is visually endowed, and hence the attempt at communication looses much of its import. The creative discovery of the other in a dialogue and the act of coaxing or cajoling or inducing the participant in a dialogue in a flight of fancy and such attempts involved in a communicative exercise seem difficult. The communicative difficulty arising out of a lack of body language of the blind reflects, on one hand, unfamiliarity with a widely shared repertory of signs and gestures (of the body) that the visually endowed creatively draws upon and uses while engaging in a dialogue. While the visually endowed learns such gestures through visual imitation, for the blind such a visually aided imitative learning is not possible. If alternative systems do not provide the blind access to the repertory, an adequate body language would not be developed. This lack of access to widely shared symbols, therefore, can constitute a dimension of exclusion (or lack of effective inclusion) of the blind from social communicative networks overwhelmingly dominated by the visually endowed. On the other hand, the communicative difficulty also arises from an inability of the visually endowed to appreciate signs and symbols of a non-visual nature, such as subtle differences in auditory gestures that the blind might be using in a dialogic interaction with the visually endowed. This later aspect we would further develop in course of our subsequent discussion. The point to note is that the blind whose social interaction involves, to a large extent, the visually endowed, fails to participate (as in an act) in the exercise of gestures that expresses and communicates. We argue that this external failure also probably leads to an internal cognitive failure in organizing and classifying subtle emotions and moods (and in the process further developing it), for it is through external action (in gesturing) within a social setting that an internal cognitive realization of subtlety of emotions is also

[2] The experiment began in 1994 within an established theatre group (Nandikar) as a project with blind boys and girls of Calcutta Blind School (a residential school partially supported by the government) financed through a Ford Foundation grant. The short project culminated in the production of a play—but Nandikar decided to discontinue the initiative thereafter. The group of blind boys and girls were, however, deeply interested in exploring the world of theatre—dabbling with stage performance had aroused that *magical* possibility amongst them. The group of theatre professionals involved with the work including the present director (the second author of the paper), also thought that the idea was promising and setup an independent outfit—the Blind Opera—in 1996 to carry on the work towards building a professional theatre troupe of the blind. While the call to explore the undiscovered world of the blind inspired, increasing discontent with developments in the world of theatre/culture that was moving away from its engagement with the life around convinced the group to seek out a departure. The work started with a group of around 30 students of Calcutta Blind School who had completed their schooling. Several of them are still with the group, while new people have also come in. The new group is more diverse with different levels of schooling (including dropouts). In general, the blind in India, after completing their schooling, enter a difficult phase because of extreme dearth of occupational openings. They are, therefore, often victims of social neglect that emanates from the closest quarters. Their lifeworld remains, as a result, stricken by horrid experiences.

achieved—for such skills[3] as gesturing are not learnt through conceptualization and a discourse but mainly through repeated action.

The other aspect that we referred to above is the difficulty in mobility that the blind experience. Difficulties regarding mobility and devising of means and methods to get over that have also been a very important concern of discourses concerning the blind in Western societies. Underlying the lack of mobility is the inability to have a visual mapping of the surrounding space and the relation of the body with other physical artifacts within the surrounding space. The mapping out of space, therefore, has to be made with non-visual cues, such as through touch or through audio cues. Exploring through these other cues, often, is a slow process and it takes time, for instance, to feel through the space around. Motion, therefore, is slow. It also induces a fear of the unknown—of new spaces or new ordering and arrangements in known space that must again be mapped, which can lead to a lack of desire to explore.

Here we make a distinction between the difficulty in navigating through new spaces or creating maps of new spaces that the blind experiences and the difficulty that the blind experiences in achieving rapid (or coordinated) movements within a known and pre-explored (through non-visual cues) space. The Western discourse around mobility and rehabilitation of the blind has concentrated thus far, primarily on the first of these two aspects through construction of several physical (external) artifacts, such as traffic signals that give out a visual and an audio signal simultaneously (or such gadgets as electronic walking sticks) that has eased the navigational problems of the blind in new spaces and have thus made social space more accessible to the blind. That, however, is not enough, particularly in cases involving problems of the later type. For instance, when Blind Opera started its work of developing stage production/enactment of theatre with the blind, one of its first innovations involved designing of such an external artifact—a thick rope that is placed at the periphery of the stage to delimit it. Before any performance begins the actors and actresses feel the space in the stage and the rope aids that process—and all through the show, the rope acts as a delimiter of all movements that are accomplished on stage—so that the inside and outside of the stage becomes clearly discernible. The innovation is remarkable for its simplicity and economy—it is hardly discernible even to the visually endowed audience. Yet this artifact does not help the movement of the blind within the bounded (and pre-explored) space—such as somersaulting during the performance. Achieving such feats, which is far more important in the context of theatre would require an adequate learning system built on non-visual cognition involving space and motion. It has to be internally driven. We would explore such a multi-sensory teaching system that can overcome the two dimensions of visual disability that we identified. While the development of these skills and its perfection is a prerequisite for theatre, a minimum development of these skills is useful (even essential) for a successful and fulfilling 'folk life' experience outside the theatrical stage. Therefore, without denying the significance of Western innovation trajectories that aim to create inclusive spaces for

[3] Although 'skills' generally refer to ability to dabble with the material world and achieve a desired transformation (for instance potter's skill in shaping clay to a pot), we are using skills in a wider sense while referring to gesturing as a 'skill.' A vocal musician's skill would be of a similar category, where a material object is not associated with the idea of performance of the skill.

the blind through high-tech gadgets, we argue that Blind Opera's practice is aimed at addressing facets of the problem that cannot be tackled within the Western approach. Therefore, we claim a complementarity.

2.1 Sensory skills of the blind

A group of people are sitting in a circle—some of them are blind and others visually endowed. They are all speaking at the same time—in a chaotic frenzy. The game is to decipher from the chaos the speech of the partner of each. The blind in the group succeed in their attempts—the visually endowed are most often not as lucky.

From that group, a blind girl slowly stands up—removes the anklet that makes quite a bit of noise and silently slips away. The visually endowed could see it all. Then her partner—a blind—remarks after a few minutes—"when did she leave?" Even silence could not deceive. When she left, the blind girl left a trace—the absence of a smell—that could be discerned.

The group disbands after a few more exercises. Every blind finds their partner with whom they would travel back with ease without exchanging a single word. Those who can see can seldom find their loved ones from a motley crowd just by touching them—yet the blind can discern that familiar touch of the beloved even in the complexity of a large crowd.

Even folk knowledge about the blind has long acknowledged the heightened sensory capability of 'sound–touch–smell' that the blind possess. In several mythical and poetic allusions in the Indian tradition the blind (*andha baul* or *fakir*) often led the way for they could 'sense' what the visually endowed could not 'see.' It was a celebration of the skill and capability of the blind—their heightened sense of sound–touch–smell. Just as these sensory skills of the blind are honed through repeated use in their daily living, their memory also gets sharpened through a similar mechanism. Memory serves a very important purpose for the blind even in mundane tasks as finding the way to a known place. Lacking a continuous stream of visual signals, the blind depends much more on memory of the place. While the visually endowed also recollects from memory the visual images of the place, for the blind, memory is, in a sense, used more intensely. It is therefore not too uncommon to find an average blind person to be far more capable of memorizing a long text faster and with greater retention over a longer time. Pedagogy for the blind must therefore aim to sharpen these endowments for it provides the key to their cognitive world.

2.2 Towards a multi-sensory cognition of the body and space

Developing a body language and mobility requires an exercise of the body and it starts, in a sense, from the cognition of one's own body. So knowledge of the basic anatomy and physiology of the body is essential to begin with. This knowledge is not picked up through abstract reasoning, as in memorizing or understanding a text, but it happens principally through action—an action by exercise of one's own body along with gradual familiarity with a system of naming. Therefore, it has phenomenological roots. This 'actioning' is most often imitative. Since the blind cannot imitate through visual images, alternative imitative mechanisms need to be created. Blind Opera's methods concentrate on

two such modes—through sound (as in profuse verbal description of body movements) and touch (the blind imitates by touching the body movements and positions of the person whom they imitate).

This learning through imitation begins from the premise that there is motion and rhythm in everyone, driven by psycho-somatic processes—a rhythm that is primitive or pristine and natural. Yet it is through a social learning process that this inner rhythm unfolds. Blind students begin such rhythmic exercises in apparent chaos, as an untrained exercise is bound to be. Yet the work must begin from this chaotic expression rather than from an instruction of the cultivated sophisticated movements—because it is his/her own—driven by an inner cognitive state. That is why it is spontaneous and joyous. The first task, therefore, is to induce the student to participate and give expression (as in acting) to the spontaneous rhythm, however ugly it appears to an outside observer. It might be meaningless to any observer and would fail as a communicative tool but it is important to realize that it is pregnant with meaning for the actor, for it reflects the inner cognitive state. And it is full of meaning to the teacher, who has to discover the inner cognitive state of the student to engage in successful pedagogy. Teaching and learning is a process of mutual discovery by the teacher as well as the student in this method. Achieving this, that is inducing the student to engage in the spontaneous act is, however, quite difficult. It can be achieved only in an environment of trust, built up by the teacher. It cannot be induced by a fear of punishment, as in contemporary grading/marking systems in schools. Yet a disciplinary mechanism within a structure must be in place (as in the structure of games a few of which we discuss below) for pedagogy and learning to be effective. A set of injunctions from the teacher (who has power) provides the structure. It does not, however, create a fear that can throttle self-expression. The student also remains free to reveal the naiveté and ignorance and not be scoffed at or rebuked. On this chaotic expression, the teacher has to work, demonstrating, illustrating and guiding. The teacher is like the 'mirror,' whom the blind imitates by touching all over to get an image of a movement or a posture that they can then replicate. A repertory of movements and expressions slowly gets built up that the blind starts creatively drawing upon and using. We provide below, as illustration, a few of the numerous theatre games (or structured learning environments) that form the basis of this pedagogic method.

Theatre games The task of the blind in this game is to turn towards the direction of the source of a sound—it is initially told that the sound is that of gunfire. The sound can come from any direction in three-dimensional space surrounding the blind and can be located at different distances. First the game begins by slow movement of the body and then the speed picks up—the speed of turning as well as the speed of consecutive shots (or the interval between consecutive shots decreases). The body movement is achieved in several stages. It can start with a movement of the head (from above the shoulder), then it can be turning from the waist above and then turn around completely. While turning, the task of the blind is to react to the sound and its nature—to express the mood that gets created through the audio signal emanating from the gunshot. At the next stage, the blind may also react by uttering a sound, which seeks to express the own feeling. The external sound can then change in stages and at each stage the whole set of exercises are repeated. The sound can change to the growl of a

dangerous animal seeking its prey, then the sound of a less dangerous animal, then an unknown person's call, a known person's call and a beloved person's call.

As the nature of the sound changes, the blind has to now react in more complex ways to that sound to express the inner emotions aroused by the external sound. The initial reactions are just bodily—though involving increasingly complex coordination of body movements. It culminates in a dialogic response, where the body language has to be only one component that must synchronize with the dialogue. As the game proceeds, the teacher observes and guides and engages in a continuous dialogue. The blind at some stage should be able to articulate (in a dialogic response to the teacher's queries) the emotions aroused within by an external sound or a dialogue. At later stages this dialogue becomes prolonged as a mutual justification is sought about the reasons for the arousal of a particular mood or emotion.

The theatre game described above illustrates several aspects of the basic pedagogic philosophy of Blind Opera. The learning system within the simulated environment of the game is multi-sensory. The basic purpose is to build up a teaching–learning method for the blind through non-visual sensory cues so that a body language gets developed. The game is structured to develop the capability to distinguish between different audio cues so that an elaborate system of classification can be developed that would enable the blind to cognize the surrounding space. A large repertory of audio signals (or sounds) in memory with the ability to draw fine distinctions between different sounds (i.e., a discerning ability) constitute a basic skill of the blind. It is this ability which aids a fuller sensory cognition of the world around—for the blind world is a world of sound, touch and smell. Similar games aim at developing and honing the sense of touch and smell so that a heightened sensory experience becomes possible. At a higher level, the game also sharpens the ability to relate between motor skills (of the body), audio skills and relating all of that to the process of recollection from the repertory in memory and the emotion aroused within. All of these coalesce at the point of action—for in action all of these skills are invoked together in the process of the act.

Secondly, in this method, learning occurs through action. The numerous theatre games that are designed regularly and played out not only makes learning interesting and fun, but it makes it more effective since the students act it out. The game creates a structured simulation of a social setting within which the action of the student (a dialogic response in the above game) occurs. This action-based learning is superior to learning systems based just on a text (or the written word), since the process of discovery of the student—in the richness of the internal cognitive world—is more effective. In action the overall cognition of a person, in its several dimensions, comes to the fore and develops along a unique path.

Finally action also effaces the difference between an external manifestation, such as a body movement denoting an expression or an emotion, and the underlying emotion. Learning through action leads to a simultaneous cultivation of the external movements—an accumulative build up of a repertory and a system of classification and differentiation of such external manifestations and a corresponding internal cultivation of underlying emotions and moods that can be finely differentiated (or classified) and hence grasped. It is through this dual

movement that a cognitive grasping of the world around that leads to a fruit in the form of a successful enactment proceeds.[4] It is the explicit importance given to this internal cognitive dimension that constitutes a novelty in the practice of Blind Opera. It might be apt to recall that we argued that the Western discourse on mobility has concentrated on construction of external artifacts that aid the process of navigation of the blind. In the case of Blind Opera such an external artifact was the rope on stage that delimited—yet it was not enough to achieve movements within that bounded and known (or explored space). The differentiated movements and gestures (or body language)—such as the dance of fury, of ecstasy or the serene movement of joy or the pensive movement of sorrow—gestures that enliven a dialogue on stage (and in life as well) can be accomplished only through a system that aims at a wholesome cognitive grasping of reality.

Just as such feats are achieved through learning and doing, so can the impossible feat of a blind somersaulting—the magic of whose possibility we started the essay with—be achieved. It is a leap of faith. In one dramatic moment that is often created through a sequence, music and dialogue—pushed by a trusted teacher—a blind takes that leap. A successful accomplishment breaks a cognitive barrier—once, twice and so on till it becomes a routine—a feat in the accumulated repertory of the blind, a skill that has been learnt. When enacted on stage—it is magic for the visually endowed—for they are exposed to the product (outcome) alone. The process lies hidden in a magical mist in the mundane detail of the daily practice of the group. While these accomplishments have undoubtedly been invaluable on stage—for the purpose of theatre, it has also had a significant effect on the folk life of the students. For instance, several of the students—when they began their association with Blind Opera, would come to the place where the group worked and go back aided by an escort—normally a family member or a close friend. After around a year of involvement in Blind Opera's learning systems, they could travel alone, even in the crowded city of Kolkata—where there are hardly any special aids (as external artifacts, like signal systems) which make public space accessible to the blind.

Evolution of this pedagogy at Blind Opera based on learning through action has been influenced deeply by the long lineage of thoughts on traditional Indian systems of basic education, Rabindranath Tagore (Tagore 1961) in particular (Banerjee 1998 provides a succinct summary of the position). Briefly, basic education was sought to be built around action rather than on abstract principles or theorization (of concepts). Much of the literature emphasized skill building related to working on and transforming the material objects around (Gandhi 1962),[5] while some views within the broad tradition (especially Rabindranath among those from recent history) also emphasized skills related to performances such as music, dance and drama as a fundamental element of what basic education should seek to achieve. Clearly, the skill world was visualized as much more than a linguistic world—it was necessarily multi-sensory in

[4] Our argument, therefore, is in sympathy with views within cognitive science that discard a mind–body or mind–matter separation. As Clark (1997) argues, the mind is not in the brain and extends into the body and the world outside.

[5] There is a large contemporary literature on skill building of the craftsmen that share a similar concern, for instance, Gill (1996).

the first place. This basic education also needs to be distinguished from apprenticeship systems. For instance, in the practice of Blind Opera, while the basic element of say, learning of gestures, would be of benefit for everyone—an advanced learning and cultivation of the skill would be required for those who choose to specialize as performing theatre professionals. This advanced learning linked to a profession requires a working apprenticeship institution to develop. The organization has not yet been able to institutionalize such an apprentice system as would sustain continued social reproduction of theatrical skills of the blind beyond the current group of persons.

3 Drama therapy and emotional memory games

The opening scene of the play King of the Dark Chamber described at the beginning of the essay—the group of blind boys and girls making an internal emotional journey from the depths of sorrow to liberation of joy manifested externally in the wails transforming gradually to a vivid choreography of life—represented on stage an enactment of a long drawn practice of Blind Opera. It is an emotional journey that almost every student of Blind Opera has undertaken. This part of the essay explores the process that made such an experience possible in order to identify certain unique characteristics of the methods of the group. Underlying this method is the realization that emotions shape an individual's cognition and hence it plays a role in shaping the desire to act.

An individual's memory is often stricken—stricken with grief and sorrow. Emotions emanating from such grief stricken memory dampen the desire to act, to explore or to learn. It therefore, leads to seclusion or exclusion from wider social processes. This seclusion is not that of an ascetic, whose seclusion is willed, has a purpose and is a willed act. This seclusion, on the contrary is involuntary, in a sense, and leads to and arises from a sense of failure of fulfillment of desires. While such failures are ubiquitous in an individual's social existence, not being able to speak about or an inability to grasp it is what leads to a sense of stricken-ness. The grief gets overblown. The inability to engage in a dialogue leads to a failure in sense-making—so that sorrow and the emotions arising therefrom remain undiscovered. It remains clouded beyond reason, inaccessible to reason. The inability to speak out can arise for lack of a refuge of the trusted that can be acute particularly in excessively regimented systems. For the students of Blind Opera, such sense of alienation, grief and sorrow arose from the general social neglect and exclusion that they experienced—often from the nearest and dearest ones in the family and in other intimate social spaces. It may be pointed out here that it is not an external neglect alone, such as in a utilitarian view of poverty as lack of income or wealth for sustenance that causes this stricken-ness. It is the failure of sense-making of one's reality that is more important. So, symptoms of such processes can also be found in abundance in social spaces with abundant material endowment, particularly at points in history when the general sense of balance in society (and the philosophical system underlying it) is lost. This sense-making of one's reality and the failure of desires, we argue, is a social exercise and can occur only through an inter-personal process of a dialogue with the trusted. Dialogue is an action—and by acting it

out an individual obtains liberation or a sense of freedom that prepares the self to again begin desiring to act. It is a cathartic act—it sort of breaks through a cognitive blind alley. This catharsis, however, is not associated with penance and is not judgmental or corrective in nature.

But, a major problem of stricken psyches is that such grief and emotions surrounding it are beyond the ambit of reason—beyond the possible ambit of a dialogue. So the first task is to break through and make such issues accessible to an inter-subjective process of dialogue and reason. This is achieved in Blind Opera's methods through simulation of events surrounding such grief in a theatrical setup (where music often plays a major role) through dialogue with the teacher (often a monologue by the teacher that guides the thought). It is a reenactment for the subject—and by this reenactment (the action) the subject obtains control over such emotions. The blind alley is torn open—action brings it out—and it becomes open to access through dialogue. The method, therefore, differs from practices of psychological counseling which can proceed only if the subject is willing to bring out such issues on the table for a dialogue of reason. In a way, it is extra-linguistic at one stage and dialogic at another.

We attempt providing below a verbal description of an emotional memory game involving one of the students of the group (incomplete though this description is by all accounts for we would in all probability fail to reproduce the emotion and the mood of the moment).

A young, talented dwarf blind girl who came to Blind Opera and got associated with one of their stage productions had a revealing experience. She was then a student at Jadavpur University (in Kolkata) and had just completed her post graduate education—all through her life she had to fight twice as hard to gain entry into educational institutions and she could prove again and again that her visual disability would not stand in the way of her education. All that fight had made her bitter, angry with the world around, particularly the world of the sighted—so easily identifiable as the 'other.' In an emotional memory game, she was talking with the teacher about all this bitterness and as she went deeper into memory and her feelings, her anger started bursting forth.

What would you choose to do if you had your way to punish this unjust world? She was asked. (Italicized part of the dialogue is by the teacher.)

I would kill... *Kill whom?* Kill all—all the sighted people, who make our life miserable.

So kill me, I am a sighted person... a representative of all the injustice meted out to you. But you are my teacher. *How does that matter—if you cannot kill me—hit me—remember it is people like me—maybe I am your teacher, yet it is sighted people like me who cause you so much pain... hit me with all your might*.

And then the teacher recounted one by one the anecdotes of pain, despair, treachery, hate—stories from her lifeworld that he had known over days of intimate interaction with the student. The group was humming a tune (generally a local folk tune that is widely shared) that captured the mood of the moment. The moment was electrifying—charged with emotions, there was music. It was a dramatic point of climax. The teacher and the student were in a trance.

And then she (the student) started beating the teacher with all the might that her little hand could muster—it was a blind fury. The humming changes. And then she broke down—in inconsolable tears. The humming changes again. She

had beaten her teacher—her beloved, revered teacher. It took a month for the pain of the inflicted wound to heal.

Now that you have poured all your anger on me—has it solved your problems—what have you achieved? If now everyone else in this room decides to beat you for some wrong that you did them some day some time—how would you feel... and the dialogue continued. The girl recovered slowly. The humming of the group changes again—the group starts dancing—*tata thoi thoi..., ki anondo ki anondo, ki anondo, nache mukti nache bondho* (in Bengali; see note 1 for a translation). They hold her hand—she gets up and joins the choir. It is a catharsis—a liberating experience. None of those who watched it that day as outsiders would, probably, be able to erase it from our memory. Every student in the group, after they first experienced this kind of an emotional journey, wanted to enter the game again—to relive, reenact that experience. This experience got scripted into a play—a full stage production—where the dwarf blind girl played the lead role with élan—and it was the first time she did theatre on stage. The boundary between stage and life faded away.

Exercises in emotional memory, set within the context of simulated theatre games, have been an important aspect of the routines of Blind Opera. Several features of such games need to be remarked upon. The stricken-ness that we discussed above arises in an individual for a unique reason, a result of a unique history and a train of events—its nature, hence, differs widely. Although there might be patterns in the nature of such problems between different groups, such as between totally blind persons and partially blind persons (who still retain some very low vision), the discovery of the unique experience is very important to success of the method. Even the nature of the theatre game, i.e., what is to be played out, would depend on the teacher's understanding of the uniqueness of the student. The method, therefore, explicitly recognizes that the cognitive path to liberation is unique to an individual. As the game unfolds, there are multiple layers of movements occurring simultaneously within the subject—she is a participant in a chorus—the music that operates at the level of the subtle. At the same time she is a participant in a dialogue with the teacher—this movement is more concrete as in an unfolding of the subtle. Shared information between the teacher and the student (this information might not be accessible to others in the group and a whispering mode is often resorted to between the teacher and student) is brought to bear in this movement. And at the same time there is a cognitive movement in the subject that is unique in its detail—not fully discoverable by anybody else, even the teacher who would not know the full details of that path of journey. The method, therefore, is built around multiple layers of 'private-ness' and 'public-ness' of information. While the subtle layers bring a force to bear on the unique individual movement, it is this unique journey that is the route to liberation. While the skill of the teacher lies in operating the subtle levers, unless space is created for the unique journey through a partial discovery of certain features of that uniqueness, the method would fail. The subtle (which is the shared or general) must not dominate. The method therefore is not amenable to mass intervention systems of psychological counseling. Every participant has to be treated as unique, while maintaining a relation of tension with various layers of subtlety that are shared with groups (that differ in its extensiveness of inclusion of others), and it is in this that the success of the method lies. For the teacher, every episode is new—full of surprises in partial

discovery of the unique unfolding of the subtle. Every episode, therefore, requires a creative participation of the teacher who must be motivated to take it at that rather than as a routine exercise in conduct of certain procedures from repertory.

The ignorance of the teacher about the exact cognitive path to liberation of the student poses important problems for the structure of organizing these interventions. Since there is ignorance the exact path cannot be explicated in detail—the teacher has to prod and push noting for external manifestations that would demonstrate whether the student has undertaken a sincere exploration of the depth of those thoughts. When exactly that prodding would succeed is not known a priori. Importantly, when it succeeds the full game has to be played out and nothing, such as a pre-structured time schedule must intervene. Within educational setups used to routine pedagogy in pre-structured time slots, this unique requirement to organize time poses immense problems.

We earlier argued about a two-stage process—one that is beyond-linguistic followed by a dialogic intervention. The above account mostly describes the first stage—the beyond-linguistic part that prepares the subject for a dialogic participation. Blind Opera's method differs in this respect from recent discussions and practice of pedagogy of 'marginalized' groups, such as that of the famed Brazilian educationist Paulo Freire (Freire 1972, 1995). Emancipation in Freirian method arises from a process of critical dialogue around a search for the meaning of words in the concrete context of the subject.[6] The world, including the mechanisms of oppression, unravels through this critical dialogue. However, because of its emphasis on discovery of the concrete particular context, it often looses touch with the common linking thread between the severalties of particular contexts. Blind Opera's method differs precisely here. The common link, the shared or the subtle that we identified above is a vital key to the process of emancipation. This subtle takes various forms—the humming in the episode described above or fabulous narratives of the past that are shared through a common tradition. This subtle, we also argue is what defines a society—the commonality that runs across the severalties of particularities. The emancipation is achieved by lifting the subject beyond the particularity of the context in an intense dramatic exercise—without effacing at the same the concrete particularity. The Freirian engagement with the particular therefore occurs, but without loosing sight or the possibility of emancipation offered by the subtle. The subject, therefore, becomes willing to participate in a dialogue. This willingness to engage in a dialogue is a primary indication of the subject's ability in coming to terms and countering the sense of stricken-ness and alienation. It is the first step towards acting in the pragmatic life. The dialogue with the teacher often leads to certain injunctions about the conduct of pragmatic life that has to be followed respectfully (which is possible because teacher has a power). This dialogic process, moreover, does not end during that particular interactive episode—it lingers. Blind Opera's daily practice concentrates mostly on a

[6] Paulo Freire developed his methods while he was engaged in adult education initiatives with several marginalized groups. His major contribution was to bring out the relation between words and the context (that gives a meaning to the word). Therefore, word or texts written by a teacher who does not share the context (and hence the meanings) of the student group often fails to evoke an interest in learning and critical thinking. Literacy becomes merely an information transfer exercise and it dehumanizes.

discovery of the cultural roots of the community through enactment of epics—so that through a series of such dramatic enactments a discovery of a common lineage occurs. Such grand narratives often become a part of the continuing dialogue—in some such narrative or epic tale a subject might find that element of emancipation. The choice of such tales by the teacher is often motivated by the need to seek such refuge in narratives—but that is never told that way. The individual has to discover the exact path to emancipation. So the dialogue is a lingering process—spaced across time, which often also escapes the confines of the present and in a flight of fancy engages with the past. As the past unfolds as a narrative, the future too unfolds as a possibility and the ground for creating an imaginative unfolding of the future seems graspable.

The second strand of our argument, therefore, has dealt with development of an attitude, rather than a skill—as we argued earlier as well. Development of the skill and attitude defines the pedagogy.

4 Conclusions: on a speculative note

The pedagogy described above is unique in several respects, as we argued above. The important aspect of that is the explicit importance given to the subject's individuality (that defines a context specificity) on the one hand along with a search and an engagement with a commonality that we argued to be the basis of the society. The target of this pedagogy, unlike most contemporary educational systems, is not to bring every participant to an average standard of performance but to seek a cognitive emancipation of each individual, although they might be placed very differently in terms of levels of consciousness and knowledge. Contemporary educational systems organized vertically under centralized administrative control are not geared to this purpose. Examination systems are, for instance, primarily oriented towards certifying certain skill levels in terms of dabbling with the written word. It would fail to evaluate multi-sensory learning systems that are oriented towards action (in this case on the theatre stage). This power of the written word, we argue as a speculative proposition, serves an important purpose of centralization and control—for it can transfer some simple information across contexts and locales much more easily. Governance then can be organized around transactions around those information. A necessary corollary of such a system is standardization and an educational system that valorizes literacy (including familiarity with written rules/laws/procedures) and hence would emphasize pedagogy around written word, which, however, seldom reaches high levels of conceptual engagement.

The written word, in a way, is inadequate in conveying richer information that needs to take recourse of multiple sensory experiences. For instance, information on pedagogic success of programs that seek to qualify students in certain standard certification tests can be developed easily and would be robust to inter-subjectivity validity tests as well—even when the people involved are located at great distances. But devising such a procedure for testing the effectiveness of Blind Opera's pedagogy would be absolutely cumbersome if it has to be administered through a bureaucratic administrative apparatus. Governance from a distance, therefore, would most likely fail. The political economy supporting such initiatives as Blind Opera probably has to be local—seeking local

alliances with local patrons who can base governance on more direct experience of the work. The spread and dissemination of the practice, therefore, would require a decentralized network of several learning centers, each built on local patronage mechanisms. The network can then be linked through an apprenticeship program that would continue to generate new knowledge around the practice and transfer it at the same time to a large base of apprentices who would in turn form the nuclei of the dispersed local learning centers. However, that is a leap of faith. Over the years, the experiment of Blind Opera has been sustained by a yearly grant from government of India and small philanthropic initiatives from a local network of well-wishers. The relationship with the State bureaucratic apparatus, however, has not evolved (in fact the grant-making ministry does not even monitor the grant utilization and the work of the group). The local supporting network, in contrast, probably has to devise a shared right mechanism so as to allow the space for innovative experimenting to continue even within a dense relationship. Whether the pedagogic innovations of Blind Opera can be matched to organizational innovation required to sustain such a practice is an open question. But it is, to our mind, clear that failing the supporting organizational innovation it would probably end up with the same fate as several such initiatives, including the Santiniketan[7] experiment of Rabindranath Tagore that were made along similar lines.

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[7] Santiniketan was designed by Rabindranath Tagore as a center for higher learning, principally in fine arts and literature—and Sriniketan was built up as a twin setup to concentrate on local rural development initiatives. Both the initiatives were sought to be financed through the civil society without support from the State. After independence, though, Santiniketan was nationalized.