

# ***THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES***

## **Culture Therapy among Prison Inmates: Experience of West Bengal Prisons**

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**Abstract:**

*Culture Therapy refers to use the creative vehicles of performing arts (like theatre, drama, dance, etc.) for exposure of prisoners in a controlled & planned manner within the mainstream society. The core of the intervention is persistent training of prison inmates to prepare them for stage performance in a public place. The primary objective is to promote psycho-social well being of the prisoners. But the intervention helps in transformation of the prison environment to a more enabling one for reformation and correction, and, also to sensitize the larger society for creation of a pro-rehabilitative social environment. This paper analyses the background of initiation of Culture Therapy in prisons of West Bengal (a State in eastern part of India) and experience of conducting the intervention. On the basis of the analysis, various management issues which need to be factored for successful replication of culture therapy are culled out in this paper. The intervention may be conceptualized as a process consisting of four stages – Initiation, Preparation, Performance, & Post performance. Administrative officials / Social Workers role involves ensuring various tasks in each of the four stages. The distinguishable feature of Culture Therapy is that it can be used for sensitizing the community and in decreasing stigma towards prisoners. Other corrective-rehabilitative measures like vocational training, continuing education, or, counseling, have no or limited scope for community sensitization. Hence, culture therapy as a tool of reformation has multiple action point, which makes it strategically powerful.*

**Keywords:** Culture therapy, prison, correction, prisoners, correctional administration

### **1. Background**

Till 2000, prison administration in the Indian state of West Bengal used to be guided by an older Prison Act (1894, amended in 1955) and Prisoners Act (1955) and Jail Code (1967). A new Act, the West Bengal Correctional Services Act (1992), came into effect on 14<sup>th</sup> April, 2000. The new act marked a shift from security & minimum facility centered approach of prison administration to a more progressive correction–reformation oriented approach of prison management. The act re-designated the ‘prisons’ or ‘jails’ as ‘correctional home’. Echoing the modern philosophy of correction for rehabilitation and reintegration of inmates with mainstream society, the new Act delineates various functions of correctional homes.

In chapter III, the new Act mandates for adopting measures -

-“to give correctional treatment to the prisoners ..... to efface from their mind the evil influence of antisocial ways of life and rehabilitate them in the society as good and useful citizens ;” (Section 4 b)

-“..... to rouse in the mind of a prisoner a healthy social sense and a sense of abhorrence against the antisocial ways of life and an impulse for returning to normal social life as a good and useful citizen;”(Section 4 d) .

-“.....for mental and normal uplift of the prisoners and to provide them with educational and other facilities for upgrading their qualities, character and mental attitude;” (Section 4 g)

- “..... whereby a prisoner confined therein may not fall prey to the depriving mental attitude which may make him believe that he is lost to the society and it his fate to pass the rest of his life as a social outcast ” (Section 4 c)

The act also provides for appointment of Welfare Officers & Chief Welfare Officers in central correctional homes, district correctional homes and special correctional homes. Section 11(1) of the Act empowers the state government in prescribing qualifications, terms, and conditions of services, and duties of Welfare officers. All such provisions broadened scope enough for experimentation to transform jails to an institution of correction in real sense and spirit.

In July 2006, the idea of conducting therapy through exposure to culture came into mind of Mr B D Sharma, Inspector General of Correctional Services, Government of West Bengal. When he was visiting the Berhampore Correctional Home, he requested Mr Pradip Bhattacharya (a well known theater personality) to put on a cultural show inside the correctional home for the entertainment of

the prisoners. Prior to stage performance, few of the prisoners sang songs and recited poetry. He observed that apathy, desolation & depression of the inmates vanished during the performance. Watching the inmates perform in lively manner, Mr Sharma was struck with the idea of to initiate a theatre workshop involving the prisoners inside the jail. On his request, Mr Bhattacharya readily agreed to his proposal and initiated a theatre workshop.

One year later, On May17, 2007, at Rabindra Sadan, Kolkata, and an unusual stage performance took place. On that day, inmates of Berhampore Central Correctional Home staged a performance of Rabindranath Tagore's 'Tasher Desh' in presence of many distinguished personalities including the Chief Minister of the state. Immediately, stage performance by prison inmates in made into print media headlines and received considerable electronic media attention. Response of media and people in general was a mix of enthusiasms and skepticisms. However, positive responses & encouragement from various ends could not be missed. This initial success inspired the state government in continuing the experiments.

In one interview, Mr. Sharma opined that exposure to Tagore's creations resulted in remarkable changes in their personalities of prisoners. "Exposure to culture and a sense of dignity and self-respect awakened in them by the standing ovation and public appreciation worked as therapy. I, therefore, gave it the name Culture Therapy." (Basu, 2012)

The cultural therapy slowly took its root among other prisons also. Many dance –drama started to be performed by prisoners including Tagore's 'Ashoka', 'Tota Kahini' and 'Valmiki Pratibha'. Prisoners even have come up dramas based upon their own life experiences. 2009 onwards, prisoner troupes has been invited from other states of India as well to stage the performances. Their performances have reportedly inspired jail authority of other states to actively consider initiating such intervention.

## 2. Understanding Culture Therapy & Consequential Changes

Culture Therapy refers use of creative vehicles of performing arts (like theatre, drama, dance etc) for exposure of correctional home inmates in a controlled & planned manner within the mainstream society in a cultural ambience. It is not a complex psychological treatment. The core of the intervention is persistent training of prison inmates for enacting a drama to prepare them for stage performance in a public place. The objective is to promote psycho-social well being of the inmates and to sensitize the larger society regarding the humane side of the inmates.

Culture Therapy is a dynamic intervention. It has three major elements which promotes changes among prison inmates and other stakeholders. The elements are –

- a. The subject & content of the drama (which are built around classical theme of good and evil)
- b. Experience of enacting out & donning different role
- c. Process(s) which help oneself and others to rediscover the human capability to change

These elements work in a concurrent manner, bringing about changes in the way individual prisoner organizes himself / herself and the way s/he interacts with others. The changes, when observed by prison guards & officials, trigger changes in the way s/he interact to the prisoner. The dynamic nature of interaction is best portrayed in following words –

"The subject and content of the dance dramas, while built around classical themes of good and evil, the rule bound versus the unpredictable, and liberation, lend themselves to artistic improvisatory interpretations. These are not just performed but lived in the experiences of prisoners and guards, as well as through civic processes as these slowly bend in response to the new energy. The dynamic gradually provokes change, which is reflected in the attitudes and practices of the prisoners themselves. There is a transmutation in the individual prisoner's levels of interest, self reliance, respect, and self organization as well as in the overall policy and rules of penal organization in the region of West Bengal..... Civilians have very rigid ideas of and attitude towards those incarcerated in jails. They range from fear, distrust, and hatred to ignorance and nonchalance. These performances, by their sheer brilliance, have generated fresh public interest in this sphere." (Basu, 2012)

## 3. Consequential Changes Brought in by Culture Therapy

Effect of Culture Therapy is yet to be investigated in empirical manner. However, interaction with selected officials and analysis of available documents offers interesting revelations. The changes brought out Culture Therapy on various stakeholders are of different kind. But there is one similarity, one common effect – the effect of having improvement in comparison the existing situation. The consequential changes brought about by Culture Therapy are briefly discussed below-

### 3.1. Among Inmates

#### 3.1.1. Relieving Frustration & Desperation as Immediate Effect

Initially, inmates take interest to be involved in Culture Therapy as it offers her/him to keep oneself engaged. Being in a walled environment, her/his environment is not only psychologically monotonous but also physically restrictive. Culture Therapy throws a window for an inmate for physical movement outside prison, though only for few hours. Further, participation in the therapy offers scope to interact with the outer world. These immediate benefits relieve some despair & desperation from the mind of the inmate.

#### 3.1.2. Moral Empowerment and Self-Enlightening in Later Stage

Moral empowerment and self-enlightening of the individual starts taking place when he/she recognizes a positive response from others. Positive responses include praise, accolade and recognition from fellow inmates, prison officials, as well as from society outside. This is quite different from degraded quality response which is common to a prisoner or criminal. The difference act as an

incentive or stimulus, which promotes family values, propels him/her in building up a inner force to resist the seduction of the antisocial behavior.

### 2.1.3. Generation of Welfare Fund

Apart from trust building and promoting positive values among prisoners, the unique by-product of the Culture Therapy was establishment of a prisoners' welfare fund. Fund generated through ticket sale proceeds is utilized for their own welfare as well as that of their family members.

### *3.2. On Institutional Practices of Prison*

It has been pointed out that, initially, there was huge resistance from the keepers of age old institutionalized practices. The whole concept was ridiculed first, and then it faced resistance from many senior officials.

“There were financial hurdles because there was no precedence for this kind of activity; therefore, no funds could be sanctioned officially for this project. ....The staff unions did not like the entry of outsiders into the jails because it came in the way of their total and absolute control over prisoners.” [10] However, after constant follow up and verbal & written orders, the resistance slowly waned. Many of the staff started to take part in the theaters / dance drama along with the inmates. Culture Therapy, thus, generated change in the institutional ways of interaction within the Correctional Homes.

### *3.3. On Outside Society*

Emergence of a prisoner as a responsible & useful citizen after release from correctional home and his/her proper rehabilitation into the society depends on the opportunities available to him/her. The opportunities offered by the society depend largely on the attitude of the members of the society towards the prison and prisoners. The common belief that an offender is incorrigible inhibits other individuals of the society to interact normally with the released person and to extend the hand of cooperation in his/her need. Such labeling does not support sustenance of corrective & reformatory efforts taken inside the correctional home. Culture Therapy plays a role in reversing this trend.

## **4. Management Issues in Culture Therapy**

As noted earlier, there is a growing trend of initiating Culture Therapy in other prisons of West Bengal which was fuelled by initial success and positive reaction from society and media. However, there are many factors, which must be taken care of for successful replication of culture therapy.

### *4.1. Regulatory Framework*

To begin with, regulatory framework should be supportive. Laws and rules which govern the prison administration system should not contain any provision which actually forbid initiation of practices like culture therapy. Existing laws & rules also shape culture of prison system. Sometimes such institutional culture itself acts as obstacle to such reformatory practices. In case of West Bengal, there was resistance from the staff of prisons during the initial days to allow the men & women prisoners to interact & rehearse together. Special instructions had to be given to allow the selected prisoners to rehearse before the stage performance.

### *4.2. Involving External Experts*

Like any other stage performance, Culture Therapy also requires rigorous training & mentoring of the actors. Apart from designing the script and other knit-grits, the task demands artistic expertise, which, in general, cannot be expected to be available in among staffs and officials inside prison. Inviting external expert artists is sole option remains in such a situation.

### *4.3. Qualities of Expert*

Choosing an expert external artist needs to be done judiciously as aptitude and attitude of external experts play key role in the process of mentoring the inmates. Teaching theatre to law-breakers and ‘criminals’ is a challenging task. Genuineness, warmth, empathy, non-judgmental attitude, and readiness to accept others without prejudice are some of qualities, which should be present in the expert artist. Hence, it is necessary to be discreet in selection of technical agency or experts. Fortunately, in beginning phase of experimentation with Culture Therapy, prison administration authority in West Bengal met some of critically acclaimed artists ready to experiment with compassion. In fact, many of them came to the government with proposals to initiate such actions, which accelerated the pace of adoption of Culture Therapy as a prison reform process in the state.

### *4.4. Using Group of Inmates for Optimization of Resources*

Instead of single inmates, a group of prison inmates should be chosen for Culture Therapy intervention. Choosing a single inmate and providing necessary training him / her to sing or dance for a public performance involves one to one contact between the inmate and the trainer artist. On the other hand, when a group of inmates are chosen for theatre or drama, they can interact, encourage & give feedback to each other part from the trainer artist. The group environment facilitates quick learning among the inmates, and thus reduces cost & time investment.

Choosing a group of prison inmates over a single inmate offers another practical advantage. Preparing a single inmate has higher probability of being a wasteful effort than preparing a group of inmates. If the single person is released from the prison or become ill

before public performance, then the whole process of training become a wasteful effort. But when a group of inmates are trained, the released or ill inmate can be replaced by others.

#### 4.5. Coordination among Agencies

The use of Culture Therapy warrants high degree of alertness among the jail & police officials, and effective coordination among prison authority, police and the agency arranging or managing the public performance event. Since the target system comprises of persons (inmates) who had shown or been charged with delinquent or criminal behavior, necessary precaution should be taken so that inmates do not get any scope to get involved in delinquent or criminal behavior.

#### 5. Role of Social Workers / Executives

Culture Therapy triggers change at various points – at individual level at institutional level, and at social or community level. Managing the changes at various ends requires interaction among various stakeholders. The stakeholders include prison inmates, various technical experts, prison officials, prison administration authority, and society outside prison. When all of them work in a synchronized way, change management process triggered through initiation of Culture Therapy, can be effectively handled.

To achieve the synchronization, the intervention may be conceptualized as a process consisting of four stages – *Initiation, Preparation, Performance, & Post performance*. One or a small group of officials/ social work professionals have to play critical roles in the whole process of managing the intervention. S/he may be a part of prison authority or may be a part of any other social work agency. Whatever her/his position is, s/he has to ensure that certain core tasks are completed before going to the next stage. These tasks are explained in the table below –

Stages	Tasks
Initiation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Get necessary permission from prison authority to start such an intervention</li> <li>• Selecting &amp; tie up with expert artists</li> <li>• Giving critical inputs and information for further sensitization of expert artists regarding the prisoners, prison management and correctional philosophy</li> </ul>
Preparation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help the external artists to screen/choose the inmates who will be trained for the public performance</li> <li>• Encouraging inmates to be part of intervention</li> <li>• Mental support to overcome fear of public performance in the mind of inmate(s)</li> <li>• Arrangement for training / rehearsal</li> </ul>
Performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensuring completion of formal procedures to release inmates for actual stage performance</li> <li>• Coordination among prison authority, police and the event management agency during the public performance event</li> <li>• Managing media personnel for strategic media coverage</li> </ul>
Post Performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensuring media coverage of public performance by prison inmates and making larger society aware about the underlying importance of such a performance</li> <li>• Documentation , reporting, and research to support advocacy for further policy changes, if required)</li> </ul>

Table 1: Various Stages in Culture Therapy & Tasks in Each Stage

#### 6. Conclusion

Culture therapy refers use of any kind of performing arts to expose the inmates of correctional homes before mainstream society in a controlled ambience. This is a well thought-out conscious attempt to sensitize the inmates as well as the mainstream society regarding intrinsic worth and dignity, which is present inside imprisoned individuals like any other human being. The expected outcome of the intervention is may be summarized as the following-

- a. Moral empowerment and self-enlightening of individual inmate.
- b. Transformation of prison environment to a more enabling one for reformation and correction.
- c. Creation of a pro-rehabilitative social environment through attenuation of stigma towards prison and prison inmates.

The biggest advantage of Culture Therapy inside prison is that it can be designed to change the convict, the institution and society simultaneously. The therapy planned and applied partly in group setting and partly in community setting, is less resource intensive compared to case specific treatment techniques. The whole process have ample scope to empower the individual inmates through intra-personal introspection to understand the socio- cultural processes that landed him/her inside a prison, and being perceptive of the view-points of others through role-play during practice sessions and final stage performances. The process results in bringing about changes in attitude of the correctional institutions & society towards convicted persons. Such change favors rehabilitation of convicts after their release from correctional homes.

The distinguishable feature of Culture Therapy is that it can be used for sensitizing the community and in decreasing stigma towards prisoners. Other corrective-rehabilitative measures like vocational training, continuing education, or, counseling, have no or limited

scope for community sensitization. Hence, culture therapy as a tool of reformation has multiple action point, which makes it strategically powerful.

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