

Changing Culture through the Power of Narrative

Thesis

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Disclaimer: A few names have been changed to ensure confidentiality and certain
interviews mentioned in this thesis were translated from Hindi to English through an interpreter.

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Introduction

Kajal sat quietly on the mat. As she stared out the window, a few small tears trickled down her cheek. After a few minutes, the 21-year old began to tell my interpreter that she understood a few of the English words that I had previously said. She went on to say that she used to attend school at an English-Medium before her father pulled her out. She slightly smirked and said, “I used to be very smart, the top in my class. I always wanted to learn English and every day that I went to school, I would daydream of what I would one day become.” Her oldest sister was the family Khilawadi; a prostitute earning the economic livelihood for her parents and siblings. At the young age of fourteen, Kajal was told that she too would have to support the family by becoming a sex worker. She said that she used to cry and beg her father to let her go back to school with her friends, but he refused, as if this was his only option. She said that every night she would get scared because she was “forced to entertain drunks and sleep with strange men.” Eight years later, Kajal described her current state of being as “physically alive, but really dead on the inside.”

In August, 2016, I traveled to Northern India for three and a half weeks. There, I was given the opportunity to sit down and hear stories from individuals like Kajal. The purpose of my trip was to gather ethnographic research on the Banchada tribe and also conduct a small-scale program evaluation, for stateside funders, on a home for Banchada girls called the House of Palms. Some 40,000 Banchada are spread out in sixty-three villages between the districts of Ratlam, Mandsaur, and Neemuch, just north of Indore, in the state of Madhya Pradesh (Food for the Hungry). The tribe’s most well-known historical narrative is one that includes a 500-year-old tradition of selling daughters into the sex trade. Girls from the tribe are considered “diamonds”, and at the age of twelve to thirty years old, daughters are prostituted alongside trucking routes to

financially support their families. Some who are considered “better looking” will have rich patrons who provide them with a set allowance every month (Singh, “Cursed by Custom”). According to Sushil, a Food for the Hungry project coordinator, almost every Banchada living in the five villages that he oversees either has a sister, daughter, niece, aunt, or mother who is a current sex worker, better known as a “Khilawadi” (Sushil). In fact, according to a survey conducted around five years ago, approximately one out of every eight women in the community is a Khilawadi (Singh, “Cursed by Custom”). This particular cultural tradition started out as oppression from upper-class elites, but has now turned into a heartbreaking enterprise where the harm of young girls is normalized.

I was sitting in a presentation at church a few years ago when I first heard about the Banchada tribe. I remember feeling outraged and appalled that this community would so blatantly exploit their young girls. Looking back, I can see that my reaction stemmed from genuine compassion and concern, as well as my own ethnocentricity. Throughout my field work and thesis writing experience, I have learned that these particular foundations alone cannot be the grounds for culture change. There is wisdom in first seeking to understand the logic behind cultural norms that may seem controversial, in order to then evaluate if culture change is in fact needed or necessary.

I would argue that “story” serves as a powerful agent in the dissemination of norms, and thus should be a strategy considered in culture change. In order to change culture, a community must consider alternative or preferred storylines in order to transform their experience. Diving into the existing stories that surround a specific cultural norm and, from there, reframing the necessary parts, is how true transformation and social change come about.

In the case of the Banchada tribe, the dominant historical narrative allows for the selling of daughters into the sex trade. Changing the narrative of a cultural tradition that is harmful to children requires a community to leverage new stories in order to make alternatives to prostitution possible. The methods that need to be used in order to promote narrative change around the Banchada sex working tradition is contextualized human rights education, group narrative therapy, appreciative inquiry, community-led collective action, and economic logic. The theoretical framework presented at the end of the paper is built on research as well as ideas proposed by the Banchada people, in the hopes of bringing an end to child prostitution among the tribe.

The Collision of Rights & Culture

Culture is complex, but preserving human dignity is vital. When universal human rights standards collide with long-standing cultural and religious traditions, community development work can be extremely difficult to navigate. There are those who would assert that permitting international norms to override an individual's religion and culture is a violation of the sovereignty of state (Musalo). Then there are those who believe that the human rights that have been guaranteed in international conventions are universal, applying to all nation states, and must be maintained even when they conflict with cultural and religious beliefs, practices, or traditions (Musalo).

Current-day international human rights can be traced to World War II, when countries saw the need for an international consensus regarding basic human rights standards (Musalo). The majority of nations did not intervene in a timely manner, or even at all, as the Nazis killed millions of people (Musalo). The formation of the United Nations in the 1940s was a response to the Holocaust and the failure of the international community. The United Nations and associated

human-rights measures were created to ensure that an event like the Holocaust never happens again (Musalo).

Throughout the years, the UN has backed many different human rights treaties, declarations, and conventions. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was the most foundational declaration adopted. This declaration set a list of basic rights and freedoms that the international community decided to commit itself to (Musalo). The Universal Declaration has been followed by a number of treaties and conventions, one of those being the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The CRC sets out the rights that must be realized for children to develop into their full potential, free from hunger and want, neglect and abuse. Children are “neither the property of their parents nor are they helpless objects of charity” (UNICEF & the CRC). They are human beings and are the subject of their own rights. The Convention offers a “vision of the child as an individual and as a member of a family and community, with rights and responsibilities appropriate to his or her age and stage of development” (UNICEF & the CRC). The convention was adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1989, and 191 nations have since signed and ratified it (UNICEF). Since then, there have been many universal efforts made toward protecting the distinct rights of children and adolescents. Despite enthusiasm, momentum, and increased awareness, the implications and implementation mechanisms of the convention have been left up to interpretation and much debate (Miles & Wright 53).

Controversial Cultural Traditions

There are no shortcuts in achieving justice for children. Simply enforcing the implementation of rights has the potential to bring damage to complex cultural scenarios. Take

the example of female genital cutting (FGC). FGC is a procedure done to remove total or partial external female genitalia for non-medical reasons. The U.N. Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women condemns FGC as an act of violence against women and girls, and states that countries “should condemn violence against women and should not invoke any custom, tradition, or religious consideration to avoid their obligations with respect to its elimination” (Musalo 2). UNICEF estimates that close to 120 million women today have undergone female genital cutting, with over three million girls at risk each year (UNICEF & the CRC).

Cultures and communities where FGC is practiced have reasons for keeping with tradition. Many see the procedure as a cultural tradition and even a religious mandate. A major motivation is believed to “ensure that the girl conforms to key social norms, such as those related to sexual restraint, femininity, respectability, and maturity” (Garcia-Moreno 3). In many contexts, FGC is viewed as a rite of passage for the girl child, signifying the end of childhood and the beginning of womanhood. Gerry Mackie, an associated professor and co-director of the Center of Global Justice at UC San Diego, emphasizes in his research that “the communities that have been practicing FCG for centuries are not intending harm. Parents who have their daughters cut don’t want to see them hurt or disfigured, they want to assure them of being marriageable in their society, along with being respected” (Moreno 3). In the parents’ eyes, they are doing the right thing.

A three-year case study in Senegal and Gambia found that decision-making around FGC involved more than just the individual girl and her family (Kiderra 1). Understanding the social dynamics of decision-making has helped practitioners recommend that “preventative interventions include elements of community dialogue and sharing; understanding the

importance of local rewards and punishments; and a method for coordinating change among social groups that includes men and women from multiple generations within the community and related communities” (Kiderra 2). Working with the community’s distinct culture has led to lasting change. Reinforcing positive cultural values looks like supporting community dialogue aimed at finding ways to signify and celebrate a girl’s coming of age that does not involve cutting (Kiderra 3). Karisa Cloward, author of *Elites, Exit Options, and Social Barriers to Norm Change*, outlines a theoretical framework for thinking about local-level, cultural-norm change. She argues that normally high barriers to “defecting from local norms supporting Female Genital Cutting are more likely to be overcome where there are non-circumcising groups living nearby and when there are elites among the group of first movers” (Cloward 1). She talks about the characteristic of a norm, that being the social expectation of compliance. Community members who have participated in her study went through a process where they would weigh the social as well as the intrinsic costs and benefits of a choice or practice— in this case, FGC. In her study, Cloward references the “bandwagon effect,” stating that often community members will not willingly forsake a cultural practice which would go against the pressure that comes with high levels of group heterogeneity (Cloward 6).

In an article titled *Female Genital Cutting: Confronting Cultural Challenges and Health Complications*, author M. Farage reveals results from her study that focused on women’s perspectives surrounding female genital cutting in the Iraqi-Kurdistan region. She emphasized the need for bringing community narratives to light. Some of her main findings suggest that the “main provocative factor for continuation of this practice (FGC) is tradition and customs inherited in the family from mothers to daughters” (Farage 12). In cultures where oral rather than written word is emphasized, there is great importance in what is passed down from mother to

daughter, parent to child. The stories young girls are told throughout their childhood play a part in the framework in which they see themselves and their roles in society.

Positive Deviance Approach

In the early 1990's The Centre for Development and Population Activities in Egypt founded a project in an attempt to try to understand the factors that contribute to families making the decision to not cut their daughters (CEDPA). They did this because they felt as though most approaches and research focused solely on the root causes. The project was based "on the Positive Deviance Approach, a methodology that focuses on individuals who have deviated from conventional, societal expectations and have explored successful alternatives to cultural norms, beliefs, or perceptions in their communities" (CEDPA 1). Below are the questions that the CEDPA-Egypt asked a group of Positive Deviants (PDs) in hopes that the results would help them develop more realistic, contextualized strategies:

- What is the PD's opinion of FGC? Personal experiences with FGC?
- What are the reasons, events, or turning points that led the PD to reject FGC?
- Did the PD's decision to stop the practice create tension within her/his family and, if so, how did the PD deal with the difficulties encountered?
- What advice on FGC would the PD give to family or friends?
- What are the PD's ideas for community-based strategies to end FGC?
- Does the PD believe that he or she can play a role in the struggle against FGC in Egypt? If so, what would that role be?
- Is the PD aware of other community members who are not practicing FGC? Would she or he introduce them to the interviewer or other NGO staff? (CEDPA 3)

These “Positive Deviants” or “PDs” became valuable spokespeople in the CEDPA’s awareness campaigns.

The Positive Deviance Approach to behavioral and social change first appeared in research done in the 1970’s by Drs. Jerry and Monique Sternin of Save the Children. They were working in Vietnam addressing the high rates of malnutrition among children in rural villages. After completing a community-based nutrition assessment, the Sternins observed that despite abject poverty, there were small groups of families that did not have malnourished children (Myers 264). They found that these outliers were harvesting tiny crabs and shrimp in their rice fields and were adding it to their children’s daily meals. Positive Deviance Approach focuses on the observable exceptions instead of the norm that is suffering from a given problem. Positive Deviance is an “extension of Appreciative Inquiry. Normally Appreciative Inquiry focuses on the common view of the community whereas Positive Deviance focuses on the appreciative lens on the outliers who may have good news that others have not yet noticed” (Myers 266). This approach centers on tapping in to deviants in the community who have already discovered solutions to complex social systems and norms. A community is empowered when it finds innovation within rather than outside of itself (Myers 267).

Community-Led Collective Action

Individuals must come together as a group and collectively abandon harmful social norms in order for culture to change. According to Gerry Mackie, “People can change their ways, but don’t bother preaching against a culture’s conventions, or outlawing them. Neither will work—at least not for long” (Kiderra 1). Collective action is especially effective in cultures that rank low in “individualism” on Geert Hofstede’s cultural indices. According to Gert Hofstede, “collectivism represents a preference for a tightly knit framework in a society in which

individuals can expect their relatives or members of a particular in-group to look after them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. A society's position on this dimension is reflected in whether people's self-image is defined in terms of 'I' or 'We'" (Hofstede Center). The majority of countries that still practice FGC score fairly low on Hofstede's "individualism" scale, indicating that they think more as a collective (Hofstede Center).

Tostan is an organization well known for their success in rapidly accelerating the abandonment of FGC throughout large parts of Africa. The organization's mission is to empower people to claim their own basic human rights and self-worth through helping over 7,000 communities in nine different African countries publicly declare abandonment of female genital cutting and forced child marriage (Tostan). The organization's stated mission is to help empower communities to bring about sustainable development and positive social transformation, based on human rights standards, to their own families and villages. One hundred public declarations of FGC abandonment have been celebrated throughout the past fifteen years through human-rights-based education classes taught by locals and the establishment of a "Community Management Committee". These celebrations are joyous occasions where communities, after much dialogue, come together in a "process of positive, celebratory, and forward-looking, where they encourage a new norm to spread" (Tostan). They celebrate the girl child through new rites-of-passage ceremonies, elevating the positive traditions, all the while saying goodbye to the ones that have been deemed as harmful (Tostan).

Tostan's Community Empowerment model first seeks to train a facilitator who speaks the local language and is of the same ethnic group. That particular staff member lives in the community for three years. They will help establish a human rights-based education class that uses non-formal education techniques. A few techniques that ensure information is presented in

relevant, engaging ways to both educated and uneducated audiences are theater, storytelling, dance, artwork, song, and debate. During this phase, both adult and adolescent classes are held three times per week (Tostan). The classes consist of discussions on the fundamentals of democracy, human rights, and problem-solving. Phase two is literacy and numeracy learning, along with training in income-generating activities. Participants are trained in reading, writing, basic math, and management skills, so they can select, manage, and implement small projects (Tostan). All the while, a Community Management Committee is selected to help implement development projects designed by the community. The Community Management Committee serves as advocates, encouraging Tostan participants to share knowledge gained in human rights courses in their own immediate spheres of influence. The committee is also in charge of planning “Awareness-Raising Events,” “Inter-Village Meetings,” and “Public Declaration Rallies” (Tostan).

Tostan’s model has been proven successful because it encourages social change through a system that is already in place within the community (Tostan). Tostan facilitates group-based decisions and community-led action. Instead of promoting an individual to abandon FGC, Tostan works alongside the entire community. Tostan’s model can be applied to other community development efforts that are working toward changing the culture around a harmful tradition.

Much of Tostan’s Community Empowerment model was created through analyzing the strategies that were used in eradicating foot-binding, a well-known cultural practice harmful to Chinese women that was used for over 1,000 years. How did they eliminate its existence in one generation? It was through “pledge societies,” or again, collective action (Mackie 1015). Parents publicly pledged not to bind their daughters’ feet and did not promote their sons marrying women whose feet were bound. In addition to these “Natural Foot Societies,” there were also

large educational campaigns that helped to display the advantages of natural feet alongside the disadvantages that come with bound feet (Wilson 1). Unbound girls were even provided with scholarships, rewarding those families that chose to go against cultural norms (Wilson 2).

How Cultural Norms Come to Be

How do cultural norms come to be? Individuals are products of their culture and environment. From a very young age, children are thrust into a journey of being socialized by the systems put in place around them. Every person, no matter how old, is continually inheriting and interpreting customs, norms, beliefs, rules, ideas, and values that are disseminated through different relationships, systems, institutions, and structures existing in one's surrounding environment. This process is called "socialization" (Oswalt).

Urie Bronfenbrenner developed the "Ecological Systems Theory" in the 1980s which argues that an individual's entire ecological system must be taken into account in order to understand human development (Oswalt). Since birth, a child grows and develops due to the influence from the systems in play around him or her. The "microsystem" is the small, immediate system that the child lives in (Oswalt). The family unit, for example, is considered a microsystem. The "mesosystem" is how different parts of a child's microsystem work together, whereas the "exosystem" reflects the indirect influences that affect a child (Oswalt). The "macrosystem" is comprised of the cultural, religious, historical, or political values that affect a child, while the "chronosystem" represents the changes or transitions that occur in one's life, over time (Oswalt).

Addressing harmful cultural traditions that negatively impact children requires macrosystem change felt on the microsystem level. Macrosystem change is making an adjustment to the specific social norms that are behind a harmful practice. A social norm is a

rule of behavior that community members adhere to, believing that others expect them to follow suit (World Vision). Compliance is motivated by the expectations of there being social rewards for adherence to the rule and social sanctions for non-adherence (UNICEF). Cultural norms thus become the standards that we live by, highly influencing behavior. Cultural norms are made by humans, thus have the ability be altered or replaced by new norms.

Story-Based Approach to Community Development

Changing deeply embedded social norms that are entrenched in a population can be extremely tricky. If one were to pull back the layers of a social rule or convention, one would see that it is built on stories. In order to bring about change to a norm, alternative or preferred storylines need to be explored. Humans are interpretive beings who create meaning through the multiple stories we tell and believe about ourselves. Cultures are made up of stories and continue to be shaped by stories. According to Doyle Canning, author of *Reimagining Change*, “Stories are the threads of our lives and the fabric of our human cultures. As humans, we are literally hardwired for narrative” (Canning 17). In his book, Doyle references the work of Harvard University psychologist Steven Pinker. Pinker’s work shows there is growing consensus in the scientific community that the neurological roots of both storytelling and enjoyment of stories are tied to our social cognition (Canning 17). Canning believes that in order to make social changes, individuals must study their history and the institutions that are underneath the contemporary social systems at play, “as well as how these histories and institutions shape culture and ways of individually and collectively making meaning” (Canning 18). His work goes on to show that individuals understand the world and themselves through the narratives that they choose to live by and adhere to.

Narrative Therapy

There is a form of psychotherapy which seeks to help people leverage stories in order to experience personal transformation. It is called “Narrative Therapy,” and it was developed by Australian social workers Michael White and David Epston out of New Zealand in the 1970s and ’80s (Dulwich Centre). Narrative therapy is based on the theory that if we “live by stories, we change by stories” (Freeman). This type of therapy helps individuals build new storylines to live by through the process of re-visioning and re-authoring. It is a method of “making sense of the past, being in the present, while generating a positive, future-focused narrative to add to the existing” (Denborough 5).

The word “story” has different associations and understandings for different people. For narrative therapists, stories consist of: events, linked in sequence, across time, according to a plot (Denborough 15). This form of therapy focuses on the fact that a story emerges over the years as certain events and experiences are selected over others, deeming the chosen as more significant or true. We, as individuals, link these chosen stories in a sequence in order to make sense of existence (Abels 1). Paul Abels, co-author of the book *Understanding Narrative Therapy: A Guidebook for the Social Worker*, states that:

A person’s worldview is a set of fundamental beliefs, attitudes, values, and knowledge that influence a person’s comprehensive outlook on life. The fundamental sources for this outlook come from all aspects of a person’s life, including culture, family, peers, gender, religion, location, economics, and life experiences. It evolves into a frame of reference that organizes the person’s perceptions of others and the world in general (Abels 60).

People's lives are multi-storied, not single storied; therefore there are many stories that remain unrecognized and untold. Giving power to the unseen stories of our lives create new possibilities (Abels 3).

Narrative Group Therapy & Social Justice Work

Harnessing the power of narratives can be a catalyst for liberation and true change. Narrative therapy is a non-threatening, cultural-honoring method which can be applied to sensitive community development work. The Dulwich Centre has just begun to explore the question, "What is narrative justice?" (Dulwich Centre). They believe healing and justice go hand in hand. Last year, Cheryl White and David Denborough, professors from the Dulwich Centre, teamed up with the International Women's Development Agency to put on a training called "Narrative Responses to Human Rights Abuses" for women workers from Burma and Myanmar. The facilitators took the women through exercises where they had to unearth hidden stories. They had the women make an individual, family, and community timeline in the hopes that the exercise would help to unearth significant historical stories that often go ignored.

Narrative Therapy applied in a Community Development context can provide a group of people a new story that can now be lodged into their history and will serve as a supplant to the story that is already there (Freeman). Oftentimes the stories people believe about themselves have, in a sense, been written by others. People and whole communities can inherit oppressive narratives that corner them into living undesirable plots. Unfortunately, under certain conditions, many harsh and cruel stories, stories of oppression and neglect, are accepted as truth and are never questioned (Abels 161). These "problem-saturated stories" oftentimes become the "identity stories" that are internalized. Individuals and whole groups of people are left to feel helpless when this happens (Abels 160). According to David Denborough, teacher and writer for

the Dulwich Center, “conclusions drawn from problem-saturated stories disempower people as they are regularly based in terms of weaknesses, disabilities, dysfunctions, or inadequacies” (Denborough 6). Re-authoring is the process of reconstructing problem-saturated stories.

Re-authoring is the thickening of a thin oppressive storyline with new, alternative narratives that may even contradict the main story. In the book *What is Narrative Therapy*, author Alice Morgan suggests that one does this by:

1. Listening for other events and experiences that are beyond the thin oppressive and restricting storyline.
2. Speaking of the multiple possibilities of someone’s life. Identify multiple storylines at play.
3. Exploring possibilities in order to co-author a new narrative.
4. Connecting new narratives to the bigger story/dominant plot (Morgan 18).

Morgan states that “as narrative therapists listen to stories brought in, they will hear of events that fit with the problem story and events that seem to contradict or stand outside of that dominant problem story. They will hear events that seem to fit with the influence of the problem, and events that stand against the problem’s influence” (Morgan 51). The therapist pays attention to the unique outcomes by placing these new events more in the foreground of people’s consciousness (Morgan 59). These new stories may reflect resilience, or a satisfying series of experiences that can serve as a new path to reestablish a hopeful direction for the client or community (Abels 4).

The Banchada Sex-Working Narrative

During one particular village visit, I was determined to learn the origin of the Banchada people. The Banchada, according to a Sangina, a village member from Sagargram, means a “people with no roots” (Sangina). For many years, the Banchada were known as nomadic gypsies. There is a legend that has been passed on throughout generations regarding their origin as a people. The legend is told of a king from Rajasthan who abducted a low-caste girl. He used her for entertainment and pleasure. She became pregnant and was soon sent back to her people. Her people rejected her, so she began to wander from place to place. She gave birth to a daughter and settled in the outskirts of a town in Northern Madhya Pradesh (Sam). In order to avenge the king and also to make a living for herself, she sold her daughter as a sex slave to upper-caste elites. According to Sam, a father of three Banchada girls, “we as a people have looked to this legend to define our history as a people and to validate prostituting our daughters as our caste’s destined trade. . . I do not know if it is true or not, but it is what my mother told me and my sisters when we were young.” After interviewing around nine different Banchada village members in the hopes of finding out information on the tribe’s history, it became clear that the official origin of the Banchada people, as well as their tradition of selling their girls, is not fully known.

In addition to the legend Sangina shared with me, I was told of two other accounts. One version was that the Banchada people were brought to the northern part of Madhya Pradesh over 150 years ago by the British to cater to the physical needs of the soldiers at the newly established garrison (Singh, “Highway Hurdles”). Another rendition was offered by a local teacher that I met, Dr. Sehgal. He described the Banchada community as farm laborers and poor peasants, only taking on the profession of sex working to cater to their feudal countryside masters to gain access to limited land (Sehgal).

In addition to these narratives, most Banchada village elders believe the offering of daughters to the Hindu goddess Nari Mata has religious sanctioning. According to Santosh, a once devout Banchada Hindu:

There is nothing in the Hindu holy writings that condone sex working... My tribe believes that the specific caste trade has divine approval. Many have confused culture with religion, and that is where things get confusing. We were told from a young age that we are destined by God to be sex workers and pimps... This is what our parents told us because that is what they were told from their parents (Santosh).

He went on to describe the fact that his people, along with Indian society, uphold the fact that there is a set order to life and they are where they are in society due to karma, varnas, and svadharma (Santosh). They see poverty as earned, it is a sanctioned inequality bestowed by the divine. The Hindu belief system is founded on the belief that one's station has a right activity of duty and to challenge it is wrong (Myers 185).

The narrative of birth and rebirth is central to Hinduism. According to the authors of *Caste, Discrimination, and Exclusion in Modern India*, "a man's social status depends upon how he conducted himself in his previous life (or lives). From this perspective, an upper-caste Hindu is simply reaping the reward of previous virtue; while on the other hand, a Dalit is paying the price for previous sins." (Boorah 4). The concepts of fate can make social exclusion seem acceptable and natural.

One of the staff House of Palms staff members, Sam, told me that he grew up believing that his role in society and means of survival was to sell his sisters to entertain and satisfy the sexual desires of men from upper castes. This was what he was told by his father. For years,

Banchada girls and women are said to have traveled from town to town serving as street entertainers, dancers, and courtesans for the upper-castes. Through time the tribe decided to settle in the Northern region of Madhya Pradesh and chose to continue the practice by building establishments outside of their villages for the Khilawadis to work from. Due to the conservative nature of rural Northern India, Banchada women are used to keep upper-caste men in Neemuch, Ratlam, and Mandsaur from damaging the reputation of their own women (Shanta).

Up until around ten years ago, Hinduism was the only religion practiced in Banchada villages. More and more Banchada have been exposed to new worldviews through their interaction with community developers, many of whom are practicing Christians. I attended Banchada church services in Neemuch every Sunday. The church in Neemuch consisted of mostly girls and staff from the House of Palms, with around ten others from surrounding villages coming to hear. In nearby Mandsaur, there is a small Christian faith community of around thirty believers. Mona, one of the girls living at the House of Palms, told me that as she began to learn about what it means to follow Jesus, she started to understand that she was made in God's image, "So were my family, friends, and the people in my village. I always thought that sex work felt wrong and bad but now I see it is sin, or just choosing to go outside God's original plans for us" (Mona). She went on to tell me that she never questioned the religion she was raised in as a young girl by saying:

I accepted the practice of sex working; it was always seen as my people's destiny. Now I see that it is really oppression from upper castes that has just become normalized throughout the years. Many have justified the abuse and greed through their own interpretation of religion. Our people, they don't know anything else. They have continued to stay victimized and the cycle continues, year after year, generation after

generation. It is just what is accepted. No one questions it. Maybe yes we are from a lower caste, but nowhere in Hinduism did it say we no other choice but sex working. If we all had access to land, which we don't, we would farm and raise animals. It is cultural tradition and a lack of alternative options which continue this practice (Mona).

Narendra, a brother who used to pimp his sister, told me that vocational options are limited due to caste discrimination. He said that it is a struggle to find any sort of employment in nearby towns because of the social hierarchy at play. During an interview he stated, "Many of the men in the towns will laugh at me when I ask for work. They will tell me to go back and not even bother trying." Although the caste system is no longer mandated, its effects are still seen today, especially in rural areas in the north (Saranu). The Banchada tribe is classified in the untouchable caste; the people at the bottom of society, more times than not disregarded and dispensable to those who are above.

Trapped by Tradition

It is seen as a holy occasion when the eldest daughter of a family turns twelve years old. A hen is sacrificed by the family in the nearby temple, which signifies a sin offering. The family will go into town to worship the village goddess, Nari Mata, with singing and dancing. After receiving a said "blessing" from Nari Mata, the girl is inducted into the family business as an official Khilawadi (N.K. Singh, *Cursed by Custom*). She is led to a room by her father, where she will await her first customer. Since she is a virgin, the father asks for bids from interested clientele.

One night I went about five miles from the House of Palms with a couple staff members to talk to some of the girls working the roadside. When our van pulled up, two women walked

toward us thinking we were potential customers. They saw that I was a woman and quickly turned around; afraid I was some sort of official there to arrest them. A staff member called out to them and assured the girls that we were just there to briefly talk with them. We invited both of them to come to the House of Palms the next morning for tea. After five minutes had gone by, three men came out of the house and started to yell for the women to come inside. We sensed that it was time to go, and piled back into the van and drove away. There was a huge Hindu pilgrimage that week and so many men were walking alongside the streets, as well as trucks passing through, slowly pulling to the shoulder of the dusty road.

The next morning Kajal, twenty-one years old, her young son, along with Nina and her two children, entered the building to find Usha, the woman who runs House of Palms, and me. We sat down and had a conversation. Nina told me she had been working in the family business for close to nine years. She described her status as "...greater than that of a normal prostitute in the city. My position is more powerful than my younger sisters who are Bhattekwadis, those who are married off for a price... What can I say? I do it to feed my family." She continued, "You may feel sorry for me, but what other choice do I have? I am the eldest daughter... this is our tradition... our duty. This is the tradition of our mothers, our grandmothers, and our great-grandmothers."

A few days after speaking with Kajal and Nina, I visited five different mothers of girls who stay at the House of Palms. These particular mothers were former sex workers and are now living in what the tribe calls the "dark period," back inside their villages (Usha). A Khilawadi forfeits the right to marry once she is initiated into the sex trade, so after she stops working, she is left with few options. There typically isn't the social stigma that one would expect around the women integrating back, as they are usually welcomed in right away and even shown respect.

They, however, have a difficulty finding other sources of livelihood once sex working is no longer an option (Shanta). Most male customers desire younger women, so a woman will age out of the trade due to no one wanting to purchase her. Usually this occurs around the age of thirty-five+ according to Usha, who served as my interpreter during the village visits. I asked the mothers why they decided to bring their daughters to House of Palms to live and study, and one of them said that it was because “I could no longer feed her... There is no hope for me, but my daughter, she can go to school and have a better life than I have had” (Sangina). Sangina described her reality by saying that she had “four kids by four different men... None of my children know their fathers. I only went to school for two years. I don’t know how to read or write, but I want my daughters to.” I was told later that she now makes money by making and selling alcohol illegally.

In Banchada culture, the daughters who are “Bhattekwadis” will typically be married off as young as thirteen or fourteen (Shanta). If a man wants to marry a Banchada woman, he has to pay a very high dowry price, around Rs 70,000 (Singh, “Highway Hurdles”). Most men cannot afford to make the payment, so they will steal, make alcohol, or try to pimp more than one sister to make the money that is required. Due to such a high dowry price, there are many unmarried women living in Banchada villages (Suresh). The high dowry system is encouraged by the village Panchyat and the elected head, the Sarpanch, who believes that it is his duty to preserve culture. Although illegal, the dowry system continues to perpetuate the cycle of the exploitation of girls.

I asked Sam, the cultural broker for House of Palms, if he had ever witnessed law enforcement intervening, given the fact that child prostitution is illegal in the state of Madhya Pradesh. He described the situation to me by saying;

The hard reality is that there are many of the local law enforcement and government officials are corrupt. Some of the officers are paid off by Banchada men, and a few are even their most regular clientele. It all happens at night. Usually no one can tell who is a police officer and who is not. Then there are those officers who just don't care. Many think it is not worth their time to have to go to the trouble to investigate, be out at night, and then have to deal with the paperwork and legal parts (Sam).

During my stay in Neemuch, the International Justice Mission pressed local government officials to do a sting operation in two of the Banchada villages. The young girls who were working as sex workers there were taken from their villages to the local police station and then to a juvenile detention center many miles away. From there, the girls were transported to orphanages in another state since the state is required to provide rehabilitation and safe housing to minors who are victims of sexual exploitation and trafficking. One of the girls was only eleven, so she stayed behind, and a family member of one of the girls who stays at the House of Palms told me that she was being abused at the police station. Sam's wife, Julie, who has three sisters working in the sex trade, said, "Sending in police doesn't change mindsets. Yes, it makes people scared, but it doesn't stop them... Maybe for a few weeks, but then they are back again." I was informed that some Banchada men who don't have daughters have even abducted girls from train stations or purchased girls from other tribes in order to make money. Officers will typically intervene quicker if it is a potential case of child trafficking from the outside over a child groomed in to the trade by their own family (Sam).

According to Madhya Pradesh's State Commission for Protection of Child Rights, a Special Juvenile Police Unit has been established in Madhya Pradesh (National Commission for Protection of Child Rights). There is technically supposed to be one officer in every police

station, in every city, who is trained in child welfare and rights (Saranu). Prostitution of children is illegal in India under international law and the United Nation's Convention on Rights of the Child (UNICEF & the CRC). Article 34 states that "The state shall protect children under the age of 18 from sexual exploitation and abuse, including prostitution and involvement in pornography" (UNICEF & the CRC). Outside of this, prostitution is not technically illegal in India once one is of age. According to the Immoral Traffic Suppression Act a prostitute can practice their trade but cannot solicit customers in public. However, third parties can face up to two years in prison since pimping is illegal and a client can face seven to ten years of imprisonment if found guilty in having sex with a minor (someone below 18 years of age) (UNICEF & the CRC). Kajal, a current sex worker, told me that the Banchada usually hide the younger sex workers and keep them out of eye sight during the day (Kajal). She said "I would usually stay indoors when I was younger. At night time I would go out with my sisters to the roadside, but it was always so dark. I had a flashlight that would signal to men that I was available to purchase" (Kajal). I was told by a girl named Shalu who used to be a sex worker for three years, then escaped, that some young girls are even given hormone supplements to make them look older so that it is harder for officers to tell their age (Shalu). A large percentage of the sex workers do not have birth certificates, since they were not registered at birth, making it increasingly difficult to prove that a girl is underage (Saranu).

Community Development Work Among the Banchada

According to Ram Raj, a Dalit/Low-Caste Human Rights activist, "it is Madhya Pradesh's state welfare department that has failed to reach the Banchada people. They have done very little" (UCA News). There have been attempts to impose a ban on the selling of girls among the Banchada and forbidding bride price, but it has ended in much resistance and ultimately

failure (Singh, “Highway Hurdles”). The government opened two schools and two sewing centers over the past ten years, according to Ramchand Saranu, the founder of House of Palms and the base director of YWAM Indore. The sewing centers have only trained a small percentage of women, with many of them returning to sex working in the nighttime (Saranu). The government also attempted to award cash in some villages to anyone marrying Banchada girls. This is a mere short-term fix and does not address root causes. Both of these programs are largely dependent on government cash surplus, which is not predictable or dependable.

There have only been two organizations consistently working among the Banchada people throughout the past ten years. The first one is Jeevan Jyothi, a Catholic organization that provides medical care to sex workers who have HIV. Blood samples of a population of 5,500 Banchada in one district found that 18 percent of current and former sex workers and their children were found to be HIV positive (Singh, “Cursed by Tradition”). The second organization is Youth with a Mission (YWAM). It has partnered with two American churches and two non-profits in order to come alongside the Banchada community.

Three YWAM families from Andhra Pradesh moved to live among the Banchada people ten years ago. They started off by helping the people build wells and sanitation systems. The wives created kids’ clubs, because at that time, only 40 percent of Banchada children living in the villages attended school. After a year, the staff reached out to a few churches and a non-profit, World Help, in the United States to let them know of the situation and how they needed help. Soon after, YWAM staff in Neemuch received funding to start building a home for girls called House of Palms as well as a church. House of Palms offers a safe haven for over 130 Banchada children, some being children of sex workers and others being those on the trajectory of becoming future sex workers. They have chosen a child-focused approach to community

development, believing that change will come when Banchada children are educated and prioritized. They believe they can eradicate the sex working tradition through investing in the future generation. The staff provides the children with an opportunity to go to school, a safe place to sleep, food, clothes, clean drinking water, sanitation services, and a positive and loving environment where they can thrive. Parents can visit every Sunday afternoon if they so choose, and the youth are given the opportunity to go home for holidays. There are currently 12 staff members and a cook and his wife that live at House of Palms. Half of the staff members are Banchada and the other half are Indians from Andhra Pradesh.

Youth with a Mission received grant money in the spring of 2016 to be directed toward the establishment of women's self-help groups in the surrounding villages (Saranu). Self-Help Groups (SHG's) are seen as "the most popular strategy for empowering women in India. SHGs are groups of ten to twenty women initiated by a development agency, which are usually involved in savings and credit programs or advancing group members claims of rights" (DeHoop 1). Twenty-four villages are in the early stages of getting these women's self-help groups up and running. The SHG's are steered by a Village Development committee, made up of a few village members, both men and women, who have bought in to the long-term goal of eradicating sex working. They are paid a small stipend. All of the twenty-four Village Development committees attend trainings in Indore every quarter, which are facilitated by YWAM through partnership with Food for the Hungry. At the trainings, the leaders are able to share stories, struggles, and receive support. The hope is that these groups can be leveraged over time to help introduce awareness campaigns as well as trainings inside the very closed-off Banchada villages. According to Lucas Koch, Director of Public Policy at Food for the Hungry, lasting community change must "come from within, not from the outside. Not from us, Food for the Hungry. The

hope of this tribe lies in its leaders” (Koch). Andrea Danz, Asia’s Regional Programs Officer who provides SHG training, believes that the Banchada female SHG leaders have the potential to be powerful catalysts for change. She said, “Despite lack of schooling, these women want to learn. Every session, they are working hard and asking so many questions. At first they were shy and the men dominated. Slowly they are contributing to conversations and giving their input.”

New Stories & Positive Deviants

Throughout the last eleven years, new stories are being written, stories of life-transformation and hope. There are those from the Banchada community who have decided that they want a new future. I believe that the YWAM and House of Palms staff has helped establish environments where Banchada people are given the opportunity, either directly or indirectly, to critically think outside of that which they have been raised to know. The staff is vital in providing the support, guidance, encouragement, and framework necessary to Banchada individuals and families considering alternative religious, identity, and lifestyle narratives. YWAM and House of Palms provide these positive deviants or those who are curious, with a safe place to examine, contemplate, question, and even challenge their culture, religion, and worldviews. Such places are the children’s home, newly established primary and secondary schools, women’s self-help groups, discipleship training schools, and new Christian faith communities. Every positive deviant that I interviewed, who had made a decision to question the oppressive inherited sex working narrative, was connected to one, if not all of the safe places mentioned above. These places and the staff members there cast vision for a new identity story to consider. The discipleship training school and Christian fellowships share God’s big story as well as the Gospel, which is foreign to many. The children’s home and local schools give kids the ability to see life beyond their villages and culture and the women’s self help group promotes

alternative lifestyles to adopt. The unique stories of these positive deviants are compelling and, as they are shared, have the potential to bring about even more change.

Stories like Sam and Julie's, a Banchada couple who entered an arranged marriage when they were only twelve years old. Sam made money by making alcohol and stealing, and Julie came from a family where three of her sisters were sex workers. The couple prayed to their village's goddess for girls so that they would be set financially. Julie eventually had three daughters.

Julie got very sick one day. Sam was at a loss because he had no money to pay for the surgeries and medicine that his wife needed in order to stay alive. He was scared he was going to lose her and didn't know where to turn. He found two of the missionaries who had been staying in his village building water wells, and asked them for help. The couple prayed for Julie and the next day she was miraculously healed. Sam and Julie were left speechless. The missionary couple invited them to come on as staff at the House of Palms. They now go into the surrounding villages to serve as cultural brokers in community-development efforts. Even though village members think that they are foolish for not selling their daughters, they still give them a platform to speak.

There are stories like Sanu. Sanu is Julie's niece. She heard about House of Palms and begged her mother, who is a sex worker, to let her go live at the home and attend school. Every time she goes back to her village during the holidays, her mother asks her to drop out of school to enter the sex trade, but Sanu refuses and tells her mother that she will call Childline (a hotline children can call if they are in distress) if her mother tries to force her. She has dreams of becoming a good police officer who will help put a stop to sex working. Sanu is a change agent. She said in an interview, "I go around my village convincing others to send their girls to

school...I say the ways of sex working are over. Do not sell your girls; educate them” (Sanu). She has many ideas for women’s economic-empowerment projects that could be implemented to give alternatives to families who feel they have no other choice but to sell their daughters.

Shalu was a child prostitute from ages thirteen to sixteen. One day she had enough. She packed her things and ran away, eventually seeking refuge at the House of Palms. Through long negotiations with her parents, House of Palms staff convinced them to let her stay at the home and attend school. She now is the oldest girl at the home and serves as a mentor, assisting young girls with their schoolwork. She is considering going to nursing school so that she can come back and help those like Rani, an eleven-year-old whom she befriended at the House of Palms who is now a carrier of the HIV virus. She and staff member Shanta have a dream of “opening up beauty salons in villages as a way to build relationship with current sex workers who feel trapped with no way out.” (Shanta). She also has big dreams of using her nursing schooling to open up a small clinic for sex workers who have HIV.

Vidhya and Sakshi are sisters I got to know well during my time in Neemuch. Although Vidhya is the oldest girl from her family, she never had to go into sex working. Vidhya described her father and mother’s stance by saying, “Even though we have a lot of girls in my family, my mother and father decided that this would be the generation they stopped sex working... My dad always said growing up that he would rather starve than sell us... He said he lives with enough guilt for seeing what his sisters had to endure” (Vidhya). In an interview he shared that many men will pressure him by saying, “Your girls are so beautiful... you could be making a lot more money” (Ramesh). The fact of the matter is that sex working brings families ten times the amount of money compared to the average field working or textile job (Food for the Hungry).

Their father may struggle to make ends meet, but he believes educating his girls and believing in their future will be worth it in the long run.

Then there is Narendra and his brothers from a Banchada village called Sagargram. His mother was a sex worker until he convinced her to get out of the trade. He and his brothers found a means to support the family financially through farming jobs in a local town. Since he never knew his father, he took it upon himself to be the man of his family. His mother wanted to put her daughter, Neelum, into the trade, but Narendra wouldn't let her. Instead, he found a way to get his sister's school fees paid so that she could get an education. She is in her last year at nursing school. Narendra is now assisting Food for the Hungry and YWAM in an effort to help establish savings/self-help groups in his village. He has helped start a small sanitary-napkin-making business at House of Palms. There is a large room at the top of the home. He brings women there every week and trains them in how to assemble the materials, use the machinery, and make the napkins. The women are then able to sell and distribute those in local villages in order to have a source of income so they don't have to rely on sex working. One of the House of Palms staff members describes Narendra as having "... a big heart. He continues to bring more and more women here to learn the skills needed to make the products, so they have something to sell. He truly cares for the women in his village. He is one of a very few men who want to see the women strong" (Vanya).

There are teenage boys like Shobbash and Lukosh from the Banchada village called Karin Puria. They told me that they stopped going to school and instead would drink all day. They would make money by stealing. Every week Sam, a staff member at House of Palms, would come to their village to visit. He started to build a relationship with the two boys and eventually he shared his testimony and the Gospel with them. They trusted what Sam had to say

because he was a respected Banchada and had a similar background. The boys decided that they wanted to forsake their Hindu religion to follow Jesus and ever since then Lukosh said that their worldview has slowly begun to change. They come every Sunday to a small gathering of Banchada believers at the House of Palms. When I met Shubbash and Lukosh, they were a part of a group of 26 new believers traveling to Indore to attend a discipleship training school for seven months. In a state where only 0.01% of the population is Christian, the Banchada people, according to the Joshua Project, have been listed as an “unreached peoples group” up until the past ten years (Saranu). Lukosh told me that “my village, from the outside, looks like a place for the poor, the criminals, and a god-forsaken place. God has not forgotten about us. There is much evil there, but God is also there” (Lokesh).

All of these stories point to individuals who have chosen to break barriers by re-authoring new stories that go against the oppressive narratives they have inherited throughout the years. None of them can erase history and start from scratch, but they can choose to live from alternative storylines for not only themselves but their families and the generations to come. They are “positive deviants” who have, for various reasons and motives, chosen to go against the tradition of sex work that has been associated with the Banchada tribe for centuries (CEDPA-Egypt). These stories and storytellers can be leveraged in efforts toward large-scale, community-wide, culture change.

Changing the Narrative Around Sex Working - A Theoretical Framework

This section is a proposed theoretical framework to help promote narrative change among the Banchada tribe. Although top-down pressure through legislation and government intervention is needed, for the sake of this paper I will focus solely on a ground-level, bottom-up, targeted approach centered on community driven solutions. After all, it is the “people-powered

grassroots movements that are locally owned, led by those who are most directly affected, that are the engines of true social progress” (Canning and Reinsborough 12). This framework is based on a compilation of ideas from the Banchada people themselves along with models and strategies derived from a review of literature.

Prioritization of Contextualized Human Rights Education

I pulled together a focus group consisting of approximately sixteen Banchada community leaders who had come to Indore for training on the savings group model. During the discussion, the topic was brought up regarding the need to educate the Banchada communities on human rights. The fact is, universal standards provide helpful parameters, but if they are never contextualized or applied, then what good are they? One Banchada leader spoke up and shared there were a few organizations throughout the years that would come into their villages to try to do community-development work. Their communication with the tribe was filled with lots of judgment and assumptions, which had an extremely negative effect (Saranu). One organization, for example, set up classes to educate the community on the international human rights standards in hopes that it would help toward ending sex working, but none of the village members attended. The trainings were not contextualized and the organizations had not put in the work to build rapport with the community leaders for initial buy-in. According to Sam, “The trainings were all done by outsiders who didn’t spend enough time in the community to first learn local culture. They did not choose to go through established local community leaders but instead wanted to do it all themselves. It was obvious that they were there to push their agenda until grant money ran out” (Sam). There was agreement within the focus group that many parents and older community members in the Banchada community have never been educated on their rights and freedoms, and need to be made aware.

The group, generally speaking, believed it would be beneficial to have classes or group dialogue regarding human rights for both Banchada adults and adolescents. This could be done in creative ways, through dance performances, debates, storytelling, and skits. Just like the situation described in the Tostan model, many of the village members cannot read or write, so creativity was important. The idea was presented of starting small and designing classes to be piloted first for the girls at House of Palms, and for a few of the kids' clubs in the villages, and then among any of the established women's village Self-Help Groups.

Narrative Group Therapy and Appreciative Inquiry

Building off contextualized human rights education, the next step would be building in some psychological methodology, in particular, basic principles of Narrative Therapy, into the classes. The change management approach of Appreciative Inquiry and Positive Deviance would need to be explored, done in a culturally sensitive way of course.

With Narrative Therapy, the group facilitator would need to first help the group acknowledge the "problem-saturated story" or the "oppressive narratives" that have become the people's "identity stories" (Abels & Leib 33). Studying our historical narratives is not just about finding out what happened, but also to discover who we are (Myers 206). Through mapping exercises the group can reflect on the origin of how problem-saturated stories came to be. From there, dissect the narrative through critical thinking and questioning exercises. There then would need to be time to consider other stories that are in the community but not always prioritized or talked about. This is where Positive Deviants can be brought in. In order to reassess, revision, reframe, and re-author, there would need to be a time set aside to consider new stories, community strengths, and untapped community reservoirs. Appreciative Inquiry is a solid strategy to use to help the tribe decode and demystify their social systems and sanctions. From

there they would be able to construct their own reality and take ownership of it moving forward (Myers 249).

Appreciative Inquiry is an effective way of getting people to talk about the positive unexplored potential of their communities. It centers on the assets, strengths, resources, and opportunities that exist in a living system. A more traditional approach to community development would be to first look at a felt need or problem, make a diagnosis, and then arrive at a solution to fix that problem or deficit. Appreciative Inquiry, on the other hand, leverages the positive, which eventually leads to societal change.

Appreciative Inquiry is a four-stage process. The first stage is “Discover.” Discovery has to do with appreciating, as a group, the strengths and the best of “what is” (Hammond 29). Stage two is “Dreaming.” This stage centers on envisioning what “might be” (31). Stage three is “Design,” which is essentially constructing the ideal and planning out how to get there, and stage four is “Delivery,” which centers on implementation (33).

I asked permission from Ramchand Saranu, the Base Director of YWAM Indore and Suresh Pallegago, Director of House of Palms, if I could do a trial run of Appreciative Inquiry with a small group of youth and staff at the House of Palms. In the course of my three-and-a-half-week stay, I was able to try out both the “Discover” and “Dream” phases with the selected group. Although my interpreter did an excellent job, one of the greatest challenges was the language barrier. Needless to say, I was still able to gather insightful information.

In the “Discover” phase, people are supposed to share high-point stories, discuss core life-giving factors, and think through the aspects of their community history that they most value and want to bring to the future. Participants come to know their community history as a positive

possibility rather than a static, problematized, romanticized, or forgotten set of events (Hammond 45).

The “Dreaming” phase involves envisioning more valued and vital futures and end results. This includes designing the social and technical architecture necessary to support the collective dream. Since images of the future emerge out of grounded examples from a positive past, they are compelling and trustworthy possibilities. In both cases, the inspiring stories are used to create a portrait of possibility (Hammond 45).

Some of the themes that were culled during the ‘Discovery’ stage of Appreciative Inquiry with the group were as follows:

Our people are very entrepreneurial. We like to make money and we think very business-minded. Even though for bad reasons, the men and women who sell girls are savvy in negotiation and deal-making (Mona).

Traditional dancing, storytelling, and singing are important to our community and a strategic avenue for communicating messaging (Julie).

Many Banchada women have strong camaraderie and strength. Empowered women in the community are starting to show themselves and speak out (Mona).

Our people love to wear colorful saris and vibrant jewelry. There are a few very talented seamstresses living in the communities (Sam).

We, as a people, have always taken pride in observing religious celebrations. Regardless of financial standing, the people always celebrate and participate in the rituals. During this time, the people are very hospitable and make really good food” (Neelum).

Since there was some difficulty with cultural barriers, I switched focus and asked the participants to draw a picture of a time when they saw good among their fellow Banchada people. At this time, some of the staff had to attend to an unexpected emergency, so I continued the exercise but with just with youth participants. I asked them to draw or write about the things they see as beautiful about their culture and people. I then asked them to draw a picture or write about the strongest Banchada people they knew, in addition to those they saw as being most successful. Finally, I asked them to draw a picture of their dream for their families and community.

Examining the pictures of the “good” seen in their villages, some of the youth drew pictures of their parents letting their children go to school, times when they shared food, and times when they were helpful to their neighbors. One boy drew a picture of a neighbor’s house leaking during the monsoon season and people helping him fix his roof. One girl, Bulbul, drew a picture of a girl being strong and standing up for another friend in a time of trouble. Two girls drew their mothers and described that they have given them permission to attend school. Another young girl drew a picture of people singing in a church with the music going out in to the village. All of the people were smiling.

Regarding the beauty question, one child drew pictures of women in colorful saris dancing to music. Others drew pictures of their families walking to the market to get food, emphasizing the luscious green scenery as well as cows along the roadside. One girl drew a picture of all of her friends at the House of Palms.

When I asked what their dreams for their community were, one said she didn’t want there to be any more sex working and others agreed. Another said that she liked living at the House of Palms, but she wishes she could be with her family. Many drew food to eat, money so they would no longer be poor, and dreams of traveling to visit a big city, far away from the Neemuch

countryside. A few said they wished that people would no longer suffer or be sick. Some of the older girls presented their idea to open a beauty shop in town to provide training and jobs for girls. One girl said she wished people from her village knew that God loved them.

Usha, my interpreter, the wife of Suresh who runs the home, shared with me that they, as staff at House of Palms, never do these types of things with the children or village members. With limited staff, they are constantly in survival mode. She said it would be wise to shift from always talking about the problems and negatives to consider new, hope-filled stories, along with individual and collective dreams for the future. Most of the time the staff is so focused on providing the basic necessities that they do not have time nor do they always know how to engage with the children in this way.

This pilot run showed me as well as the staff that Narrative Group Therapy and Appreciative Inquiry are strategies worth exploring. I believe that the community would benefit in engaging in this type of exercise. One of the benefits would be a sense of hope and momentum felt amongst the people participating. I asked one of the staff members what the exercise was like for them. Julie said “usually when we talk about our tribe it is all focused on the problems, the bad, sex working, stealing, alcohol, greed. These classes helped us see the good, the strength of our people. Many of the people were smiling and laughing. Our people need these types of things. They feel like victims and don’t ever want to change. Listening to the children gave me hope that our people can eventually change. They are changing” (Julie). Narrative Therapy and Appreciative Inquiry in a group setting allow for new norms and stories to be elevated and spread.

Community-Led Collective Action

In order for new, alternative norms to be spread, community-led collective action is needed. Sustainable change is made when people begin to believe in a community's capacity to understand their situation, solve their own problems, and help build toward an envisioned future. After youth and adults have gone through human rights education, Narrative Group Therapy, and Appreciative Inquiry, the next step is to begin moving forward in implementing a plan to bring forth collective action and awareness. Some of the women I talked with who are key leaders in establishing Self-Help Groups in their villages have the idea to put on a large rally or festival and have performances and entertainment, along with strategic storytelling, in order to highlight of the change coming from House of Palms and the Women's Self-Help Groups. Many of the youth want to paint their dreams and visions for the future on a mural for the community to see. Sanu believes if they were to "make the area around their villages beautiful, with important messaging, maybe it would show that the younger generation is wanting change" (Sanu). She continued to say "we are learning that we are made in the image of God, we have a purpose, we have worth, we have a voice... other women need to see and hear our stories" (Sanu). Positive deviants rallying together and sharing their stories is just what the community needs, according to the girls from the House of Palms and the women from the Self-Help Groups. People do not often hear of the alternatives and so there is no pressure to critically think and consider the true rationale for why they are continuing to adhere to the tradition.

Another idea was for the parents who have chosen to not sell their girls, just like parents forsaking the tradition of cutting their girls, to band together and spread the message that there are those in the tribe who feel strongly about abandoning the tradition. There was even the thought of re-branding the traditional rites of passage ceremony for the eldest, keeping a similar

format, but instead making the ceremony about the importance of sending girls to school instead. When considering the short term, it may feel like a huge sacrifice to many, but assurance comes from knowing that they are not alone and that their choice will benefit their family line in the long run. Sushil, Food for the Hungry Project Manager, stated that many of the Village Development Committee leaders are pushing on the village panchayat to do away with the dowry system all together or at least put measures in place to keep the dowry price affordable for families. Collective pressure and action is what is continually needed.

Economic Empowerment and Alternative Livelihood Projects

In terms of future direction, many of the community leaders have voiced concerns over the fact that nothing is being done to provide skilled training and economic empowerment projects for the people. If the community could invest in helping Banchada women find other sources of reliable income, intergenerational prostitution in low-caste communities could very well be eliminated.

Faveri, Wilson, and Shaikh's work with case studies of women in economic empowerment projects in rural parts of Ghana, Pakistan, and Afghanistan showed that women's access to economic resources and opportunities cannot be an end in itself (Faveri 11). Their research points to the vital role that men's participation plays in women's economic empowerment programming. Faveri states, "A contextual understanding of how women and men interact in their communities, the roles that women play, the social and cultural barriers, and opportunities to women's full participation in market systems are critical to designing strategies that will maximize outcomes for women" (Faveri 13). She believes that women-centered economic empowerment efforts must take on a gender-transformative approach which challenges

inequitable gender norms (Faveri 13). Men and women must equally be brought in on the process.

In *Linking Social Entrepreneurship and Social Change*, author Helen Haugh examines the relationship between empowerment, social change, and entrepreneurship. She states, “Entrepreneurship is increasingly considered to be integral to development; however, social and cultural norms impact the extent to which women in developing countries engage with, and accrue the benefits of, entrepreneurial activity” (Haugh 643). She collected data from forty-nine members of a social enterprise in a rural community in Northern India that sells handicrafts made by impoverished women to local, regional, and international markets (Haugh 650). A key challenge this project faced was figuring out how to get men on board, and thus change in their attitudes toward women and paid work.

Banchada men view their women as the breadwinners. That assumption needs to be exposed, examined, and discarded. Men and village elders must be challenged to reassess their perspective. Unless this is done first, livelihood projects will fail in the long run. That is why human rights education, appreciative inquiry, narrative therapy, and collective action must be offered alongside alternative livelihood projects for both men and women.

The tribe also needs training to develop skills to start small businesses. The idea was proposed to extend services to reach out to adults through building a skill and education center. This building would host all different classes that would give the Banchada the skills and training they need to find alternative sources of income to support their families. With the help of savings groups in villages, women and men could take out small loans to get them started, with the hope of eventually bringing in a larger microfinance agency once the model has been proven

successful. Alternative narratives and norms spread by positive deviants open the door to alternative sources of livelihoods, leading to true, sustainable, and holistic change.

Personal Reflection

Qualitative Research Methods was one of my favorite graduate classes. In the course we were assigned a riveting read by Seth Holmes called *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies: Migrant Farmworkers in the United States*. For one and a half years full-time, Holmes used the classic “anthropological research method of participant observation in order to understand the complicated issues of immigration, social hierarchy, and help” (Holmes 3). He immersed himself in the everyday lives of Mexican migrants whose labor is indispensable to the modern day American food system (Holmes). Along with participant observation, he also tape-recorded conversations and interviews along the way. I had his example in mind as I crafted plans for my own fieldwork experience.

I went in to my fieldwork curious, wanting to be fully immersed in the culture. I did not want to be with a team from the United States or stay at a hotel, but rather at the House of Palms and live amongst the girls and be out and about in the villages. When I arrived, Madhya Pradesh had put down even tighter restrictions on Christian evangelism. Although that was not my intent for the trip, there were officials at the airports and in towns that were suspicious of me being there. To guard the well-being of the staff there and to also consider my safety, I was limited in where I could go and who I could talk to. Regardless of restrictions, I was still able to experience so much. Many of the staff took risks in having me visit the closed-off Banchada villages that they had worked so hard to build relationships in. It was a stretching experience to always try and be cognizant and aware of how I was presenting myself and if it was done in a culturally honoring, humble manner. I believe that anytime we step in to a culture, in to the stories others

have given us access to, it is an extremely sacred moment. The whole time, I was in awe of what I was allowed to witness and hear.

My fieldwork was a deeply rewarding and rich learning experience but also emotionally taxing and heavy. I felt like I was living in the constant tension of seeing beauty and hope on one end but also extreme suffering and injustice at play all around me. I would spend a morning in a village where I physically felt the weight of bondage on me. I often felt spiritually attacked and I constantly would need to cry out to God to carry me through so I did not break down in tears. I would transition from being in some of the worst poverty that I have ever seen, talking with former sex workers or to pulling up to the House of Palms and being greeted by hugs and smiling girls who were excited to tell me about what they learned at school.

After I adjusted from initial culture shock, I began to acclimate. I ate whatever was served at the home or in the villages, I took cold bucket showers with limited water, I dressed however they told me, and I had to contend with the power constantly going out due to it being monsoon season. The language barrier was extremely difficult but I am thankful for the patience and dedication of the woman who interpreted for me and also those who I interviewed. I found myself picking up the language and my heart so desired to stay longer. Less than four weeks is only a slight scratch on the surface of beginning to understand the complexity of a culture and the traditions that go with it.

If I am being honest with myself, I am still processing all that I saw and heard. For a long time, I didn't want to. I in a sense am haunted from the nighttime scenes where I witnessed firsthand young girls being solicited for sex. Girls climbing in to trucks to have sex with random men and then walking out ten minutes later to sit back on their wooden bed, waiting for the next. There was one moment when I was outside of our van and I looked to my right and saw a young

girl, she had to be no older than 14-years old. She had on bright red lipstick, a colorful sari, and her eyes locked with mine. Her face is singed in to my memory. She looked at me as if she was trapped and was longing for a way out. A woman walked past her, grabbing her arm and yanking her away. She looked back over her shoulder and then disappeared into the darkness. I could not write for days after that evening. I have come to peace with the fact that there are moments and experiences that are sometimes too deep for words themselves.

Conclusion

In the words of Patrick Reinsborough and Doyle Canning, authors of *Re:Imagining Change*, “Story-based strategy helps us to understand the story we are trying to change, identify the underlying assumptions that allow that story to operate as truth, and find the points of intervention in the story where we can challenge, change, and/or insert a new story” (Canning & Reinsborough 28). Behind harmful cultural traditions lie stories. True change comes when communities realize the harm that can come from living from one single story, especially when that story is inherently damaging. The Banchada have slowly started to consider alternative stories for their tribe thanks to the bold, courageous, and empowered positive deviants who have refused to conform to the oppressive sex-working narrative they have inherited. According to Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and humanize. Stories can break the dignity of the people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity” (Adichie). True and lasting change comes when we rise up and begin to replace the stories that hurt with stories that heal and bring hope.

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