Freire, Communications and Tolerance in India

Freire, Comunicação e Tolerância na Índia

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ABSTRACT

This article explores Freire's continuing relevance to education and cultural action in India. It engages with the specificities of Freire's contributions reviewing the work of two key Indian pedagogists, Tagore and Gandhi. It deals with Freirean thought in the specific context of Indian politics characterised by hypernationalism. Drawing from the author's experiences with the praxis of popular theatre, the article deals with challenges posed by critical education in contemporary India, during a pandemic that has highlighted the lack of access to education and the digital divide. It reinforces the need of understanding context and of an enlightened approach to an education that fosters tolerance as a counter to hypernationalism.

Keywords: Freire, popular theatre, digital divide, Tagore, Gandhi

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RESUMO

Este artigo explora a contínua relevância de Freire para a educação e a ação cultural na Índia. Aborda as especificidades das contribuições de Freire, revendo as obras dos principais pedagogos indianos, Tagore e Gandhi. Trata, ainda, do pensamento freiriano na conjuntura específica da política indiana, caracterizada pelo hipernacionalismo. A partir das experiências do autor com a práxis do teatro popular, o artigo discute os desafios da educação crítica na Índia contemporânea, no contexto de uma pandemia que escancarou a falta de acesso à educação e a exclusão digital. O artigo reforça a necessidade de compreensão do contexto e de uma abordagem esclarecida para uma educação que promova a tolerância como contraponto ao hipernacionalismo.

Palavras-chave: Freire, teatro popular, exclusão digital, Tagore, Gandhi

INTRODUCTION

I T IS QUITE extraordinary to think that in 1978, the then government of India actually invited Freire to help with their plans to think through and expand adult education. This was when Freire was in exile and at the World Council of Churches in Geneva. While Freire did meet with representatives of the State and with non-governmental organisations (NGO), there is little that has been documented of his time in India. His legacy, however, has been quite extraordinary. His writings have been translated into many Indian languages, his ideals live on in the work carried out by social and cultural activists throughout India, and even today, debates on the relevance and irrelevance of adult education in India allude to Freire's contributions. Siddartha (n.d.), a well-known NGO activist who worked with Pipal Tree in India describes Freire's influence on NGOs in rural Tamilnadu, South India in the 1970s and 80s:

> I remember the time twenty five years ago, when I went to villages around Villupuram, three hours from Chennai, where young dalits were regularly meeting to understand the ideas of Freire. A few university-educated activists from Chennai helped to translate these ideas into Tamil. It was truly a period of hope. In a few months local struggles against caste oppression had began to erupt all over the area. In the years that followed these ideas spread all over the state. At about the same time similar local movements began to develop all over South India, and shortly thereafter in the North as well. Freire's books were translated into all the major Indian languages, and widely read among social activists. Things would never be the same for dalits, tribals, slum-dwellers, and other excluded communities. (pp. 2-3)

This article will explore Freire's relevance in contemporary India, in particular on popular communications. The phrase *popular communications* does not translate well into Indian languages, unlike it does in Latin America, since it is associated with Bollywood cinema and traditions of Indian film music. Nevertheless, Freire's ideas and ideals did filter through civil society and the NGO movement, and there are records of a Freire symposium in Bombay (now Mumbai) in 1973 (Fonseca, 1973). The influence of his ideas on the praxis of popular communications was derived from Freire's seminal thoughts on the theory and practice of adult education and, in particular, the creation of awareness, the making of critical consciousness and communication as the means to resist domination and the basis for contestation, struggle, and solutions. While Freire's influence on cultural activism in India was widespread in the 1980s and, in particular, in NGOs that were involved in awareness-raising and in the uses

of popular communications, such as popular theatre in grassroots activism, his influence today, while not that apparent, does surface occasionally when there are discussions on the need for universal education and the digital divide in the context of education in pandemic times.

The issues related to critical learning and critical education have become sharpened in the context of what has predominantly become online education characterised by a distancing between the teacher and students. The lack of digital access to education for millions of students in rural India has led to their further marginalisation (Gupta, 2021). This gap reflects the drawbacks of populist politics in India and the gaps between ideological promise and institutional performance in education in India. Having said that, Zinnia Mevawala's (2020) *Critical Consciousness, Social Justice and Resistance*, an account of street children and cultural action in Mumbai offers one of the most comprehensive accounts of using Freirean methods in awareness-raising and conscientisation in India. She specifically explores the uses of dialogue and informal conversation, drawing and storytelling, and child-led photography and tours (pp. 124-128), and recommends the need for a move away from banking forms of education;

> the importance of Indian educators recognising and valuing counter-discourses and oppositional worldviews emerging from children's own lived experiences and perspectives are paramount. Moreover, it is recommended that all educators be supported to value counter-discourses and oppositional worldviews as advocates of possibility and human agency. In particular, it is recommended that educators working with subaltern and oppressed groups are supported to engage with pedagogies of indignation, that is, that theoretical tools are provided to children, educators and communities to facilitate shared investigation of the multiple forms of oppression experienced by the students and communities. (Mevawala, 2000, p. 279)

This article will deal with the continuing relevance of Freirean ideas related to cultural action, tolerance, and humanity in a context in which hyper Hindu nationalism has effaced the reasons for commonalities across the divides that exist in contemporary India. It will be based in five parts: 1) situating Freire within the political economy of India; 2) exploring his contributions against that of two key Indian pedagogists, the Nobel Prize-winning nationalist Rabrindranath Tagore, and Mahatma Gandhi; 3) situating Popular Theatre within the context of Political Theatre in India; 4) reflections on the uses of Freirean ideas in the cultural struggles in the 1980s that I had explored in the context of my doctoral work; and 5) situating Freire in the context of the persistence of major divides in India, including the digital divide, and the continuing relevance of his thoughts

to the critical need for dialogue and tolerance in India. I have explicitly attempted to link Freire's contributions to Tagore's and Gandhi's precisely because both these nationalists had a vision of universal education for all Indians. However, and unlike Freire, learning for them was explicitly linked to an education that was primarily culturally relevant, to a freedom through education that was imaginatively constructed in the confluence of Culture and Nature (Tagore), and that was rooted in the local (Gandhi). Freire emphasised the connections between learning and an education that was a precursor to radical social change. I have also tried to connect past and present, Freire then and Freire now, although the politicisation of education and social change today in India in the context of hypernationalism does suggest the need for re-imagining Freire's relevance, and reinvent communications strategies linked to popular struggle. The article deals with the digital divide precisely because affordable access to smartphones, laptops, and the internet are critical to the praxis of education today.

THE CONTEXT

To begin with – we simply have to deal with the context and political economy of India in the 1970s. When Freire visited India in the late 1970s, the country had just about emerged from being under a national *Emergency* (1975-77), a period of autocratic rule during which time Mrs Indira Gandhi of the Congress Party ruled India with an iron fist. Her political opponents were jailed, and journalists who wrote against her abrogation of the Constitutional rights of citizens were incarcerated while there were numerous cases from around the country of deaths in custody. The coalitional government (Janata) that unseated her in 1977 consisted of a curious mixture of the Left and the Right but who were committed to India becoming an independent nation and who were broadly in favour of the restoration of civil and political rights. This was also a period when Social Action Groups (SAG), an euphemism for non-governmental organisations (NGO), began to expand their operations in India. These SAGs ranged from those involved in mainstream developmental work to those who were ideologically committed to radical social change. This expansion of SAGs in India coincided with the expansion in the funding of such groups by international NGOs, mission agencies and foundations. India was a net recipient of foreign development aid – and, to some extent, the expansion of non-state development was a reflection of the fact that the State, despite its investments in planned, *dirigiste* development, did not have the capacities or resources to invest in development for all. The history of the NGO movement in India needs to be viewed in this context. The involvement of NGOs, however, had its detractors.

The Left, in particular, and the organised Communist parties who were of the opinion that NGOs were part of a neo-imperialist project committed to the advancement of Western imperialism. There were major debates on the space and place of NGOs and non-State actors in the development of India in the pages of India's most prominent journal – the *Economic and Political Weekly* – and other publications.

So, what did the more *progressive* NGOs bring to the table that was different to what the State and established parties had to offer in the development space? I think what they fundamentally brought was an attitude towards development, an understanding of development and its objectives, and the role played by citizen's in their own development. The latter was a significant departure since the established Left also had a reputation for being top-down in their approach. In a hierarchical society that was divided by many markers of identity, including caste and class, the leadership of Left movements also reinforced this caste and class divide. In the state of West Bengal, for example, where the Left ruled for close to three decades, their leaders were often described as the *Bhadralok* – educated, upper-class and caste elite. NGOs, in all their myriad permutations, brought flexibility and creativity to development. They enabled solutions in development that were outside of the box, as it were, and that I think were a significant departure from the norm. While progressive NGOs were by no means inured from the grand narratives of progress, such as the overthrow of the bourgeoisie by the working classes, their focus on local development, local capacities based on education, and awareness raising was different primarily because they invested in participation as a process, and because they invested in people deciding for themselves on development trajectories. Getting people to think for themselves in order to act was a major challenge since this was not the norm in a context in which the *banking* model of education, along with *tradition*, reinforced the status quo. So, in a fundamental sense, Freire's thinking humanised radical thought in India, in particular that stemming from Marxism by enabling and facilitating ordinary voices to be heard, recognised, and factored into the making of their own development. Freire's ideas on education contributed to the making of agency – and this was a radical departure, a freedom that was hitherto denied to most people in India.

FREIRE AND RABRINDRANATH TAGORE

Freire's ideas on education can be contextualised within a consideration of the more progressive variants of education in India associated with two nationalists,

Rabrindranath Tagore (1861-1941), and Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948). Tagore was among the early Indian anti-colonial nationalists who articulated a vision for education that was a blend of the East and its spiritual humanism, and the West – the scientific temper associated with the West. Ghosh et al. (2011), in an article on Tagore and education, compare his approach to Freire's:

> Freire tried to get away from "banking education" in which "knowledge" is deposited, while Tagore wanted education to be a process of absorption, not a process of filling the child's mind with "knowledge" from the books. Similarly, both of them saw the importance of removing ignorance which was the cause of poverty and vulnerability. (p. 67)

Tagore's concept of education was operationalized through Shantiniketan, a school that has an iconic status in the history of education in India given its emphasis on experiential learning that is centered around the use of the imagination and deep correspondences between Nature and Culture. His learning emphasized naturalism, humanism, internationalism, and idealism – and the self-realization of these ideals in organic ways – the education of the senses and that of the intellect. While learning at Shantiniketan certainly is different from the standard learning route practiced in both colonial and post-colonial India, its focus was on developing rounded students who would go on to serve the nation in its project of nation-building. It was certainly not an education that was meant to question the prevailing system or provide the intellectual means to resist, combat, and overthrow systems such as caste that was, and still is, the architecture for social relationships and sociality in India. As an enlightened scholar, academic, aesthete, and poet, Tagore did address some of the sins of the caste system in his writings, although, as Tapan Basu has observed, this did not result in his wanting to dismantle the system. To Tagore, caste was integrally Indian, and while he fought against its more heinous manifestations, it was a basic principle on which Hindu society was based. In the words of Tapan Basu (2012),

> this liberated man – who deliberately and cavalierly defied the taboos of caste in his own life – demurred at attributing transgressive subjectivity of the same order to caste-tormented people within his own narratives. . . . Tagore's stories about outcastes in general and untouchables in particular were inevitably "narratives of suffering". His subalterns do not rebel. (p. 169)

FREIRE AND MAHATMA GANDHI

Tagore's contemporary Mahatma Gandhi was also a fierce anti-colonialist whose entire approach to the challenges of development in post-colonial India was based on a going back to the best of tradition. Unlike Tagore, who believed in a Modernity that was tempered by the traditions of India, Gandhi's ideals related to growth and development in post-colonial India by going back to village India that, to him, represented simplicity, living within one's means, frugality and humanity. This vision was at odds with that of the first Prime Minister of Independent India, Jawarhalal Nehru, who was committed to modernizing India. Gandhi opposed colonial education, wrote extensively on the purpose of education, and worked towards a New Education – Nai Talim – that was fundamentally aligned to vocational training and employability, but that was based on clear correspondences between the dignity of manual and mental labour. Gandhi's emphasis on employability and holistic education has left a lasting impression, and India's New Education Policy (2020) continues to have this dialogue with Gandhian thought. As Jaydev Jana (2020) notes, Gandhi's "educational scheme was nationalistic in setting, idealistic in nature; pragmatic on the one hand while social in purpose and spiritual in intent" (para. 26).

Like Tagore, there are some parallels between Gandhi's and Freire's approach to education; for example, Gandhi's belief in *Ahimsa* (non-violence) and *Satyagraha* (Truth-based, non-violent resistance), ideals that underlie Freire's belief in tolerance. Furthermore, for Gandhi too, education was a tool for political education, for knowing right from wrong, and for learning the essence of love as the means towards the humanisation of society. However, Gandhi too, like Tagore, had a complex relationship with Indian hierarchies – in particular caste. While Gandhi is universally known for his commitment to reforming caste, he believed in the essence of the caste system, and that it could be reformed by the higher castes voluntarily acceding to the need for reform – a conviction that has proven to be unworkable and is today considered an erroneous assumption. Caste is an entrenched system that perpetuates humiliation for one group and privilege and entitlements for another. Ratna Ghosh (2019), writing in the *Wiley Handbook of Paulo Freire* does point out that among Gandhi's many weaknesses were the facts that he had an ambivalent attitude towards women who he considered primarily *homemakers*, and caste, that he believed provided the framework for life in India. However, Ghosh's critique is measured given that Gandhi did

have a less than satisfactory record in his attitude towards *black* South Africans during his sojourn in South Africa, and his inability to rise above his own position and location as a privileged member of his caste – an issue that led to his confrontations with B. R. Ambdekar, a Dalit himself and revered leader of Dalits in contemporary India. Here again, Freire's attitude towards tolerance was universal, it did not discriminate. To Freire, conscientization was the means to not only become aware and get involved in actions to change the world, it was also the means by which the oppressed learned to both understand the dominant syntax, question it, and transform the world, thus bringing about a level playing field. While Gandhi's lasting legacy is his unique approach to the nationalist struggle that he achieved through his extraordinary communicative actions that were based on the fusion of the symbolic, the moral, and the spiritual, and that were aimed at humanising the colonial oppressor, this approach was not successful in transforming the oppressor who was also a fellow citizen.

FREIRE AND POPULAR THEATRE IN INDIA

While there are still conversations with Freire in India in the areas of education and adult education, his impact on popular communications is less tangible; although, there are writings on his and Augusto Boal's continuing influence on popular theatre, such as Jana Sanskriti in West Bengal (see Brahma et al., 2019; Coudray, 2017; Ganguly, 2010; Jha & Sanyal, 2019, and Nath, 2012), and on other theatre groups also in West Bengal (Thakur, 2013). I will, in the following pages, illustrate Freire's influence on the traditions of popular theatre in India as experienced during my own doctoral study-related fieldwork in India carried out in the late 1980s in rural Tamilnadu.

The fieldwork associated with my doctoral studies was carried out in rural Tamilnadu, South India, during 1984 and 1985. Mrs. Gandhi had been assassinated in 1984 by Sikh separatists, and her son Rajiv Gandhi had taken over during what was a sombre time in India. I travelled throughout Tamilnadu, and while visiting and speaking to NGO activists, it was clear that many had read Freire and used many of his ideas in their own work mobilising women, adivasis (tribal), and Dalits. In fact, it was unusual to not come across activists who had not heard of Freire. Many of these NGOs had adopted and adapted repertoires of cultural action associated with the Left, including political, agit-prop theatre, and revolutionary songs and music. West Bengal was the home of protest theatre, although it was very much an urban medium catering to the urban elite. The Indian People's Theatre Association was established in 1942 under the

aegis of the Communist Party of India (CPI) in Bombay, and their plays were initially used to create awareness of colonial failures and their consequences, such as the plays *Jabanbandu* and *Nabanna* (1944) which were on the Bengal famine that led to the deaths of more than a million. Suchetna Banerjee (2019), in an article on the IPTA, highlights their modus operandi:

> How did the IPTA plan to carry out this project? It sought to effect change centrifugally and centripetally. First, travelling performing troupes sponsored directly or indirectly by the Communist Party travelled from urban centers into the villages to rally mass support and organize the people's movement. Secondly, local rural troupes would be enlisted on their own to support the cause. The effects of this cultural exchange – between the urban and the rural, the intelligentsia and the peasant/workers – considerably strengthened the movement. Moreover, religious and ritual forms of performance, musical performance genres, and folk performance forms were being reconstituted during this period in order to respond to the political climate. Urban performance forms and the realism of the proscenium stage started to be showcased in rural regions. It became a main task of the people's theatre movement to manage these tendencies. New experimentations in dramatic forms and the demand for representation of contemporary reality in drama emerged out of the democratic struggles. (p. 43)

While the IPTA expanded its reach and presence in post-independent India, this form of political theatre did have limitations. It was didactic, and there were few opportunities for post-performance discussions. While the objective was to agitate the working and other classes to fight for their rights, there was little by way of follow up, limited post-performance discussions, and certainly no involvement of audiences in these productions. In other words, these plays did make people aware of their rights, but these were not accompanied with concrete strategies for translating such revolutionary fervour into a practical blueprint for action. Another important footnote in the history of political theatre is the Third Theatre/Poor Theatre associated with Badal Sircar (1925-2011). Grounded in experimental theatre, Sircar preceded Augusto Boal's attempts to make theatre really accessible by bringing theatre down to people, eschewing the proscenium, and focusing on the actors' ability to not only use their bodies to communicate but also to perform theatre that reflected their own internal journeys to an awakening of consciousness (Jain, 2019). While Sircar's plays – most famously *Spartacus* –, was used to create awareness of enslavement and the need for empowerment, his plays, while intensely political, have been critiqued for attempting to deal with too many issues, thus losing focus (Chatterjee, 2016).

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While Freire's writings had percolated into India before Augusto Boal's, the combination of a radical philosophy for adult education that was centered on the making of critical consciousness, and a communicative means – popular theatre – to explore the making of that critical consciousness enabled a praxis that was operationalisable. While both Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* were certainly academic and directed at literate readers, the strength of these two publications was that facilitators and activists were readily able to appropriate/cull the ideas and techniques from these texts and translate these into primers for popular education and grassroots uses. While Freire's literacy teaching method could not be readily translated into Indian languages, his ideas related to learning in context, based on maximal participation, consciousness raising as the means to understand, advocate, and transform reality were certainly seen as a viable alternative to approaches that fell short on the nature and processes having to do with community engagement. Freire arguably articulated an egalitarianism at the very centre of learning and development, reflected in what was a categorically preferential option for the poor. It was this complete acceptance of the Other as autonomous human beings who had the capacity to understand, agitate, and transform that enabled Freire to be widely accepted by the civil society in India.

Similarly, Boal's dramaturgy lent itself to an engagement with the practice of popular theatre that could be adapted to the specificities of local forms of theatre – such as the *Terrakoothu* (street theatre) in Tamilnadu, India. Boal's approach to theatre was systematic and divided into three stages – the first two involved learning to use one's body to express oneself and understand its possibilities and limitations, the third stage was characterised by three parts: 1) simultaneous Dramaturgy, where the audience demonstrates to the performer what to perform; 2) image Theatre, where the audience inserts itself in the actual production; and 3) forum Theatre, where the audience acts as full participants directing the script of the play, using individual analysis of situations and means of countering them. Boal's approach offered popular theatre artists in India the opportunity to make theatre participatory. Theatre performances were not only opportunities to dramatise issues and find solutions – they were also opportunities to build capacities in local communities, especially among the youth. Critically though, theatre was not just the means to create awareness and conscientize publics, it was one aspect of a larger mobilisation that involved education and grassroots actions that were aimed at the restitution of human rights and the rights to livelihood. In the words of one of the key champions and archivists of popular theatre Ross Kidd (1985),

Popular theatre plays a supportive rather than central role in the organising process. It is one of a number of activities used to build up the courage, participation, awareness, and organisational strength of popular groups and organisations. As an organic part of an educational and organising process, it can play a range of roles – bringing people together and building organisational unity; drawing out participation and the expression of popular concerns and analysis; voicing protest, overcoming people's fears and building confidence; deepening discussion and understanding the major issues; clarifying the target for a specific struggle and assuring support; planning and agreeing on the strategies and tactics for action; stirring people's emotions and mobilising for struggle; building alliances with other groups and communities, etc. (p. 277)

THE PRAXIS OF POPULAR THEATRE: NOTES FROM THE FIELD

A part of my doctoral fieldwork was carried out with the Association for the Rural Poor (ARP), an NGO that had been established in the early 70s and was one of the earliest such organisations involved in radical development alternatives in India. The organisers of this NGO were mainly Dalits, and they were especially focused on issues related to land and landlessness in parts of rural Tamilnadu, South India. Their founders were influenced by Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence, Freire's theory of conscientization and alternative development, the Latin American liberation theology, Marxian social analysis, and Saul Alinsky's methods of building popular movements. The ARP was explicitly involved in trying to use Freirean adult education methodologies in their action-reflection based work. They were focused on 1) conscientizing rural, mainly Dalit, publics on local and national issues using a *keywords* approach; and 2) using a variety of cultural actions – skits, theatre, songs, cultural yatras (pilgrimages) to strengthen collective solidarities, depict and clarify understandings of key local issues – from the issue of debt and moneylending to landlessness, land rights, and minimum wages. All these were critical issues facing these communities, many of whom were landless labourers working as seasonal labourers in agricultural cultivation.

The leaders of ARP believed in working in a region only after they were explicitly invited to work there by local people. The key words were generated through ARP's animateurs who tried to understand the context of a village before they began the process of building community. Once invited, they were involved in extensive conversations based on transect walks – and this led to the collection of key words that were shared and that denoted common issues such as the lack of water, health facilities, and/or land. These key words were expanded into phrases and sentences that became the basis for thematic analysis,

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granular understandings, and solutions that were often dramatized through popular theatre. Cultural action and political action went hand in hand and, in many cases, people were involved in petitioning local administrations, squatting on land or getting legal certificates for the land they occupied. The role of the animateurs were critical since they had to be open and inclusive, had to listen and be involved in the art and practice of dialogue and dialogic communication. They played a key role in facilitating voices, helping people to articulate the difficulties they faced, and establish a relationship unlike, say, a government visitor to the village or a political agent who is an episodic visitor who does not establish an enduring relationship with most people – although they certainly do with the caste hierarchy. Caste oppression was a huge issue then and now. Landless labourers invariably were Dalit or belonged to the lower castes. Caste oppression was a frequent subject in the cultural and political analysis classes and these oppressions included the practices of untouchability, sexual exploitation of women labourers, daily acts of humiliation, caste violence, and social distancing that were prevalent. I remember being confronted by caste as a social reality in these villages – from separate plates and tumblers for Dalits who had to wash them in the local restaurant to upper caste disruption of cultural performances. Popular theatre performances were held at night – and there were occasions when the upper castes threw stones, threatened violence and shut down electricity supplies to the makeshift stage.

To me, these popular theatre performances demonstrated the rich possibilities of using theatre in cultural action. It also had significant limitations since the actors, including the animateurs and locals, had to be well versed with local issues and depict them in ways that could be understood by local people. The danger of rough and ready popular theatre is that it can descend into farce. And so, it was important that there was a shared understanding and a familiarity with the theme. Here is an example of local participation that I had written about in my thesis:

> In another skit on the theme of bank loans, a similar scene between the bank officer and the petitioner was frozen. This time there was unanimous agreement that the petitioner was too meek. Prabhu (the animateur) changed the scene around. This time the petitioner refused to be cowed by authority. He demanded his loan and threatened to expose the officer if he did not comply with his request. There was a good deal of excitement during this scene partly because the person acting as the petitioner was a local boy. Frequently, the actor or actors directly addressed the crowd and asked them for their opinions. In Mudaliarkuppam, the audience was asked about the prevailing rates in the Minimum Wages Act. There were differences

in the answers provided by the audience. It pointed to a confused understanding of the wage structure under this Act. Prabhu and Jeyraj immediately launched on an impromptu dialogue between themselves on the Minimum Wages Act and this was appreciated by the audience. (Thomas, 1987, pp. 318-319)

Apart from the issue with animateurs, there was also the issue of what type of theatre to use in cultural action. There are numerous traditions of folk theatre in South India, and in Tamilnadu it was a form called *Terrakoothu* (literally, street play) that was widely used in cultural actions. The content of folk theatre in India is either a dramatization from the Hindu epics or local mythologies, and one of the issues had to do with the adaptation of *Terrakoothu* to cultural action. As the purpose of the exercise was to enable local people to learn this art form, the animateurs decided to discard the accoutrements associated with *Terrakoothu*, including the masks, makeup and costumes. Initially there was some opposition to this, as it was felt that the audience would be confused if they did not recognise the performance as *Terrakoothu*. It was then decided that make up and costumes were optional and not obligatory. Key changes, however, were made to content and to the conventions. The story line was changed, and instead of dealing with traditional myths from the Hindu epics, the story was set in feudal India, and was a story about a king and his religious authorities and their economic, political and religious oppression of the masses. There was a clear analogy with the then political situation prevailing in Tamilnadu. The story was a reflection of contemporary realities – the alliance of local land lords with temple priests and their joint role in the subjugation of people. Some of the conventions were also changed. The traditional invocation was upturned, and instead of an invocation to Lord Ganesha, the invocation was addressed to the audience who were asked to listen attentively to this new version of the *Terrakoothu*. The narrator then spoke directly to the audience, and basically told them that the future was in their hands, that only they could save themselves from the oppressions that they faced as long as they stood united and resisted this tyranny. While the king and his courtiers used classical Tamil, the court jester used the language of the masses. And, like traditional *Terrakoothu*, this version too was about the triumph of good over evil, of the oppressed over their oppressors.

While popular theatre was a powerful tool in the hands of skilled animateurs, I had, in 1995, written an article on the crisis of popular theatre in India in relation to *participation*, its forms, ethos and legitimacy (Thomas, 1995) – in other words, the limitations of using theatre in social change in which neither its expressions nor its context were grounded in locality: "cultural strategies need to respect popular memory – tradition, common understandings, shared

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meanings and collective goals. . . . Popular threatre needs to be moored in the popular consciousness as a genuine alternative medium – as an alternative, not as an all-sufficient substitute" (Thomas, 1995, p. 222). To me, one of Freire's enduring legacies is his insistence on the need to understand people and their cultures in context.

FREIRE ON CONTEXT

Freire believed in context and in the beauty that resided in the dominated *syntax*, their ways of expression, and their traditions of communications. In other words, and in a Freirean sense, the resources of hope are available locally. However, understanding context remains a massive challenge given the global pivot towards online education in pandemic times. Whether in adult education or in popular cultural actions involving traditions such as popular theatre, prior understanding of context is absolutely critical to the advancement of meaningful pedagogies and cultural action. While both Tagore and Gandhi believed in education in context, Freire's insistence on beginning an education from where people are, shaped by their experiences and circumstances in order to change their world's was radically different. Neither Tagore nor Gandhi were interested in a transformative education that would result in ordinary people questioning reality and using their critical consciousness to change that reality for the better. Their approach to education was not, by any stretch of the imagination, the means to contest hegemonic power or to mobilize collective solutions. Freire believed that those who had a poor grasp of context were unsuited to getting involved in any transfer of knowledge. In the edited volume, the *Pedagogy of Solidarity* (2014b), he highlights the importance of knowing context in any transfer of knowledge.

> I am sure that a foreigner, an American professor, or a Chilean, or French, or Indian, can go to Brazil to help us to change education in Brazil. But he or she can only do that if, firstly, he or she really knows something about Brazil; secondly, if he or she is eager to learn about Brazilian reality; and thirdly, if he or she is humble enough to re-think himself or herself. Without these conditions, it is better for all of us that this person stays at home, do not go there to try to educate us. The same rules apply to me. (Freire, 2014b, p. 18)

That lesson was learned by Freire in his encounters with ordinary people, from fishermen to labourers, in Brazil and elsewhere. In his book the *Pedagogy of Hope* (Freire, 2014a), that provides the background to his writing his classic *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he traces his journey from being an educator

who had knowledge of key education scholars, such as Jean Piaget and his theory of cognitive development, to a transformation that came about through his encounter with a participant at one of his lectures. After listening to Freire's lecture, in the Q&A session, this gentleman pulled up Freire for his class position and class knowledge. In Freire's (2014a) words:

> In his intonations, his laborer's syntax and rhythm, the movements of his body, his hands of an orator, in the metaphors so common to popular discourse, he called the attention of the educator there in front of him, seated, silent, sinking down into his chair, to the need, when speaking to the people, for the educator to be up to an understanding of the world the people have. An understanding of the world which, conditioned by the concrete reality that is part explains that understanding. (p. 19)

Freire also believed in the need for educators to be constantly up to date on making sense of the media and imparting media literacy, given the key role played by media in people's lives. In the book *Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to those who Dare Teach*, in Letter 9 he pointedly highlights that a critical reading of the world simply has to engage with media content, but also points out the need for educators to use media such as video to exchange information and learn from one another.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The special issue of the *International Communication Gazette* (2020, v. 82, i. 5) on The Legacy of Paulo Freire offers a cogent reading of the opportunities, limitations, and relevance of Freire to popular communications today. A key challenge that Silvio Waisbord (2020) had identified in this special issue is the threat from Freire to right-wing populism in Brazil, a threat that Andrew Woods (2020) describes being made by a number of politicians, including President Bolsonaro:

> In speeches and interviews, Bolsonaro and his allies represent Freire as a kind of leftist bogeyman whose influence needs to be purged from the Brazilian education system. On his campaign trail, Bolsonaro boasted to his supporters that he would "enter the education ministry with a flamethrower to remove Paulo Freire". Abraham Weintraub, Bolsonaro's now former minister of education (he recently left for a contentious position at the World Bank), blamed Freire for Brazil's poor education rankings and likened Freirean pedagogy to "voodoo without scientific proof". Similarly, the self-proclaimed Brazilian philosopher Olavo de Carvalho,

who is known as "Bolsonaro's guru," dismisses Freire as a "pseudo-intellectual militant" who produced "a collection of tricks to reduce education to sectarian indoctrination". (para. 3)

This rather violent attempt to erase the legacy of Freire is precisely because Freire's legacy is a threat to populism, and because it offers possibilities for an anti-populist democratic communications and a democratic public sphere (Waisbord, 2020, pp. 452-452). In India too, in the context of a government that is populist/fascist in nature, democratic communications has been systematically curtailed through the co-option of mainstream media, the levying of legal means, such as defamation law, sedition, national security, the incarceration of journalists and citizens who are seen to be anti-Modi as, for instance, the arrest of twenty ordinary people for putting up posters critical of Modi's handling of the Covid-19 crisis. The extraordinary mishandling of the Covid-19 crisis in India by the government and its consequences are plain to see, and while there are examples of media dissent, it is clear that these arrests are meant to send a message to ordinary Indians who are expected to bear with the shortage of oxygen, lack of beds in hospitals, lack of vaccines, and not ask questions of what is now recognised as a government that lacks any empathy. The Covid-19 catastrophe in India, as is the case in Brazil, has exposed the gaps, deficits, and divides that exist in these two countries who have invested in their public image as growing superpowers. Covid-19 has exposed the fragile nature of these countries, shambolic governance structures, and the inability of the State to provide citizens with basic health care. But that is just one divide. In the case of India, it has also exposed the nature of the digital divide and the sheer reality of poverty that were downplayed during the feelgood years, and that has been exposed with a vengeance. The digital divide was graphically illustrated by the fact that Covid-19 lock-downs of schools meant that education was delivered online. This immediately exposed the reality of rural India, where students lacked access to smartphones, laptops and internet, and that even led to an increase in suicides among students who were unable to study. As Twitter and government helplines become the means by which desperate people try and access oxygen and health facilities, those who do not have smartphones and social media accounts are unable to do likewise ("Covid Meltdown", 2021). Kundan Pandey, (2020) writing in the environmental magazine Down to Earth, describes the digital divide thus

> Kuldip Kumar from Gummer village near Himachal Pradesh's Jawalamukhi town was recently in deep distress. After the Union government announced a country-wide lockdown on March 24, 2020, the school where his children studied, decided to take online lessons. But Kumar did not have a mobile phone as well as the money to buy one.
> He moved from pillar to post to get a loan of Rs 6,000. He approached banks and also private lenders, but failed to get it. Finally, he had to sell his cow. . . .
> Education is just one area that has highlighted the digital divide between India's rural and urban areas during the lockdown. The trend is evident everywhere – telemedicine, banking, e-commerce, e-governance, all of which became accessible only via internet during the lockdown. (paras. 1-2, 7)

I am pretty sure that if Freire were around today, his curiosity would have extended to figuring out how to extend critical pedagogy online, to advocate for access to new technologies and the internet as a basic human right and to enable critical reflection in a context in which technology, as an intermediary, can be a barrier to the practice of engaged forms of education. In an open letter to Freire, a teacher in Malaysia, Joanna Jeyraj (2021), involved in remote education, asks how *trust* can be built in an online environment:

> Could trust be fostered when cameras were switched off and microphones muted; when there was technological surveillance through the recording and uploading of all classes on the institution's LMS? Did common online meeting etiquette which called for microphones to be muted impinge on student voice? . . .
> So, Freire, if you were able to read this, I wonder what advice you would have as teachers strive to connect more authentically with students within an online space. I wonder how we can recontextualise critical pedagogy practice to suit the present realities we find ourselves in. (paras. 4, 7)

Forty-three years have passed since Freire's final visit to India in 1978. If Freire would have been alive today, I doubt the present government in India would have invited him to contribute to their New Education Policy (NP), although, perhaps unbeknownst to them, traces of Freire continue to contaminate this policy. In an article on adult education in India, Mandal (2019) observes that in the NEP "literacy, critical life skills, basic vocational skills, basic education, continuing education and digitalization . . .

[are] priority areas" (p. 327) – all of which are Freirean concerns. As a media academic who has had a long relationship with Freire's writings, I am of the opinion that there is need for renewed attempts to adapt Freirean models of adult education to Indian realities, and for communicative engagements with a dialogue for tolerance. How to shape a tolerant society remains a challenge in India today after many deliberate attempts by the hypernationalist government in power to erase India's famed reputation for being a secular nation, and for protecting and extending the principle of unity in diversity. To me, more than ever, Freire's contributions can play a signal role in creating the conditions for critical consciousness and democracy in India. Ⓜ

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