Gramsci and Freire: Bridging the Divide in Indian Context-An Exploratory Essay

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There is a stark contrast between the Gramscian approach to the relationship between intellectuals, knowledge and people and the Freirian approach. The former favours the exclusivity of the intellectual as an omniscient person who should lead, morally and intellectually, the party and people whereas the Freirian approach sees value in peoples' knowledge and the importance of popular participation in the process of social transformation. This essay argues that though the origins in terms of space and time are different both the views need to be considered together. It argues that firstly, there is a need to bring them together; secondly, there is a possibility and opportunity for bringing them together. Exclusive emphasis on either approach taken by intellectuals and social change agents will only mean that the other dimension is missed. In a society that historically denied knowledge to the oppressed, exclusive focus on privileged monopoly of knowledge can only reinforce social inequalities. On the other hand, exclusive focus on peoples' knowledge can slide into fetishising participation and even unwarranted anti-intellectualism that can be self-defeating to the project of social change.

Italian communist thinker Antonio Gramsci and Brazilian educator Paulo Freire both emphasised the importance of subjectivity in social and political change. While for Gramsci it is hegemony and moral and intellectual leadership of intellectuals and party over the masses, for Freire it was inter-subjectivity and dialogue. This article argues that there is a contrast

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between Gramsci and Freire in their emphasis: Gramsci favoured intellectuals, albeit working class, and Freire favoured dialogue of the ordinary. Gramsci favoured party, and Freire favoured participation of the subjects in their subjective development. This article highlights the contrast and argues that in the specific Indian context there is a need to bridge that contrast: which will have fruitful implications for socio-political change. In the following, the first section deals with the Gramscian notion of intellectuals, the second section deals with the Freirian notion of participation and dialogic nature of social change, the third section argues for the need to bring them together and the fourth section deals with the Indian context.

I

Gramsci, Role of Intellectuals and the Project of Hegemony

Gramsci believed that the role of intellectuals is crucial in effecting social transformation. He felt that the intellectuals associated in organic manner with the communist party have to establish and develop socio-political hegemony in the form of moral and intellectual leadership over the masses to lead them to revolution. This process of hegemony is central to his project. The struggle of the oppressed has to be led by firstly, the communist party and secondly by intellectuals within the party. The hegemony has to be cultural and has to pervade the entirety of social formation in order for the party to counter the hegemony or even dominance of the ruling classes; this also to create new consciousness among the masses to consolidate their victory. This view lays emphasis on the everyday life, and also on the cultural life of the masses where the commonsense of the masses is established and maintained. Gramsci distinguishes between traditional and organic intellectuals and the latter are the central torchbearers of hegemony under whose light the masses have to tread. This view privileges intellectuals, the role of intelligentsia and the custodians of knowledge regimes. The masses have to follow. They will have to be led by the intellectuals. For, Gramsci says that much like somebody who makes an omelette once in a while cannot become a cook, the person who philosophises on his condition can not be a philosopher and make claims to be an intellectual. For in order to be a cook one has to specialize in cooking.

Gramsci said that everybody is a philosopher but everybody can not make claim to the position of a philosopher. If this is the view of Gramsci, what of the role of popular knowledge? What is the worth, role and significance of the subjectivity of, say, ordinary factory workers or say of agricultural labourers. What about their meanings and definitions, philosophies and view points? Do they have as individuals and groups’ right to their knowledge and right to uphold it? Even if it is in variance with that of the intellectuals and that of the party? Broadly
there is only a limited role for the perceptions and feelings, experiences and knowledges of the masses. Much of the latter is deemed to be ‘false consciousness’, which needs to be set right. This view under-estimates and undermines the ideational aspect and meanings that individuals even in the working class give to their experience of the world. And taken to its extreme, underplays the role of popular consciousness. The Gramscian view, of course is important and not to be undervalued \textit{per se}. The intellectual’s work does require hard intellectual labour and in every society there probably is an intellectual section that monopolizes the production of ideas and also, in that process, adds strength to the maintenance of the status quo. Every society does need individuals, women and men, to specialize in intellectual activity without which civilizations cannot make any noteworthy progress. But this aspect also leads to the monopolization of intellectual activity; and there is every possibility that the monopolization can hardly serve egalitarian purposes. More so in a situation where knowledge and possession of knowledge are exclusive privileges of a small minority, and vast masses and oppressed sections within them do not have access to knowledge.

Popular consciousness, popular knowledge and experiences and all their cultural expressions whether they conform to the values of reason, progress and humanism—the three core values of modernity—or not, have to be taken for their own worth. People, ordinary men and women, have their individual, inalienable right to hold on to them. This one can say without however disagreeing on the point that there always needs to be mental or intellectual labour and specialization in intellectual labour, in order for societies/civilizations to progress. Problem only is when this specialization becomes all encompassing, totalizing, and a force imposing itself on the masses. This is particularly when the dialogic nature of development of critical consciousness gets lost. No body has to speak, or even think, for that is exclusively limited to a handful. This is where the importance of dialogic development of consciousness becomes important and where the voice and ideas of every person, the right of every person to name the world, the participation of every person, in the process of social transformation and social change becomes paramount. Paulo Friere upheld that process. Below we discuss the Freirian, dialogic notion of development of consciousness and the importance of popular participation in it.

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\textbf{Paulo Freire and Significance of Project of Participation}

The Brazilian educator Paulo Freire clearly takes an approach, which is different from that of Gramsci. Friere emphasises social transformation through what he calls \textit{conscientizacao} or conscientisation, which is to be acquired through dialogue and dialogical
learning. It is important for us to note that dialogical development of critical consciousness is impossible without participation and the project of participation derives from this fairly radical idea of conscientizacao. To put in Freire’s own words,

Humankind emerge from their submersion and acquire the ability to intervene in reality as it is unveiled. Intervention in reality—historical awareness itself—thus represents a step forward from emergence, and results from the conscientizacao of the situation. Conscientizacao is the deepening of the attitude of awareness characteristic of all emergence.[Freire: 1996, pp.90](Italics in the original)

For this to happen Freire proposes dialogical education and participation of the people who are learning about the situation. It is the development of critical consciousness through inter-subjectivity, which is emphasized. In this process every participant has the necessity and right to ‘name the world’ and to participate in the process of ‘emergence’. Freire privileges participation of every human being in the process evolution of their subjectivity. To quote a long passage from Freire:

To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new naming. Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection.

But while to say the true word—which is work, which is praxis—is to transform the world, saying that word is not the privilege of some few persons, but the right of everyone. Consequently, no one can say a true word alone—or can she say it for another in a prescriptive act which robs others of their words.’ [Freire:1996, pp69](Italics in the original)

The above paragraph amply sums up the importance attached to participation by Freire. For social and economic change and efforts at socio-economic change have great deal to learn from the above. The project of participation which derives its inspiration from Freire has deep roots in humanist thinking and deep consequences for socio-political action. The emphasis is not on acquiring any consciousness, but critical consciousness and subjectivity—a point missed out in the present usage of the jargon of participation. For Freire says quite clearly: “Only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking” [Freire: 1996, pp73]. And participation is the fundamental prerequisite for dialogue.
The point is clear and need not be laboured further. This approach to social transformation stands in contrast to the one which privileges intellectuals and intellectual activity as the prime fountain from which all social change flows. Freire stands quite in contrast, if not opposed, to Gramsci in focusing on participation rather than party privilege and dialogue rather than dictat. The question then is: is it possible to bring them together in the endeavour of change? The argument of the paper is that it is possible and necessary to bring these two great and towering figures together or at least discuss and debate the possibility of doing so: i.e., a dialogue between Gramscians and Freirians is possible and—mutually beneficial as well.

III

Necessity for bringing Gramscian and Freirian traditions together

The Gramscian view of knowledge and knowledge bearers valorizes the role of intellectuals and their moral and intellectual leadership i.e., hegemony. The Freirian view on the other hand privileges dialogue, conscientisation and the importance of popular participation in the dialogue. The question however is do both these views need to be exclusive or even oppositional? This paper argues that there is a need for bridging the two: intellectual activity and popular processes of dialogue need not be oppositional or dichotomous. Effective social and economic change requires empathic understanding and coalescing of the two. Intellectuals and socio-political formations that they adhere to, have to be open to dialogue with the notions of participation; more particularly the ideational and cultural worlds of people with all their irrationalities and inconsistencies. On the other hand there is a necessity on the part of those who champion participation to be open to the intellectual process, the ideas, and production of ideas by intellectuals. A perfect combination of the two, where intellectuals specializing in knowledge production participate in dialogic consciousness production and those involved in dialogic popular change contribute to the growth of knowledge in equal measure, may be difficult to realize, in an absolute sense. But the two are not oppositional and need not be insular from each other. Intellectuals in Gramscian tradition, specializing in knowledge production and aiming at moral and intellectual leadership of the masses have to learn a great deal from the people and their expressions of popular consciousness. At the same time the votaries of popular knowledge need not dismiss intellectual activity as mere arm-chair activity either. Worse still those who champion popular participation some times see intellectuals as their bete noire. This view misses the significance of intellectual development in any society and the role the specialists in knowledge carry in taking the people/oppressed forward. Intellectual activity shorn of popular participation can become an art unto itself. Anti-
intellectualism on the part of those who emphasize participation can impoverish the content of social change that they take so dearly to their heart. Both, taken exclusively, ill-serve the aim of egalitarianism. Probably both have something to learn from the other. It is the argument of this paper that the gulf between the two can be bridged. Or the gulf has to be bridged in the interest of socio-economic change and ensuring popular voice and full popular participation in envisioning and directing that change.

IV
Bridging the Divide in Indian context

The Indian context is marred by not only class but other social inequalities. In Indian context the inequalities are multi-fold: caste, class tribe, religion, and gender. The social specificity of Indian context is important while considering both these approaches. In the Indian context the Gramscian intellectuals largely stuck to party lines of various denominations. And view the notion of participation as suspect at best and imperialist ploy at worst. There is a lack of sufficient attention to the notion of participation on the part of intellectuals. This lack of attention is also fortified by the fact that the notion of participation is largely taken over by the civil society or NGOs in the broad sense. Below we see that their understanding and deployment of the concept also is partial and incomplete.

The votaries of popular participation have largely been the NGOs and we can say that to a large extent they use participation in instrumental fashion- for participatory watershed development, participatory forest management or for participatory irrigation management or for participatory delivery of services ranging from primary education or health to public distribution system. The usage of the concept may also be in other programmes/schemes either sponsored by the government or international donors; and the NGOs largely see participation as a tool for social change in a narrow sense. Participation is reduced to participatory methods, and not as methodology of change as Freire intended. The notion of participation is reduced to its techniques, while the spirit and philosophy of participation is ignored. Techniques without philosophical understanding of the concept come to be applied to all circumstances and situations. The participatory techniques become means of implementing various programmes without ever questioning the larger processes and ends of the usage of those techniques/methods. And on the other hand those among them, who stress participation as a means as well as an end, and take a deeper view, develop an actionist and anti-intellectualist trend in practice.

It is precisely because Indian society is so complex that we need the knowledge production and propagation to be democratized and at the same time we need participation to
be imbued and equipped with intellectual practice. In the Indian context knowledge acquisition, production and propagation was historically denied to masses, particularly to women, lower castes and dalits. Therefore there is always a need for intellectual activity in the country to become inclusive; for exclusivist monopoly of knowledge can only strengthen inequalities or add to the ancient inequalities. At the same time anti-intellectualism on the part of those who champion participation is self-defeating in the context of a society where knowledge–based inequality was always a legitimizing factor for inequality in general. Therefore it appears that intellectuals and intelligentsia need to take popular participation in knowledge acquisition, creation and propagation by masses in much more open manner and those who champion popular participation eschew anti-intellectualism and eschew down-playing intellectual labour; without intellectual labour the best of possible worlds can not be built. We need in Indian context, and contexts similar, both participation in knowledge and knowledgeable participation.

The problem may be a bit more complex. There is in the present Indian context the problem that the NGOs and civil society that champion participation have been operating as part of, or have become part of, the larger strategy of structural adjustment and neo-liberal reforms. They do consciously support to a large extent this view of development. The views of NGOs towards the pre-eminence of market in development process largely happen to be either ambiguous or even ambivalent. The civil society while championing participation at grass roots level often endorses the package of economic and governance reforms and also supports the managerial practices of professionalized development management. The international donors, with the best of their intentions, precisely want this. The commitment of civil society to liberal democracy has come to mean support to economic neo-liberalism and organizational managerialism. On the other hand those who critique the economic reforms, managerialism and foreign aid (and of course foreign direct investment), have not been able to reconsider the conceptual baggage of democratic-centralism and party control. While civil society and its formal organizations derive their argumentative strength pointing to the 1989 events in Eastern Europe and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the critiques of civil society and participation turn a blind eye to the same historical developments. There is a necessity to go beyond this divide and salvage participation as a genuinely democratic and critical concept from both these pitfalls. What in that sense can restore to the notion of participation its original promise?

We have begun this paper with the argument that both the Gramscian and Freirian notions are bridgeable and a dialogue between the two is possible. In India this happens in practice at the grass roots level when civil society organizations attempt to strengthen the local self government institutions and when in the similar circumstances left front governments focus on strengthening the same local government institutions. They both converge at the level of grassroots and address the participation of people in the local institutions. Peoples’
Participatory Planning in Kerala was championed by the left front government which the Gramscian intellectuals to a large extent support. The question then is: is participation as a concept effective and agreeable only at the grass roots level? Beyond that is it just democratic-centralism on one side and capitalist, liberal democratic managerialism on the other? Does participation have any consequence beyond the local level?

The answer to this question takes us back to the original premise about Indian society. The Indian society is the most complex society laden with multiple hierarchies and not class-based hierarchies alone. And therefore any notion of democracy in the political sphere, in order to be effective, has to carry with it strong notions of participation in social sphere. It is simplistic to think in Indian context that egalitarian change would follow automatically from the obliteration of any one set of inequalities. If class inequalities are addressed, caste inequalities may still persist. So do gender inequalities and so on. Therefore there is the necessity to resuscitate participation as a broader social and political category. In Indian context it is necessary to view participation as a broader concept that can be deployed against the social inequalities that are practiced since ancient times. It is not enough to see participation as electoral participation in voting processes in the polity (though it is necessary to look into and study the electoral participation), or even in the implementation of development schemes either sponsored by governments or donors. Participation as a concept has a broader relevance and justification in India where the concept is helpful in broadening the very horizon of democratic vision and practice; arguably even beyond the local level. It is such participation, alone which can, in the long run ensure the overcoming of multiple inequalities, and ensures egalitarian change. The project of social transformation then is not imposing on people the knowledge regimes that intellectuals monopolize but only to encourage and enhance popular participation at all levels of society and polity so that the people decide, with the resultant critical consciousness, what is best for them: in the social and political sphere, and thereby in the economic sphere as well.

REFERENCES

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