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TENSIONS AND POSSIBILITIES IN PROMOTING CRITICAL LITERACY IN INDIAN PUBLIC EDUCATION
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When examined through a critical pedagogy lens, current teaching styles and the emphasis on rote memorization that characterize public education in India can be seen to hinder democratic development, creating what Paulo Freire terms a “culture of silence.” This essay explores what culturally relevant critical literacy can contribute to active citizenship and democratic development in India, by considering how research on critical thinking and theory of critical pedagogy can contribute to educational reform in Indian public schools. In particular, it examines some of the challenges and tensions involved in adapting these theories to an Indian cultural context. In an attempt to move beyond colonizing pedagogies that silence indigenous forms of learning and thinking, the author focuses on some postcolonial critiques and cultural limitations of critical pedagogy theory, and teases out some of its specifically Western epistemological and ontological assumptions. Are there elements of our dominant conceptions of critical thinking and critical pedagogy that might have to be adapted when placed in a South Asian cultural context? This essay argues that some features of critical thinking and critical pedagogy, namely the focus on individualistic critical thought, conflict-based notion of progressive change, and emphasis on challenging authority and tradition are in conflict with cultural values commonly held within Indian society. Tentative attempts are made at potential reconceptualizations of a transformative critical literacy that takes into account Indian traditions, cultural values and learning styles.

Critical education has become a prevalent theme in educational theory and practice in the West in recent decades. Critical thinking and critical consciousness are increasingly posited as educational ideals not only within the context of Western education, but as universal ideals that should be fostered by education systems internationally. But postcolonial theory warns us of the importance of evaluating imperialistic assumptions embedded in educational models, rather than universalizing them in ways that silence indigenous knowledge systems and perpetuate
Western domination. This raises questions about whether the ideals of critical thinking and critical pedagogy are indeed valued across cultures, or whether they originate in Western cultural assumptions, and whether their imposition in non-Western settings constitutes an act of epistemic colonial violence. Placing these theories in a radically different cultural context draws out some of the cultural specificities of our conception of critical thinking and critical pedagogy, and gives us a starting point to explore some possible avenues for their reconceptualization. This essay is a move in this direction, by placing critical pedagogy in the context of Indian education, and exploring the tensions and limitations that ensue. Its purpose is to explore possibilities for an empowering model of critical literacy that takes into account Indian traditions, culture, and educational philosophy.

One of the difficulties in speaking of the cultural limitations of critical pedagogy is the danger of essentializing cultural identities and worldviews, especially in the reductionist binary often employed between Western and non-Western ways of thinking. Such binaries falsely assume homogeneity of Western thinking that disregards great discrepancies and disagreements separating Western scholars from one another. This becomes particularly problematic when qualities like critical reflection are seen as specifically Western cultural practices, leading to the assumption that Western people are critical whereas non-Western/Oriental groups tend towards passive, uncritical acceptance of ideas. Similarly, a difficulty that I struggle with even as I write this paper is the possibility of speaking of Indian culture in ways that acknowledge the vast diversity and complexity of this enormous country. But while one cannot assume a single uniform mindset that characterizes Indian thinking, it cannot be ignored that there are significant similarities in ways of regarding the self in relation to the world that are often shared by members of a group with a common and distinctive racial, national, religious, linguistic, or cultural heritage—and that these often diverge greatly from other cultural groups. For the purpose of this paper, culture is being defined as a body of "basic ideas and beliefs, underlying values, perceptions, convictions, and truths shared by a large segment of a society,” that shapes members’
ways of being, knowing, understanding, behaving and making sense of the world (Kaku, 2005).

The most common pedagogical approach noted within research on Indian public schools is a teacher-centered rather than student-centered approach (Dyer & Choksi, 2002). Classroom pedagogy is heavily influenced by prescribed textbooks, and the role of the teacher is that of interpreter of the textbook, in a model that reflects what Paulo Freire termed “banking” education, where the teacher “owns” the knowledge and “deposits” large amounts of information with the student (Raina & Dhand, 1991). The most prevalent style of instruction is the lecture method, with a common approach being read-recall-recite. Many of these findings remind me of my own secondary schooling in India, where learning often involved memorizing precise textbook definitions that teachers highlighted as important, and reproducing these word-for-word in examinations. This pattern extended from subjects like biology or chemistry to history and geography. High levels of student participation and discussion are also not, for the most part, emphasized in Indian public education. Questioning by students is a rare phenomenon, especially since students’ own upbringing and socialization often does not encourage questioning. When questioning does occur, it is usually treated as a means of seeking clarification or further information, rather than as a means of independent inquiry. Genuine inquiry is restricted by an underlying assumption that all necessary inquiry has already been made and the results packaged in the syllabus and textbook (Kumar, 1991).

Another prevalent feature of Indian education is the importance of examinations and the pressure to achieve high grades. The pattern of a single public examination at the end of the year determines the curriculum, which usually encourages rote learning among students who, according to Raina and Dhand (1991), “strive for a high grade without understanding and developing a proper appreciation” for the subject of study. Little if any attention is paid to developing skills such as critical thinking, communication or library research among students. Many of the features outlined above are elements of what Freire calls a “banking” model of education, creating a “culture of silence,” where education becomes a tool of oppression rather than
of liberation. Students are expected to digest a body of fixed worthwhile knowledge without raising questions or discussions about it. What students learn about often has very little to do with their own context and lived experiences. Instead, by emphasizing an unquestioned acceptance of the teachings of authority figures, this approach alienates learners from the educational process and is a major factor contributing to the high student drop-out rate from school in developing countries (Kanu, 1996).

While these are common observations agreed upon by many studies of Indian classrooms, it is important not to essentialize these results, as teaching approaches do vary to some extent depending on contextual features such as the subject itself and the style of the teacher (Ninnes, Aitchison, & Kalos, 1999). However, even a study that sought to challenge essentialist stereotypes of Indian students, and concluded that there is much more to Indian university education than rote or surface learning, found that their research did confirm the idea that critical thinking is lacking from many Indian students’ experiences. While occurrences of debating, discussing and arguing were found in a few circumstances, reports of formal critical and analytical teaching and learning were rare (Ninnes, Aitchison, & Kalos, 1999). Despite findings that showed students did strive to understand key concepts, in general, learning still lacked a substantially critical and analytical approach, and debates and discussion were the exception rather than the norm.

In contrast, critical pedagogy offers avenues for a pedagogical practice that works towards social transformation and democratic development. In Indian educational literature, very rarely is critical literacy included under the notion of basic education, and very little research has been done on the potential that critical pedagogy can have specifically within Indian public education. In particular, my conception of a transformative critical literacy draws from a variety of sources including Freire (1970), Kanu (2005), and Koh (2002), among others. Such a model of critical literacy encourages students to challenge taken-for-granted meanings and truth about a way of thinking, reading, and writing the world. Students are taught to question the cultural and ideological assumptions underlying any text, to question the unequal power relations embedded within texts and the pow
er relations that underlie discourses. Such critical literacy moves beyond abstract critical thinking, to a form of critical social practice grounded in the student’s own context and lived experiences. It encourages students to take a critical and questioning stance toward the conditions existing in their societies and to become active in creating alternative conditions where needed, aiming at social transformation. It involves pedagogical methods that foster engaged learning and teaches students to formulate, evaluate and articulate their opinions and beliefs.

In fact there have been some recent efforts to reform Indian pedagogy in the Government of India District Primary Education Programme. This project provides in-service teacher training and tries to introduce a more active student-centered pedagogy, with greater use of instructional aids. However, this project has met with little success, and while there have been a few ostensible changes in the use of limited instructional aids in the classroom, the essential characteristics of traditional practice, namely rote and repetition, have not changed. Clarke (2003) concludes that the traditional teaching practices were embedded in the teachers’ cultural ideologies and values, which influenced their approaches to teaching and prevented them from fundamentally engaging and incorporating the attempted reforms. This is only one among numerous examples of educational reforms in India that have failed due to the tendency to transplant foreign educational practices and concepts, often ones developed in the West, while failing to take cognizance of local social and cultural contexts, resulting in a dearth of research with practical relevance for policy and practice (Kanu, 2005). In particular, Tabuwala (2003) warns against treating learner-centered pedagogies—often associated with critical and democratic approaches—as a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching and learning, since such homogenizing universalized pedagogies lead to the marginalization of indigenous knowledge systems. He highlights the need to develop indigenous pedagogies and to explore ways in which Western and indigenous knowledge systems interact with and complement each other. Thus in the effort to overcome Western cultural imperialism and the silencing of the Other’s epistemologies and culture, it is essential that we question the Western assumptions and cultural limitations of our models of critical peda-
gogy and critical thinking before attempting to implement them in an Indian cultural environment.

The limited literature available on whether critical thinking is in fact influenced by culture presents considerable disagreement on the subject. On one side of the debate lie academics like Atkinson (1997) and Fox (1994) who argue that critical thinking is a culturally-based social practice, based on western cultural assumptions and learning habits, and does not seem to transfer beyond a narrow (Western) instructional context. Rather than being a universal mental process or intellectual skill, it encompasses a culturally specific worldview that values individualism, egalitarianism, scientific method, and a direct, explicit communication style that does not rely on context. These often do not apply within many non-western cultures that instead value indirectness, leave the reader to infer a great deal from context, value tradition above "originality," and value deference to rather than critique of authorities. Such research implies that the concept of critical thinking may not be applicable or even desirable within many non-Western educational contexts.

This same sentiment is reflected in stereotypes commonly found in depictions of Asian students in general, including students from India, especially in some of the western literature on international students. Asian students are often depicted as passive learners who lack critical thinking skills or the ability to think creatively or independently, as pointed out by Kumaranavadivelu (2003). Asian cultural learning styles in general are depicted as characterized by non-critical rote-learning, passive acceptance of a single interpretation without even seeking clarification, with no argumentation or questions encouraged (Ninnes et al, 1999). Certain values underlying the notion of critical thinking are seen as incompatible with Asian cultural beliefs. Such stereotypes would suggest that critical thinking is a Western concept whose characteristics go against Asian cultural values. These stereotypes as well as the above studies would suggest that if critical thinking is indeed culturally-bound, and based on Western cultural values and worldviews, it may not be appropriate to impose this as an educational objective in other cultural contexts, and such efforts may in fact prove to be imperialistic and counter to indigenous culture. If teacher-centered didactic pedagogic
styles currently prevalent in India are embedded in culturally specific ideologies, are we justified in criticizing these practices and in exalting a student-centered critical pedagogy that is culturally specific to the West?

Despite condemnatory classroom accounts, stereotypes that depict Indian culture as one that supports passive and blindly submissive learning and discoursages any critical questioning are fundamentally challenged by a look at both ancient educational philosophical traditions as well as educational values upheld by current teachers and students. An examination of indigenous Indian education before British colonization reveals a system where knowledge was transferred through intellectual challenges and animated debates between the teacher and the student. Indian history and philosophy have a rich argumentative tradition of skepticism and reasoning. The traditional Indian attitude toward authority is reflected in Buddha’s injunction in his last sermon: “Do not trust my words, rely only upon your own light” (cited in Kumaravadivelu, 2003). Hindu educational tradition also encourages students to take responsibility for their own learning. This tradition affords equal status to teachers and students in terms of their learning capacities, but also advocates respect for teachers, who have attained a certain level of learning and serve not only as facilitators but also as a moral and inspiring examples to their students. Muslim traditions, another important influence in traditional Indian philosophy, also encourage questioning. Stereotypes of textbook-centered education are also challenged by the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi, a deeply influential figure in Indian thought, including educational thought, who denounced the lack of freedom that teachers had under colonial rule and held that a teacher who teaches from textbooks fails to impart originality to his pupils.

This valuing of qualities of critical reflection and engaged learning can also be found among Indian students today. In a survey of Indian engineering teachers and students regarding their conception of what constitutes good teaching, Bhattacharya (2004) found that participants’ opinions of excellence in teaching seem to be more than about just expounding subject matter, and include invoking interest, promoting analytical thinking, and motivating and inspiring students. Thus while “critical thinking”
may be a Western expression, some elements of the concept are not confined exclusively to the West. Perhaps what is needed is not only a new conceptualization of critical thinking but even a new term that is more applicable to other cultures. Howe (2000) points out that in Japan, the word “critical” has a negative connotation and may be translated to imply someone who questions authority or is critical of the government. Instead, he proposes a new term with less emphasis on critical and more emphasis on thinking: the Japanese expression *kangaeru chikara* or “powerful thinking.” This might be the first step required before we can recognize indigenous knowledge systems and learning practices as legitimate systems that have the potential to enrich our own educational thought.

The question that remains is, if critical thought is indeed valued in Indian culture, then why is it not explicitly emphasized within schools, and why do classrooms display features that do not seem conducive to critical thought? I would argue that the constraints on explicit critical thinking within classrooms stem not from deep embedded elements of cultural traditions that are incompatible with critical reflection, but are products of specific historical instances of oppressive social and political structures. In India, for example, many elements of current education, including the rigidity of the prescribed curriculum, limited discussion in the classroom, the heightened emphasis on order and discipline, examinations emphasizing reproductive knowledge over independent thinking, over-crowded classrooms, and inadequately trained teachers are in many ways related to the legacy of colonial rule. In his book on the colonial legacies in Indian education, Kumar (1991) analyses the focus on order and discipline and the view of knowledge that underlies present teaching styles in Indian classrooms. He attributes these to a particular construction of knowledge that arose as a tool of social control under British colonization. Along with the introduction of a curriculum that had absolutely no local relevance to Indian students, they were intended to produce an elite class of colonial subjects loyal to British authority. The students’ duty was to ingest the decontextualized prescribed curriculum, without raising any questions regarding its legitimacy.
Besides questioning Western assumptions underlying the narrow dominant definition of critical thinking that overwrites other cultural groups’ expressions of powerful thinking, it is important to analyze the cultural assumptions embedded in Freire’s theory of critical pedagogy as well. Recent critiques of Freire’s theory have brought up the charge that rather than overthrowing colonialism, it furthers the hegemonic influence of Western culture, by attempting to impose Western assumptions and worldviews on the rest of the world (Bowers, 2005). These scholars have argued that critical pedagogy tends to reinforce, rather than question, the Western Enlightenment assumptions that underlie existing unjust social and cultural systems, including the globalized political economy. Some of these assumptions include a linear view of change and progress, a focus on individual autonomy and freedom based on an individualistic notion of rights, an anthropomorphic worldview that focuses on humanization and ignores ecological concerns. Critical pedagogy is also criticized for seeing traditional and intergenerational knowledge as naive and needing to be transformed, and attempting to impose on the rest of the world’s cultures a single approach to knowledge based on critical reflection (Bowers, 2005).

Whether or not all these criticisms of Freire’s theories are well founded or do justice to the complexity of his ideas, they point to the need to critically examine the cultural limitations of critical pedagogy. Rather than leading to an outright rejection of these useful and complex ideas, I believe these critiques prompt us to take cognizance of cultural contexts before merely transplanting them in other societies, and to adapt elements that might clash with indigenous cultural values—a warning that Freire himself repeatedly put forth. Placing them in a radically different cultural context draws out some of the cultural specificities in the theory, and gives us a starting point to explore some possible avenues for its reconceptualization. Thus the following section explores some aspects of our dominant conception of critical thinking and critical pedagogy that might be in conflict with Indian cultural worldviews and might need to be adapted in that context, in the move towards an empowering model of critical literacy that takes into account Indian educational traditions, and cultural styles of learning.
One underlying assumption of critical pedagogy that might be found at odds with Indian culture is its conception of the individual as the basic social unit and source of critical judgment, with the goal of critical reflection being individual autonomy and empowerment. This orientation towards individual autonomy is also reflected in the dominant conception of critical thinking, which is typically based on teaching independent thinkers to critique other people’s points of view and to defend their own in the face of controversy, and leads to a competitive rather than a collaborative model of learning. However, one common cultural feature impacting learning that has been identified in India is an orientation towards collectivism, where the self is constructed as relational, in contrast to the North American construction of the free-standing self that emphasizes autonomy, independence, and uniqueness (Kanu, 2005). In light of this cultural trend, an emphasis on controversy, debating, and taking opposing views as instructional strategies aimed at individual development might clash with Indian cultural values, as reflected in a South Asian teacher’s response to an attempt to integrate critical pedagogy in South Asian teacher education:

“...because I am expected to fight with each writer over what they have written about the constructivist approach to teaching mathematics (her thesis theme). I feel that if people have studied this approach and written about its benefits it is not for me to challenge and criticize their idea beforehand. My duty is to try this approach in Pakistan before criticizing it, not find fault with it beforehand....” (Kanu, 2005, p. 504)

A more culturally appropriate form of critical consciousness might instead focus on working out different perspectives on an issue together, constructing knowledge collectively through shared responsibility. A collaborative model of knowledge construction could be characterized by intellectual humility, where instead of individuals making up their minds and arguing their preferred opinions against others that might contradict them, there is a greater emphasis on withholding judgment altogether until different points of view have been deeply contemplated and understood. Discussion becomes a means not of doubting and critiquing other individuals or gaining the upper hand in an argument, but of learning from them and paying def-
ference to their experience and perspective, before arriving at and committing to a single point of view. This highlights the value of collective dialogue in the process of constructing knowledge as a community, aiming at collective, not merely individual, empowerment.

Related to the process of critical reflection is also its goal, which is to overcome oppression through critical confrontation and revolutionary means. This reflects a specifically Marxist, conflict-based understanding of reality that may also clash with elements of an Indian worldview. In a collectivist society like India, that emphasizes relationships over individual achievement, people tend to value social harmony and to seek ways to manage conflicts other than open confrontation (Clarke, 2003; Driskill & Downs, 1995). This can be seen in Kanu's (2005) observations of attempts to promote critical reflection within Indian teacher education, where teachers resisted the critical, challenging, emancipatory approach being fostered, seeing it as a combative approach that violated their deeply-held beliefs about maintaining harmonious relations with others. Siddharta (2005, cited in Bowers, 2005) also relates his experience with Freirian critical pedagogy among tribals in Tamil Nadu, India, where he found that the theory’s pedagogical emphasis on confrontational politics went against the tribal culture that favoured consensual ways of solving conflicts, and proved to be inappropriate in that context.

A potential avenue for adaptation of the Western model of conflict-oriented critical reflection is offered by Peng and Nisbett’s (1999) study which found that Asian students tend to favour a more dialectical or compromise approach to dealing with seeming contradictions, by retaining basic elements of opposing perspectives and seeking a “middle way.” This is in stark contrast to the European-American differentiation model of logical reasoning, derived from Aristotelian logic, which polarizes contradictory perspectives in an attempt to determine which of the two positions are correct. Thus a more cooperative model of critical reflection might tend towards reconciling rather than confronting opposing positions. Similarly, critical pedagogy within an Indian context can draw from Mahatma Gandhi’s philosophy of Satyagraha or non-violent resistance, so that oppression could
perhaps be overcome by appealing to the conscience of the oppressor and through cooperative dialogue and passive resistance, as in the Indian struggle from colonial rule, rather than through aggressive criticism or revolution.

Another important feature of Indian society that must be taken into account in contextualizing critical pedagogy is its respect for authority. Critical pedagogy to a large extent fosters a questioning, critical orientation towards authority, privileging the authority of individual judgment over traditional sources of knowledge. The emphasis within critical thinking and critical pedagogy theory on challenging authority and reinventing the world may lead to a disintegration of the social fabric of a community, as in the case related by Siddharta (2005; cited in Bowers, 2005) in which critical pedagogy education among a tribe in Tamil Nadu disrupted the social hierarchy and the sanctity of the tribal chief, which had held the small communities together, and led to a weakening of the sense of community. Fox (1994) points to fundamental differences in the goals of learning and intellectual activity in Western versus many non-Western societies. In many Western societies, students are expected to challenge and dispute rather than accept authoritative opinions and ideas of texts and teachers, to pose new questions and arrive at original arguments and findings. This is in contrast to the task of the student as conceived in many Asian societies, where the student is expected to reflect on various interpretations of fundamental truths that have stood the test of time, and to apply them to their own lives and societies. Indian students see great wisdom in learning from the experience of previous generations and of authority figures, and adult-child relations in particular are more formal and characterized by deference and respect (Clarke, 2003). Respectful silence and listening, rather than discussion and challenge, may be a sign of respect in the process of learning. Thus a pedagogic model that seeks to eliminate all power differences within the classroom and encourages students and teacher to have an equal voice may not be easily adopted or appropriate within this context. A contextualized model would have to take into account the elevated status and respect due to the more experienced teacher, while still allowing students to
actively engage in learning and constructing knowledge within the classroom.

While the critiques of Bowers and others of the Western limitations of Freire’s theories are useful, it is important not to be paralysed by them, but to use Freire’s commitment to context-specific education as a guiding principle in the creation of hybrid pedagogies that are able to empower indigenous groups rather than colonizing them further (Margonis, 2003). Simply because an idea contains assumptions that are more prevalent in Western thinking does not make all attempts to share this idea in another culture destructive acts of colonial domination—as long as these assumptions are critically questioned and analyzed in the context of the new culture. A potential pitfall I see in Bowers’ (2005) critique in particular is a dangerous propensity towards cultural relativism, and a tendency to romanticize indigenous cultural traditions while rejecting ideas that originate in the West as invariably destructive within other cultural contexts. An idea or practice cannot be embraced within an indigenous cultural group simply because it constitutes a traditional practice that must be preserved against external forces. Cultural practices in indigenous groups, as much as in the West, are shaped by ideological and material forces, and are often tied to issues of power and domination. Before accepting that pedagogic practices in India are culturally based and therefore must be kept static, it is necessary to examine the way in which these attributes have developed and the work that they do in that society, in order to be able to decide whether and how they should be challenged. Both Western and indigenous cultural practices can and should be questioned and critically examined, in order to see what is useful and what is oppressive, in the continuing aim of learning from each another through mutual dialogue.

References


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