

# Beyond Paulo Freire

By Siddhartha

## Part 1: A personal journey

When you cannot 'name' your reality you are unable to grasp why you are poor and who keeps you poor. You accept to be taken for the dregs of society, totally oblivious of what is happening to you and your people. You are paralysed in a mist of naïve ignorance, 'the culture of silence'.

These were the 'key words' that jolted the poor and the oppressed all over the world into bouts of collective action that made them subjects of their own destiny, rather than mere objects of the tyranny of landlords, bureaucrats and politicians. The author of these ideas was Paulo Freire, a Brazilian philosopher, who through his 'action and reflection' evolved a revolutionary pedagogy for the liberation of the oppressed. When Freire died on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1997, at the age of 75, the national and international press largely chose to ignore the most original educational thinker of the last half of this century. The times, they have changed, and critical thinking is not in mode.

My involvement with the man and his ideas began 25 years ago when a small group of university students called the Free University, of which I was a part, worked till the early hours of the morning to type onto stencils what was a pirated edition of Paulo Freire's classic "Pedagogy of the Oppressed". By the end of the next day the first hundred copies of the book had rolled off the cyclostyling machine and were made available to discerning Indian readers. We had got hold of the pirated book from the Philippines, a good many years before the Penguin volume was to appear in our book stores. At the time Freire's ideas on transformative education and political change made for heady reading, particularly to those who were young, angry and idealistic. Freire believed that oppressed communities all over the world were caught in the 'culture of silence' which made them passive and powerless, unable to 'name' their reality, much less to change it.

He divided social reality after the Marxist manner into 'oppressed' and 'oppressor'. (Today, the two-class theory has lost much of its lustre. While it is a conceptually useful tool for mobilising people, it is nevertheless inadequate to understand complex social systems. For example, it has never been able to give a reasonable explanation for caste, or religion for that matter.) But Freire made significant departures from the traditional Marxist paradigm. He did not believe that the oppressor had to be destroyed in the process of struggle. The oppressed had an ontological mission to liberate themselves, and in the process, the oppressor as well. Nor did he feel the need of an all-inclusive party that would speak and act in the place of the people. His insistence on action which was informed and critiqued by theory, which in turn was tested and corrected by action, was meant to preclude the possibility of dogmas being disguised as truths.

This trajectory of action-reflection-action, where the oppressed learned to discern the cause of their oppression and then proceed to change it, was evocatively referred to as 'conscientization'. It had little to do with spontaneous, unreflected or dogmatic action. A higher moral purpose was invoked here, for conscientization was to be deeply human at its core, with the humanisation of social, political and economic structures as its goal. What makes conscientization different from other similar theories is its encapsulation in a coherent method of action which can be understood and practised by the oppressed themselves. Central to this way of doing things is a mode of literacy where the act of learning to read and write becomes a process of advancing political awareness. It begins by the oppressed forming a 'cultural circle' to discuss their problems. In the ensuing discussion certain words or themes are found to repeat themselves, suggesting that they have impinged deeply into the collective consciousness of the people. These are 'generative' words which have the potential to unmask the structure of oppression within a given social situation.

For example a community may constantly refer to the word 'slum' in an uncritical manner. To many of them a slum may be a place they are condemned to live in because they are uneducated, illiterate or lazy. Or expressed in our own local idiom a slum may be a place where a community is living out its karma. Learning to read and write 'slum' necessarily leads to an extensive discussion on what a slum means, how it is created and why certain people, and not others are obliged to live there. In this process the community moves from a consciousness that is naive and uncritical to one which is responsible and critical.

Learning to read and write thus becomes a powerful tool to understand the structures of oppression. It leads to action which does not merely provide relief from the symptoms but also goes to tackle the root causes. Freire referred to his method of education as 'liberating'. It is opposed to the 'domesticating' variety which passively transmits information and condones the situation of oppression. For Freire education is 'the practice of freedom'. This is very different from 'the fear of freedom' which afflicts the powerless (as well as a lot of us). The fear of freedom may lead a person to see the roles of the oppressor and the oppressed as the only available ones. The conscientization process goes beyond these debilitating choices.

To be part of this process implies that education is never neutral. In the process of learning one is always making choices 'for something' or 'against something'. Above all, education is transforming. It leads to higher forms of consciousness and greater clarity of action. (I have discovered that all learning has to do with transformation and implies a change in our attitudinal chemistry. Something happens within us, making us aware, creative and energised. Each moment of the learning process is transforming, and we become fully conscious human beings.)

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 begun 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.

I last met Paulo Freire about ten years ago at his modest home in Sao Paulo. He was recovering from the depression which the death of his wife Elsa had caused him. This did not deter him from a serious, if somewhat subdued, discussion with me, where he defended the essential ideas he had nurtured in the past decades. I did not disagree with much of what he said. At one point I suggested that his ideas were far too influenced by the Enlightenment which believed in progress and linear development (even if many referred to the conscientization process as a spiral), where people moved from lower levels of consciousness to higher ones. Coming from India I could not deny that I was at least partially influenced by ideas related to impermanence, to interconnectedness, to the Buddhist notion of the void, to the significance of the here and now. But I also realised that I was not alone in being sceptical of a model of progress which was merely based on higher levels of consumption, of brutal competition in the market (the dog eat dog attitude), of the poisoning of our air, land and water. It appeared to me that we had placed too much faith in concepts like 'progress' and 'development' and that political radicalism, while expressing genuine solidarity with the underdog, did not question the basic orientations of the system. Much of the cynicism and gloom that we saw around us was spawned by the callousness of this process.

Both Marxism and capitalism owed total allegiance to these concepts which were based almost exclusively on the attainment of the proper material conditions. Without denying the importance of material development could we incorporate notions that emphasised community, ecological and spiritual values? Could Freire's concept of conscientization go hand in hand with our own notions, now sadly jaded, of the deeper purposes of existence? He understood my concerns but was probably too depressed with the loss of his wife to comment on them. Despite my reservations there is little doubt that Paulo Freire has permanently changed the contours of 'critical education' and played a major role in deepening local democracy, making it accountable to the poor. As we near the turn of the century it will do us good to shed our collective amnesia and make a qualified return to the springs of hope which Paulo Freire urged us to drink from.

## Part II: Towards an inward-outward politics

Since my first encounter with conscientization many years ago my passion for Freire and his ideas has not abated, although it has necessarily undergone revision and even shifts of emphasis. To write a paper for this workshop I searched hard for a copy of the Pedagogy

and could not find it on my bookshelf or with any of my friends in Bangalore. A few of them had possessed more than one copy several years ago but not anymore. It was the same with his second best known book 'Cultural Action for Freedom'. I don't know how many copies of the Pedagogy I had bought over the years, but there were none left. It was an expensive habit of keeping several copies of a book we liked, although God knows we couldn't afford it in those days, to give away to interested friends and activists. A couple of years ago, when I was in London, I tried getting a copy from Dillons, a large well stocked bookstore, but even they didn't have a copy. All this to say how times have changed for a thinker every social activist in India was familiar with in the seventies and eighties.

The times have changed and I have grown older, although not necessarily wiser. It is a different intellectual climate altogether where one no longer carries a revered book in the head almost in the manner one carries a mantra. The quest for grand theory is today frowned upon, although the poorer countries are always susceptible to catch the virus of patchwork efforts to provide their social movements with vision and purpose. Globally, however, the new trends in social theory, have done away with the subject, so crucial to Freire. (In the de-centring process so many subjects were apparently discovered that it may well be asked which one Freire was addressing!) I am almost tempted to mischievously suggest that the title of this workshop should be 'Getting Away from Freire' instead of beyond 'Paulo Freire'. But if I did that it that would only be a precipitate and blustering gesture lacking in purpose, although the part-intention suggests we are traversing troubled waters where no single method has the answers. Most activists in India are not given to social analysis or critical thinking any more. It is almost as if we have internalised the social-democratic/ liberal political process and do not need to think anymore, as if we have contracted, in the manner of Francis Fukuyama, an ostrich-like 'end of history' malaise.

I am aware that the later Paulo Freire has made some clarifications and modifications of his ideas but I will largely remain with the Freire of 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed', his most influential book. Each time I read or teach Freire I sense a thrill going through me, opening out the pores of my being and urging me to consider that both I and the world can be transformed. The vocation of man is to be fully human and the learning process is the engine of transformation. Since education is not neutral we are either making the journey to full humanity or going the other way. Each time I hear this notion I am awakened to the possibilities in myself, even if I am not always clear if it is as simple as it seems for a community that is oppressed. Or for that matter, in this age of media driven illusions whether it is simple for anybody at all, for both oppressed and oppressor, to avoid being victims of the grand delusion that a market driven society is projecting. But I shall say more of this later. To return to my train of thought, education is certainly the practice of freedom but a freedom that is circumscribed by the hidden hand of a system where both oppressed and oppressors are victims, even if the oppressed experience a double oppression: exclusion from the bare necessities of survival on one hand and partially impacted by fantasies spawned by advertising and marketing industries on the other.

In India, Paulo Freire's contribution to the empowerment of dalits (former untouchable castes at the bottom of the social pyramid), tribals and women has been substantial, even if there is little documentation of it or what happened. The method followed was one of dialogue and confrontation; dialogue within the circle of the oppressed and confrontation against the oppressor. In the process the freedom of the oppressed communities was enlarged. But the enlargement of freedom could go that far and no further. Limit situations were reached within a year or two. Most communities achieved a string of victories in the initial period. For example a dalit community in Tamilnadu was able to force an upper caste landlord to cede a bore well, meant for the whole village, that he had appropriated for himself. Near Mysore, the process led to tribal communities within the forest mobilising to defeat a government plan to relocate them outside their traditional habitat.

These victories eventually led to a plateau without easy exits; the spiral of incremental freedom reached a premature denouement. In the case of the dalits they had certainly travelled some way from the feeling that they were a low and impure community who were destined to be the lowest rung of the ladder, at the mercy of upper caste landlords, bureaucrats and police. They had learnt the importance of networking and political mobilisation. Socially they could now walk with their heads held a little higher. But economically they were the poorest of the poor and there was little they could do to gain a measure of self-sufficiency particularly when they did not own some land. Likewise with the tribals, they were so poor (the men earning about 12 Rs a day in the early nineties) that they could not sustain their struggle for too long against a determined government. Today the displacement process has picked up momentum and the government is resettling them outside the forest on poor land with no water or electricity.

Something else has happened in the nineties that has almost completely transported Freire's ideas to oblivion. This has to do with the end of the cold-war and the collapse of communism as a workable system. As long as the threat of communism was real, particularly in third world contexts, Freire's methods was seen as a soft radical option to stem the tide of communism. Western donor agencies played an active role in supporting empowerment programmes that were based on conscientization, the name given to Freire's method. I do not believe that the employees of donor agencies themselves consciously played this role, but it was a strategy backed by a section of the northern liberal elites. With communism ceased to be a threat there was little reason to continue support for these radical alternatives. Other notions like participatory development and civil society took over from conscientization and political mobilisation. The donor agencies now faced pressures in their home countries to stop supporting radical programmes. From the mid-nineties the rug was pulled from under many a radical NGO. Henceforth they would only receive support for programmes that were non-confrontational, which undertook to create employment skills and implemented projects like micro-credit.

So what had become of the new consciousness of oppressed communities who had moved from 'naïve' to critical consciousness? Even before the donor agencies had changed course limit situations had been arrived at. Protests and demonstrations led by

oppressed groups continued to take place but it was clear that basic economic and political structures would largely remain unchanged. Issues like Human rights issues could be raised within the existing framework as also Untouchability and Bonded labour, to cite a few, but the power structures in town and country would remain substantially unaltered. A few new actors from untouchables, other low castes, tribals, women and minorities might find token representation, but that was all. Not surprisingly even the new entrants began to emulate the oppressors in their newly acquired positions. The critical consciousness of the oppressed, which initially progressed like a spiral from one small victory to another, now petered out in mid-air. The crest was over; it was now a long trough. Cynicism set in. A few grassroots activists struck out on individual furrows of self-advancement but for the communities they came from the earlier momentum had stalled. It is my contention that if critical consciousness does not keep pace with problem solving it will lead to regressive tendencies that are opportunistic, even fascist, in the absence of an awareness, a mindfulness that may sustain an oppressed community through the long troughs and depressions.

This fate was not only reserved for Freire's brand of critical consciousness. The Communist Party of India (CPM) finds itself in a similar predicament. In the southern state of Kerala, where they are in power, they have difficulties reigning in organised labour who go on strike or disrupt public life for the slightest reason. Thirty years ago the very same unions were at the forefront of struggles for land reforms and democratic rights. Today they have nowhere to go. The spiral of advancement has snapped and revolutionary fervour has viciously turned around on itself, rather like a tiger biting its own tail for lack of prey. Investments fled the state a long time ago while the public continued to be held in ransom through period strikes and disruptions of public services. Were it not for the overseas remittances coming from Keralite's who work in the Gulf, the state would have faced bankruptcy. On the creative side Kerala has produced some of the best satire and caustic humour, again the offshoot of profound cynicism. Discerning members of the communist party are aware of the serious problems created by a runaway political consciousness that ran out of credible issues, but most are afraid to catch the bull by the horn. How can they now turn around and say that the vanguard of the revolution is its own worst enemy. Fortunately, a silver lining has appeared in the form of a decentralisation programme, which the party is now vigorously implementing. Forty percent of the state's budget is now put aside for development activities to be carried out by local elected bodies in the villages. This has generated fresh enthusiasm and some of the party cadres now have the possibility of overcoming their cynicism through the implementation of activities like building small bridges, repairing roads and putting up clinics.

Up to the sixties and seventies the struggle was seen in Left and Right terms. It had to do with the division of the cake. The right wanted to appropriate as much of the cake for itself while the left wanted it distributed to the greatest number. But few had pondered on the worthiness of the cake itself. Today we know that the cake has environmental maggots inside and that the icing is laced with pesticides. We also know that the bigger the cake gets the more likely we will ecologically self-destruct. But the push for the unsustainable cake keeps getting stronger and stronger, fed by the relentless need of the

market to grow bigger and bigger, seducing humans with more and more needs. Mohandas Gandhi, who was an early critic of industrial progress, was a fervent advocate of simple living. He believed that ‘ the distinguishing characteristic of modern civilisation is an indefinite multiplication of wants’. His own physical needs were limited, subsisting on simple vegetarian food and goats milk and manually spinning his yarn. His mud hut in his ashram at Wardha is a constant reminder of how little one needs to live gracefully and joyfully. Gandhi fought against poverty, but revelled in simplicity. He was convinced that ‘the world has enough for everybody’s need, but not enough for one person’s greed.’ Today, consumerism has not only legitimised greed but also multiplied needs. The cake is getting bigger and more extravagant, even if many people are largely excluded from its taste, or can experience it only vicariously. Not only are democracies becoming plutocracies and social justice becoming a distant dream we are also in danger of destroying our life support systems by lethally damaging our environment and bleeding mother earth. Perhaps the answer lies in developing paradigms of simple living as alternatives to unsustainable consumerism.

But how do we get there? Does the Gandhian synthesis of spirituality and politics offer an insight to re-start the stalled spiral of Freire? Gandhi’s spirituality was as transparent as his politics. He meditated, fasted and prayed in the thick of turbulent politics. It seemed to have given him courage, compassion and clarity. Not only that, it powerfully connected him to millions of illiterate people in India. A spiritual field was in place that enabled people to soldier on even if the results were uncertain. Gandhi believed in the Bhagvat Gita ideal of Nishkama Karma, that one had to act without expecting the fruits of one’s action. One acted because it was right to do so, and not because one always expected to see the results in one’s lifetime. In times such as ours we need the strength to sustain many actions that may never live to see the light of day in our lifetime. The other beguiling question is: are Gandhi and Freire complementary ? Are there some situations which need dialectical thinking and others where we can seek consensus or honourable compromise?

In the summer of 1989, Raimundo Pannikar and I met in Paris at the house of Marc Levy, a Jewish friend who was an astute observer of political events in France. Marc lived close to Place de Clichy with his wife and two little sons. Pannikar was nattily dressed in a tea-coloured suit and a silk scarf, every inch of a ladies man, although I have never seen him flirt. The conversation that evening veered round to the role of conflict in the resolution of problems. At the time I headed an institute in Paris, of which Paulo Freire had been the founding president, that was concerned with studying social movements. I was half-convinced (in politics, I am rarely convinced all the way) of the importance of dialectics in promoting social change. A landlord and a tenant had to clash for the just resolution of the problem of landlessness. Likewise, one idea clashed with another to produce a superior idea; put differently, thesis and antithesis had to cross swords for a new synthesis to emerge. This was dialectics, the way progress was made, how history charted its course. Panikkar disagreed with me. He believed in dialogue, in the Chinese notion of yin-yang, where reality was not divided into polar opposites, where the yin contained the yang and the yang the yin. Panikkar believed neither in reform nor revolution. For him revolution was only ‘deformation’. He preferred something more

radical, what he called 'transformation'. Transformation was the result of dialogue, not dialectics.

Gandhi was a critical traditionalist who was wary of modernity. He saw industrial civilisation as violent, competitive and destructive of nature. Freire's approach appears to draw from modern sources like Karl Marx and Frantz Fanon, believing in the essential goodness of scientific progress provided the fruits were justly managed and distributed. Critical conscious was totally modern in the way he conceived it. I must admit I have always been a little uncomfortable with his enthusiasm to move people from their 'naïve' consciousness to a critical one. Granted, people can be apathetic and naïve when they face oppression. But Freire does not adequately appreciate that these very same people are naïve about some things and not about others. Apart from being street smart they are also storehouses of traditional wisdom related to health, agriculture and technology. They are also reservoirs of psychological and spiritual energy, which may serve to sustain alternate paradigms that are only partly or entirely non-modern. For example traditional Hindu spirituality has given little priority to competitive and material goals. Buddhism believes that 'nothing is permanent' and that the cause of human suffering is to cling to things believing they are permanent. Therefore Consumerism, which is concerned with possessing and gratifying the senses would be counter to Buddhism. Gandhi himself initially went about imitating western manners and behaviour even going to the extent of taking dancing lessons. But he didn't get far with his uncritical emulation of the English. He soon realised that his strengths actually lay hidden within him and that it did not matter if he was a poor speaker or was frail-looking. He converted his inner spiritual and psychological strengths into a powerful energy for political transformation. (I have always been intrigued at India's inability to win a single Olympic gold medal in athletics. I think that competition in sports is not part of our culture. It has been suggested that our strengths lay elsewhere, in the realm of the spiritual. That's why a nation of one billion people has been unable to win a single gold medal in the Olympics- apart from one medal in Hockey several decades ago when, apart from Pakistan, few other nations took the game seriously.)

The problem today is to know what actions are relevant and what are not. Especially in a world where the market is pre-eminent, where homo-economicus tricks the waste-land of his soul with candyfloss fantasies that titillate, entertain and make-believe. Where market sponsored fantasies and virtual experiences attempt to further lock us into pastures that are lonely and self-centred. Where we are told that reality and objectivity do not exist anymore, that they are chimeras of the mind. Where Paulo Freire's quest to be fully human is one more mind game among others. These are not only pre-occupations among armchair intellectuals ensconced in comfortable northern universities. Their fall out has served to obfuscate the need for alternative political paradigms. It is clear that meaningful political activism is at its lowest point in fiftyyears, although the recent protests at Seattle and Davos may inspire a new post-cold war awareness of the inherent precariousness of the present order and the urgent need to bring changes. But intellectual and virtual obfuscation apart one has only to walk the slums of Bangalore, the city where I live, to see the cruel and sordid conditions in which people are forced to live. (Incidentally, India is now considered to be the largest 'poverty' area in the world.) To billions of people

around the world objective conditions are not hallucinations. Fear, hunger, poor health and the denial of basic human rights are all too real and have little to do with critical discussions concerning objectivity. Likewise, the caring hand of compassion and political activism are equally real and refreshing, wherever they are found.

The presence of multiple subjectivities should not deter us from acknowledging the existence of another kind of subject, which I shall call the 'deep subject'. This deep subject needs to be acknowledged, nurtured and enlisted into the spiral of praxis for its potential to enable us to connect with each other, the earth and the cosmos. It is not an instrumentality but an energy that gives us purpose and coherence, that transforms history even when it is trans-historical. No genuine praxis may be sustained in these uncertain times without the spiritual energy emanating from this deep subject. Transforming action that relies only on rational discourse did have some potential a couple of decades ago, but with the generalisation of the instant gratification syndrome our subliminal desires have little to do with what Freire calls becoming fully human. Today the oppressed and the oppressor are subject to the machinations of the culture of instant gratification, which are peddled by the market and communicated through the advertising and marketing industries. At this point in time perhaps only the deep subject can help discern what may genuinely make us more human and what may not. The metaphor of the bow and arrow may help clarify further. The arrow shoots outward and finds its mark only when it is drawn inward in the bow. This is a self-evident principle. But what of arrows that shoot out without being drawn inward? Obviously they are illusions and not real ones. Our virtual and consumer society is concerned with despatching illusory arrows that cannot find their mark for they were not arrows in the first place. Our political convictions and our desire to change ourselves are lacking in substance because they have not been drawn inwards in the psycho-spiritual bow. And since there is no inward journey there can be no outward journey. Inward and outward go together just as spirituality and politics went together with Gandhi. An outer praxis without an inner praxis lacks conviction. Genuine critical awareness and transformation entails changing external political structures as well as the deep structures of our consciousness. Liberation is as much an inner event as an outer one.

I try to draw my faith from the energy field that permeates my being, that permeates all matter. The Earth is my primary experience of the sacred, the energy field that gave birth to plant and animal, that gave birth to me and my ancestors. I am therefore an extension of other humans, non-humans and nature as a whole. Therefore, when I am compassionate to them I am being compassionate to myself. When I treat the Earth well I treat my mother well. My body is an extension of my mother, the Earth, and therefore my body is equally sacred. When I treat my body well, when I am aware of my feelings and my thoughts, when I nurture the silence within me- then I venerate the sacred in me, the sacred in others and the sacred in the Earth. Only a similar Earth politics can save us from the catastrophe that looms ahead.

In the end we can save the Earth only if we know it is sacred. The energy field that connects the Earth to us is the ground of our being, the spirit that flows through all matter. This same spirit points to another conception of the good life, which has less to do

with accumulating consumer goodies and more to do with the celebration of our inner spaces and our friendships. This Earth spirit will prevent us from destroying our life support systems through the mindless pollution of air, water and earth. It will alert us to the dangers of the media, particularly television, which clutters our minds with inane and deadening bric-a-brac, keeping us from experiencing our true humanity, one that is kicking and joyful, and largely tranquil.

A recent document from UNDP stated that the three richest people in the world are equal in worth to the 600 million people who live in the 47 least developed countries. The ratio is 1 : 200. Years ago, when I was a student radical, a twenty-acre farmer was considered a big landlord. Everything is relative I guess and a twenty acre landlord towers in prestige and power over a landless agricultural worker just as Bill Gates would tower over the rest of the world. Still a 1:200 million ratio is staggering. The ten acre landlord exploits his peasants ruthlessly. But what off all the super rich in the world today, a part of whose wealth can wipe out poverty in the world? Or what of those nations who produce weapons spending billions of dollars, money which could once again go to wipe out poverty and stem environmental decline? All this brings home the point that any amount of conscientization at the village level is not going to matter very much unless there are global movements working alongside local and national ones.

There are some situations which require confrontational critical awareness (Freire) and others non-violent critical awareness (Gandhi). Dialectics and disjunction may serve some situations while harmony and consensus may be the criteria for others, although both approaches must be part of an ethical and spiritual vision. In all cases the effort must be to persuade and win over. Gandhi's concern of not seeing the opponent as an enemy, of not humiliating the other side and working for honourable compromise may work in many situations if they are accompanied by a strong moral force. I am also aware that there are intransigent situations which may require actions like blockades and non-antagonistic threats. In the end we have to build the climate for global consciousness of an ethical and spiritual nature where both the US president, the machete wielding Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda, Mitsubishi corporation and the oppressed Dalit in India become aware that they are all stake holders in the system and that the collective good of everybody necessitates that we dialogue intensively and compromise honourably to solve problems, small and big.