CHAPTER 5

Majority-World Foundations of Community-Based Research

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Introduction

This chapter explores the majority-world foundations of community-based research with a particular focus on the rise of participatory research (PR) in social movement and civil society settings in the global South and its subsequent spread to the North, eventually finding its way into universities. The authors were involved in both the creation of the discourse and the spread of the initial ideas through the International Participatory Research Network. In the 1970s, Rajesh Tandon came to his initial thinking about participatory research while working with tribal peoples in Rajasthan, India. Budd Hall was working at the Institute for Adult Education in Tanzania during those days. The chapter challenges the Eurocentric bias of much contemporary scholarship in the field of community-based research (CBR). It closes with three challenges to contemporary scholars.

Ancient Roots

We quite comfortably accept that some majority-world scholar-activists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have made contributions to the mainstream literature of, what we call today, community-based research. But we also generally accept the Eurocentric fallacy that knowledge-based institutions such as universities and sophisticated knowledge systems are the product of mostly white male intellectuals, with scholars from the United States adding their bits and pieces a bit later in the game. The point of departure for the
thinking of these authors is the historical corrective that posits that the first universities and the first systematization of socially relevant knowledge systems were created in what we can call the majority world. The majority world is that part of the world where most of our people live. It covers Asia, Africa, the Arabic-speaking world, Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Indigenous Peoples of the planet. It is the home of our oldest intellectual traditions, but it also contains the largest number of people living in poverty. Africa is the place where human life is generally said to have originated. The indigenous African knowledge that gave us the ability to survive and indeed eventually flourish as human beings, we would argue, can still be drawn upon (Wangoola, 2002; Odora-Hoppers, 2002). The world’s first known university was not founded as we often see in Bologna, Italy, but 1,400 years earlier in Taxila. The university in Taxila was founded in the former India, now Pakistan, in 700 BC. At its peak, it had nearly 8,000 students in residence and 1,800 scholars engaged in research and teaching. The leitmotif of this university was “service to humanity.” We posit here that Taxila is the earliest known source of community-based research.

The Abbasid period of Islamic history (750–1258 AD) is sometimes referred to as the “golden” era of Islam. During this period, Islamic scholarship and dedication to education was leading the world. Islamic scholars established centers of elite scholarship, where the very foundations of contemporary mathematics, astronomy, physics, and geography were created. One of these early universities, Al-Azhar University (969 AD) located in Cairo, is still active. But the Abbasid Caliphate also supported the first expansion of mass education, with schools created wherever there was a mosque. In contrast, the push for the common school in Europe did not come until the late nineteenth century. The Abbasid period also has a claim to being among the foundational sources for CBR, as there was much focus on applied research resulting in new agricultural systems, water transportation methods, and other tools.

Moving forward centuries, we approach contemporary times where in the 1930s, as part of the need to create a set of political cadres who would work for the independence of India, Mahatma Gandhi urged the New Delhi-based Islamic intellectuals to create the Jamia Millia Islamia, a large and profoundly community-based research-oriented university. Jamia Millia Islamia is the site of the launch in December 2012 of the UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) Chair in Community-Based Research. Gandhi also urged his supporters to create the Gujarat Vidyapith with a focus on mother tongue scholarship and politically effective community-based research. A third university that Gandhi named as one of the three decolonized universities in India of the 1930s was, in fact, already in