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Examining the Indian Farmer Suicides through the Social and Environmental Justice Lens

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Keywords: Indian farmer suicides, Social justice, Environmental Justice, Adult education

Abstract: Approximately 200,000 farmers have committed suicide in India over the last decade. A majority of them are the ones who have been failed by the non-yield of genetically modified cotton per hectare and are dependent on these crops for their daily livelihood. The GM cottonseeds represent the hegemony and oppression of the farmers propelled by the globalization movement. This paper provides an understanding that the social movements against the GM seeds are in fact movements pointing towards the social and environmental injustices and seeks to understand the role adult education can play in addressing the social and environmental injustice.

Introduction

Indian cotton farmers have been committing suicide at an alarming rate. Based on national crime bureau report and other popular news sources it is estimated that 199,132 farmers have committed suicide in India over the last decade of 1997- 2008 (15% of suicides in the year 2008 have been farmers) (Accidental Deaths and Suicides, 2009). The farmer suicides have been acknowledged by the government of India as one of the top priorities of discussion and action. While farmers of different agricultural and cash crops have committed suicides, Navdanya and Gene Campaign** report that a majority of them, are the ones who have used genetically modified (GM) cottonseeds and are dependent on the cotton yield for their daily livelihood.

The GM cottonseeds are being used to repress the biodiversity of India and the Global South (Shiva, 2007). The seeds represent the hegemony and oppression over the 'undeveloped' world by industrialized western corporations. This paper seeks to address to the role adult education can play in addressing the social and environmental justice in a developing country. Drawing from the work of India's foremost socio-political activist Dr. Vandana Shiva, the literature and the news media, this paper provides an understanding that the social movements against the GM seeds are in fact movements pointing towards the social and environmental injustices. The paper expects to make a meaningful contribution to the growing literature on Adult Environmental and Social Justice education with implications for Adult Education.

Background

Multiple socio-cultural along with economic factors are being considered among the leading causes of farmer suicide. Indian farmers face additional chronic socio-cultural stressors when compared to farmers around the world (Venugopal & Jagadisha, 2000). Socio-cultural stressors include illiteracy, the bonded labor system, providing for large families (the joint family system), corruption, predatory debt practices from local money lenders, lack of regulation and technical knowhow in usage of GM cottonseed (Shiva, 2005a; 2005b; 2005c). Environmental

factors include unpredictable weather conditions; changing soil conditions; excess pesticides usage, drought conditions, shortage of underground water (Stone, 2007). Among, economic factors such as high cost of seeds and pesticides; new debt for more seeds have added to the existing stress resulting in high rates of farmer suicides (Shiva, 2005a).

The benefits and detrimental effects of the GM cottonseeds are under the review of these scientists (IFPRI, 2008; ISIS, 2005; Qayum & Sakhari, 2003; Qaim & Zilberman, 2003; Sheridan, 2009; Shiva, 2005a; Yanhui, et al., 2010). Another study disproved the scientific link between GM cottonseeds and suicides (Coghlan, 2008). While multiple studies offering insights from both sides of the argument have appeared, what was not fully considered was the socio-economic impact on the farmers. Factors compounding the socio-economic impact on the farmers included a) lack of provision for full farmer extension support needed for successful crop-cycles by the GM organization (Glover, 2007) b) farmers would always have to buy their seeds as the germination of seeds is suppressed during modification and also be aware of intellectual property regimes for patents held by GM seed companies (ActionAid, 2000). The impact is further compounded by inconsideration in the existing ecologically delicate climate (Shiva, 1997). Each of these aspects represents the hegemony of the western society on indigenous ways of life that needs to be protected and also increases the existing chasm between the developed and the 'undeveloped world'.

Thus, the adult education framework is essential in this discussion for two reasons (a) *the disparity between the have and the have-not's* (b) *the impact of the environment degradation on a select class of people*. These two aspects clearly highlight the 'limited' thinking by most stakeholders in this process resulting in deep conflict and disequilibrium in society. At the heart of any social movements is conflict, and as Dewey said (1963) the role of education theory was to be inclusive in more than one way to resolve conflict. The purpose of this paper is to address the responsibilities, challenges and implications for environmental and social adult education.

Adult Education and Social-Environmental Justice

The roots of adult education provide the very foundation for social and environmental justice. These roots embrace democracy, feminist thought and value adults (across race, class and gender) for their potential. Thus, when a system is fragmented by injustice, it is these very roots that help sustain and disseminate knowledge and creates learning that threatens the democratic foundations of society. We contend that the centrality of the social and environmental justice now needs to be extended to the global south as we experience crisis (see BP oil spill, 2010) that remind us that we all are part of one world.

In the global south and specifically in a developing economy like India developing social and environmental sensitivities along with industrial growth is essential to support an 'inclusive development' agenda. However, the lack of regulations and weak laws has left its farmers particularly vulnerable. The role of adult education for seeking a social and environmental justice is in building a democracy through active citizenship and participatory decision-making (Hill, 2003). Both industrialization of agriculture and globalization present multiple challenges when it comes to building this environmental and social democracy. Raising consciousness of the people for active citizenship and demonstrating the connection between everyday life and need for environmental and social sensitivity is one challenge. The second is questioning the natural economic discourse that privileges industries and corporations (Hill, 2003) over farmer's rights, agriculture skilling and food security and costs. Attending to these interconnections then also comes under the purview of the academy and specifically adult education. The new social

movements (NSM) particularly are about raising the awareness and seeking environmental, social and economic justices.

Environmental Social Movements and Adult Education

The key intention behind social movement is a sustained change through constant interaction through conscious efforts. Among the predominant 21st century NSM are feminist movements; environmental and sustainability movements (Shah, 2002, 2004; Singh, 2001). A bulk of these movements have taken place in Latin America, Africa, where cheap labor, lack of regulations for access to environment and other natural resources have led to their exploitation, aggravated by instable political environment and caving to pressure of the westernized worlds need for products (Escobar, 1988, 1992, 1998, 2004; Esteva & Prakash, 1998; Furman & Gruenewald, 2004; Grudens-Schuck, 2001; Taylor, 2000). These environmental movements increased their impact on grassroots development by restoring land rights, water rights and rights to agricultural products to the indigenous people by increasing knowledge of food rights and dismantling popular power/culture and its hegemony for restoring diversity in nature and humans alike (Escobar, 1998). They achieved this through informal adult education practices (Escobar, 1998)

Environment and Social Sustainability as Social Movements.

The concept of sustainability was first time brought up in the United Nations Stockholm conference in 1972 and has since progressed. The Brundtland commission in 1987 focused upon growing population, environmental degradation and human consumption and defined the measures that need to be taken for survival of the future generations. The existing social movement and the NGO infrastructure can be used to develop and grow the agenda of the sustainable development further (García-Guadilla, 2005). According to UNRISD report, NGO and business relations will have to change and work towards forming sustainable development partnerships. It is essential for these collaborations to create winning opportunities for both corporations and NGOs and create platform for corporate environmentalism. The role adult education can play is by promoting social movements that engage large-scale change by seeking inclusivity of various stakeholders in social and economic development.

The NGO driven environmentalism and social responsibility is visible when globally coordinated protests and consumer pressures can lead to changing environmental and social practices of the corporate. Few examples include a) elimination of child labor in manufacturing of soccer balls in Pakistan; b) changing the strategy of oil extraction in Nigera by Shell and c) changing the policy of deforestation by timber traders in the Brazil Amazonian region (UNRISD, Murphy & Bendell, 1999). These movements are a reflection of the complex stakeholder partnerships between the Northern and the Southern world NGOs that came together for the purpose of pressuring the corporations (Murphy & Bendell, 1999). Similarly, the sustainable agricultural development agenda can be informed from various movements across 'the global south' such as the farmer field school movement in Indonesia (Berg, 2004), the collective action movements for farmer growth and coalition from Latin America and other nations (Grudens-Schuck, 2001; Rice, 2001).

The focus of environmental social movements has been systems thinking, human and bio-centric focus, learning, innovation and partnership with the idea of preserving indigenous knowledge base and social justice (Baviskar, 2001; Shah, 2002, 2004). In fact, they contend that

social justice and environmental justice movements are two sides of the same coin for they seek solutions for the larger dilemma of the human race. Grassroots organizations and corporations alike are becoming involved in the environmental and sustainability movements as the concern over food security; global warming and climate change is rising (Murphy & Bendell, 1999). Environmental movements represent the diverse scientific, social or political interests groups' efforts to address ecological conservation. According to Hawken (1993), the idea is that sustainable management could be incorporated in everyday life through environmentally friendly public policies and by involving grassroots organizations and people from various walks of life.

The farmer's suicide instigated the environmental movements in India. These movements highlighted few aspects such as the connectivity of Indian activists with their foreign counterparts and the farmer's problems are a subset of the larger societal problems. In this capacity, we contend that adult education has a significant role by highlighting the need for ethical governance for all stakeholders and creating space for social and ecological justice through awareness and democratic participation.

Social Justice and Globalization.

The farmer suicides have leveled off but not ended. The suicides are indicative of a wider systemic problem (Glover, 2009; Shiva, 2009). Farmers across the world are succumbing to the pressure of the globalization (Escobar, 2004) and are dealing with their debts either by committing suicides (Shiva, 2004) or completely abandoning agricultural practices and are migrating to urban areas for manual labor for livelihood (*Personal communication*). Large multinational corporations have spread their businesses and products around the world without anticipating their effects on the local communities and governments (Escobar, 2004; Williamson, et al., 2003). Understanding the consequences of globalization and preparing people then includes social responsibility and environmental sustainability is fundamental to adult education principles of social justice. When profits supersede humanity, we need to question the ideologies within which businesses operate.

Failure of the Indian farmer social movement.

The genetic modification of the cottonseeds and their subsequent introduction represents the colonization of the agricultural system (Shiva, 2004). The environmental activism and the call for social justice however failed because of the asymmetrical knowledge and skills about informing the farmers about the pros and cons of the seeds and their adoption. The movements also faced failure for the 'economic' benefits the seeds represented. Furthermore, lack of regulation had caused the spread of the seeds even before they were actually 'launched' in the markets in 2003-2003 (Herring, 2007). The organization responsible for 'manufacturing and selling' the GM seeds have won legally (Gonzalez, 2007). Here, it would be worthy to consider the role adult education could have played in the successful farmer movement and emancipating the Indian farmers. In this case, adult education's role would be through increasing awareness of a) the safety and concerns of genetically modified seeds and b) the inextricable interdependence between socio-ecological and economic systems.

Methodology and Limitations

Our search conducted through EBSCO, Google Scholar and university based search engines. One limitation of the study was the data was largely dependent on news sources and

popular media. A limitation of this study is that one of the authors is from India and may have lent an unintended bias for the study.

Responsibilities of Adult Education

Bhaviskar, 1995; Guha, 1991; Hawken, 2007; Shah, 2004 argue that social justice and environmental justice are two sides of the same coin, in such social movements, especially when discussing conflict between the dominant paradigm and the call for a democratic society. Access to equitable natural resources, clean air, food and water is a basic human right and now a part of the larger dilemma faced by the human race. The human-nature relationship is at the center of the environmental and social justice debate. The commitment to conservation is through sustainable usage of resources, prevention of degradation and removal of predatory exploitation of natural resources. It is the responsibility of adult education to create awareness (Cunningham, 2000) for these issues. Interdependence of economic, social, ecological systems has been the foundation of society as long as civil society has existed. However, the capitalistic domination has taken over the consideration of these systems for sole profit motive. Adult education then has the responsibility for discussing and voicing concerns for equity, justice, and fairness. Raising awareness has been at the core of the adult education principles and it is at this intersection of oppression of farmers and a need for developing a socially and environmentally just society becomes a prerogative for AE.

Challenges for Adult Education

The challenge for adult environmental education is to influence public policy surrounding concerns over food-security, poverty & power and democratization of socio-ecological information (Kapoor, 2000; Hill, 2003). Another challenge is to provide access and enhance ability of the grassroots to addressing problems of poverty and hunger (FSD, 2009). A FAO report suggests that by year 2015, the world food production will far exceed the population need. However, given the suppression of food rights and the concern over food security lurking around the Global South this appears like an uphill task (Shiva, 1992). Sustainable grassroots development is needed to improve the conditions of people at the bottom of the pyramid. The inclusivity of development should be able to include and *operationalize* measures that provide for development across individuals and communities. Thus, the challenges of Adult Education are two fold 1) creating a platform for discussion and b) developing programs and results that showcase and operationalize the grassroots development.

Implications

Agriculture is a significant issue at the intersection of environmental and social justice as the impact of GM foods and subsequent products, pesticide exposure and food security in majority affect the people at the bottom of the pyramid, thus creating a need for increasing awareness and education. Learning within the social movements is transformational in nature and hence effective (Hill, 2003). It is in this capacity that Adult Education plays a pivotal role and also be the cause of fundamental changes by presenting an inclusive and holistic view of nature and human interaction for socio-ecological, political and economical transformation. Creating space for social and environmental justice by challenging the privilege and discrimination associated with inequity are the key elements of environmental adult education

(Hill, 2003). Human behavior transformation for leaving as small ecological footprint as possible can be the vision of environmental adult education.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to highlight the implications and the challenges for environmental social movements as an ongoing adult education concern. Environmental education can address the debate over food rights; creates awareness about equity and access issues; preserving biodiversity and maintaining self-sufficient agricultural practices. International and domestic NGOs have been criticized for discussing the domination of GM crops without evidence, however these very agencies have not produced evidence that proves otherwise (Tripp, 2000). It is at this junction that formal/ informal learning & education can engage communities across the globe for protecting their culture and environment and remedying conditions that foster injustices by questioning the claims of the GM companies and holding them responsible when tragedies like the farmer suicides happen.

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