

Ecofeminism and Indian Gender Standards

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The past couple weeks have been difficult, exciting, strange, uncomfortable, and educational. For one, if I don't remember what type of *dhal* I ate the day before, I will definitely remember the next morning in the washroom. In India you could go on forever about the different stools, bug bites, rashes, and fevers you get, but I won't get into that. For I am here to discover the ways that rural farmers in India, and specifically women, have been marginalized by globalizing capitalist and patriarchal agribusinesses.

After my second week here, the two Japanese women finished their internship. Since then I have been the only foreigner here at Navdanya and the only woman. For an organization that advocates so strongly for the empowerment of women, they sure are lacking in their on-site staff! Nonetheless, solitude in the gender, language, and culture sectors has provided me with so much growth as a woman and as an individual.

There are four women here during the day, three of which are elderly and run the seed bank, but do not speak any English. I've learned sufficient Hindi (one of my learning goals) to ask them, "How are you feeling?" "I like your *Kurthi*," and "Is this a variety of rice paddy?" However, through non-verbal communication these women have showed me that in rural communities that depend on farming to feed their families, mothers hold all of the knowledge about seed saving. It is mothers who will fight for anything to ensure the survival of their children by in which ensuring the success of that seasons crop and the seasons to come. Women ensure that there is enough biodiversity in their fields that should one variety of wheat fail; there are thirteen more to feed the family. Companies such as Monsanto who sneak their chemicals into the farmlands of India and Thailand (the two places I've been studying this topic) through government-subsidized distribution are destroying biodiversity and soil fertility so by enlarge discrediting the very important work of women.

Last week we welcomed Dr. Vandana Shiva, founder of Navdanya and author of many publications regarding food sovereignty and women's empowerment, to the farm. She introduced me to the term 'Ecofeminism' and gave to me a book of hers co-written with German feminist, Maria Mies. She said, "Women are the first to protest against environmental destruction. Science and technology are not gender neutral and we can see the relationship of exploitative dominance between man and nature, and the exploitative and oppressive relationship between men and women in all patriarchal societies." Dr. Shiva explained to me that when large corporations insert their chemicals into the lives of farmers in India, cultural knowledge is lost and crops tend to fail. The people of Doon Valley (where Navdanya is located) have been using traditional farming methods for hundreds of years and now they are being forced into a system of commercial agriculture that destroys the land and the people. Since the Green Revolution, the industrialized food system has exploited farmers and natural resources all over the world.

My growth here has been monitored by the depth and quality of conversation (with people who speak very different English from me which was super difficult at first) and of personal journaling. I've become much more outspoken with my ideas-making me a much stronger female leader. Constantly surrounded by loud Indian men (who usually express their ideas and emotions through quotes and lengthy anecdotes that to me seem to have nothing to do with the topic of conversation) has made me rethink gender standards as they are different for women let alone foreign women in India.

The fourth woman here at Navdanya during the day is Priti, studying the biodiversity of bees in Doon Valley. Her and I got into a lengthy conversation about feminism in India. She told me that Indian women shouldn't subjugate themselves to the roles this society gives them. For example, on all buses in Indian the inner seat is reserved for women. This was an initiative from the government to stop harassment. Priti, on the other hand, believes that women should sit wherever they want and demand to be treated as equal. I've come to what sometimes seems like an intellectual dead end in trying to piece together the role of women in India and Western feminism because I agree with Priti, but at the same time there are so many cases of harassment and abuse towards women so at what point do we need to take precautions? I guess it's probably time to take a woman and gender studies class!

Overall I have been learning so much here and I continue to grow every day. I have no doubt that the skills I am acquiring through farming, working with people of all ages and backgrounds, working in an environment where I do not speak the language, meeting incredible role models such as Dr. Shiva, and researching Ecofeminism will be applicable at Tulane and in any career I go into. I feel that I've been accomplishing all of my learning goals and I am so excited to continue learning.