Ohio University

Fulbright Research Scholarship
Women’s Ecology Movement in India

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INST 6940: Professional Project

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I propose to conduct research on the women’s ecology movement at the Navdanya biodiversity conservation and organic farm in Doon Valley, Uttarakhand and Aranya Agricultural Alternatives site in Hyderabad, Telangana. The primary research objective is to gain a practical understanding of how Indian women teach and apply ecological agriculture in their communities, especially as it relates to indigenous knowledge systems. The research will help to determine whether Indian farmers practicing ecological agricultural methods can cultivate food systems that are more productive and profitable than monoculture food systems. Through participatory observation and documentation, I will develop a theoretical and operation understanding of how such practices effect the livelihoods of women, the sustainability of ecosystems and the economic prosperity of local farmers alike.

India’s shift to industrial farming techniques has undermined the integrity of India’s social, economic and environmental systems. The centralization of food production has weakened the local natural economy as a handful of companies have control over seeds, food and trade. Women have been the largest recipients of the industrial burden as their traditional role in food production is no longer valued. Rejuvenating ecological agriculture addresses social and economic problems that threaten developing countries worldwide. Crop homogeneity eliminate the availability of food and nutrients and thus, has elicited widespread famine among farmers. The reliance on expensive chemical inputs and genetically modified seeds force farmers into debt and give rise to increasing suicides. Local farmers are being denied access to land, water, fodder and fuel—essentials for economic and livelihood sustenance, while simultaneously eroding the land’s soil, water and vegetation quality. Women are most adversely affected by the industrial shift as their burden of work has increased and access to nutrition and health and educational services has declined.
Agriculture framed in an ecological perspective provides a sustainable model for the future of food production as opposed to industrial practices that operate within a reductionist and decontextualized framework. Ecological agriculture is relational knowledge, meaning it is not fragmented. It recognizes the interconnectedness of ecological entities, rather than isolating and commodifying single plant species. The latter option eliminates biodiversity, forcibly requiring the use of chemical inputs to ward off pests and pathogens that emerge from a destabilized ecosystem, reduces access to food and nutrients and erodes water and soil quality. Furthermore, ecological agriculture is contextualized knowledge, as opposed to centralized practices that cultivate crops unsuitable for the local conditions. Ecological practices cultivate plant species that can adapt to changing climates, a necessary trait in times of increasing climate unpredictability.

I plan to meet my research objectives by using qualitative research methods. I will use a participatory observation approach to inform my research methodology. I will take field notes and conduct semi-structures and unstructured interviews asking questions pertaining to the success of ecological farming practices within an environmental and social framework. Interviews will evaluate the success of ecological farming by measuring crop output, soil fertility, and the diversity of species and nutrient availability. Formal and informal interviews will be oriented towards disenfranchised members of society i.e. women, who have been underrepresented by the industrial model with increasing centralized and male control over food production (Shiva 43). Framing research on the lives of women will guide this study within a holistic framework that represents oppressed agents of society whom can help conceptualize alternative knowledge systems that promote inclusivity and celebrate diversity. Research questions will address how the ecological agriculture movement has given women agency in society by determining their level of participation in facilitating knowledge sharing and understanding how women’s practical and strategic needs are being met.
I plan to conduct research at the Navdanya Biodiversity Conservation Farm and Aranya Agricultural Alternative’s Tribal Development Program Area, where I will study the guiding principles and techniques of ecological agriculture, or agroecology, facilitated by Indian farmers. My proposed research will begin at Bija Vidyapeeth located at Navdanya’s Biodiversity Conservation farm in Doon Valley, Uttarakhand. For six months of immersive observation, I will develop an intimate understanding of the application and teaching methods of agroecology facilitated by Indian women for Indian women. I will use qualitative research methods to better understand women’s role in India’s movement for environmental sustainability and measure the effectiveness of their work in terms of the farm’s productivity and profitability. The second phase of my research will begin at Aranya Agriculture Alternatives farm in which I will work alongside professional Indian permaculture practitioners, Narsanna and Padma Koppula, to study how ecological agriculture methods are applied in realistic circumstances. As an intern I will learn from local farmers in participant observation and aid in the development and design of an ecological farming site for rural beneficiaries. I will live and work in surrounding villages and conduct social mapping and surveying to learn about the villager’s needs, gender dynamics and agricultural traditions. I will conduct structured and non-structured interviews to inform my grounded theory in agroecology methodology. The following year, I will self-fund a visit back to the village to follow-up with the farmer beneficiaries and monitor and evaluate the successes and problems of the agroecology project. I intend on taking field notes for the entirety of the project to better understand women’s role in India’s environmental movement and documenting the areas in need of improvement.

The proposed research will contribute to academic literature on ecological agriculture, especially as it relates to women’s involvement in the education and implementation process. The literature is of global relevance as the climate crisis has been induced by the patriarchal mismanagement of nature. I hope to provide exploratory and foundational research to support
women’s ecology movements maturing around the world in response to international industrial challenges.

I am qualified for this position due to my academic and experiential background. I hold an M.A. in International Development with a concentration on the Environment and a certificate in Sustainability & Women’s, Gender and Sexuality. I hold a B.A. in Global Studies with a concentration on Asia and World Religions and a certificate in Global Leadership. I have participated in intensive workshops at Ohio University in project monitoring and evaluation and project management. I hold a certificate in Permaculture Design and have interned for non-profit grassroots organization, Kalimantan Permaculture Foundation, in rural Indonesia. I have also volunteered on an organic farm in rural Jaisalmer, Rajasthan. I have completed one year of Hindi language training at Ohio University with further aspirations to hone fluency through independent lessons. I will hire a Hindi teacher to strengthen my language skills, as well as hire a local translator to promote intimacy with villagers and evoke authentic answers.

I plan to conduct the proposed research at Navdanya Biodiversity Conservation Farm from October 2017 until February 2018 then at Aranya Agricultural Alternative’s Tribal Development Program Area from February 2018 to July 2018.
My attraction to travel reflects an insoluble desire to challenge my perceived notion of reality by finding the contrast among varying representations of society across cultures. I have long-since craved to uncover the deep truths of existence that have been coated by the assumptions of the status quo. My intention for joining the Peace Corps after college was to step outside of an insulated life in the American middle-class and strengthen my relations with the natural order. I envisioned life in the Peace Corps to reflect my desires to live simply. I wanted to live in a village where rituals and story-telling were embedded in the day-to-day. I wanted to challenge my privilege by feeling uncertainty every time I turned on a light switch or sink faucet and I wanted to go to sleep with dirt under my fingernails and the door unlocked. To my surprise, my Peace Corps placement was in China where I was going to be positioned far outside my romanticized bubble, but instead in a contemporary apartment located in a highly populated and polluted city. Rather than challenging my physical reality, China exposed some of my most basic psychological assumptions. I learned to see the world as community, tradition and inseparably tied to nature. Inexorably felt was the tension between colliding values of an ancient civilization and an impeding capitalist world-order. It helped me to recognize the impact of globalization in a society whose ancient traditions were gravely in contrast. My shifted vantage point allowed me to recognize what I valued most: the very earth that supports us. This clarity led me back to the classroom enrolled in Ohio University’s masters program in International Development and Environmental Sustainability.

My first year in graduate school equipped me with incredible knowledge pertaining to the global economy, concepts of sustainability, ecology, and grassroots organizing. Paired with this powerful new knowledge was a devastating awareness. I remember being brought to tears when my professor concluded a semester embedded in climate change discourse with a lesson on “hope”. I realized what I cherished most was wavering as reality adulterated my hope for humanity. That
summer I traveled to Southeast Asia, in which my grief was met with deep gratitude and positivity. I participated in an intensive permaculture design course where I learned of an ecologically-based design system for food production and sustainable living. I was surrounded by people who were conscious of our planetary crisis but did not dwell on it. They were solution-oriented and were living their values in their daily lives. My concluding remarks to this community were drenched in tears and gratitude as I spoke of my hope being restored. I realized that one cannot hold onto hope because they rationally choose to but because they have internalized it through lived experience.

As I continued my studies I discovered the linkages between environmental restoration and women empowerment. The course “Gender, Environment and Development” pigmented my world with feminist theory and ecological justice. I was introduced to the workings of scholars such as, Vandana Shiva, bell hooks, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, who have helped to decode the silent script of my unconscious, enabling me to recognize values outside of the capitalist norm. My classes helped me to recognize that the global economy and patriarchal institutions were in grave discordance with the natural functioning of the planet. I now crave to learn from a different kind of school staffed by society’s silenced voices. I aspire to compliment my western education with that of the indigenous in the context of ecological farming.

The most substantial lessons I’ve learned from the International Development are the dangers of large scale top-down development in which modern western patriarchy’s economic values are imposed onto non-western communities in the altruistic guide of aid programs. My values instead, align with locally-led grassroots movements, in which marginalized and oppressed voices have the agency to identify problems and surmise solutions that are contextually attuned to their unique circumstances. I have learned to perceive development less like a project that is faulted by its’ rigidity and more like a holistic integration of progressive ideas and cross-cultural solidarity.