

## **"Seeds of Discord": Bt Brinjal row In India**

### **Abstract**

Even though scholarship on biodiversity activism in India has acknowledged contribution of multiple players in the process of mobilizing of movements, the researchers have primarily ignored the voice and contribution of indigenous people. This project seeks to understand the contribution of indigenous farmers specifically how they translate and interpret certain universal ideologies and in the process; they create new meanings by combing their own knowledge and worldviews. Theoretically, this project asks how and if marginalized people can revive their local knowledge practices by exceeding boundaries to transform consciousness. Data will be collected through qualitative interviews and focus groups and via discourse analysis of relevant newspaper articles. Data will be then coded and analyzed to see if it is consistent with the research questions proposed for the project.

### **Project description**

The widespread expansions of corporate globalization in the contemporary world have progressed through a violent, chaotic, and divisive process. Corporate globalization is based on "new enclosures of the commons" (Shiva, 2005; p. 2), which transforms all human beings and resources into commodities and robs diverse species and people of their rightful share of ecological, cultural, economic and political space. Though protestors against corporate globalization have been criticized for their lack of appreciation of the process of global integration (Tsing, 2005), the protestors have proved the need of a new paradigm to respond to the fragmentation caused by various forms of fundamentalism. This lead to the emergence of new movements like Earth Democracy that were seen in the streets of Seattle and Cancun and in homes and farms across the world, which emphasized the move from the dominant and pervasive culture of violence, destruction, and death to a culture of non-violence, creative peace, and life (Shiva, 2005). Shiva (2005) avowed that Earth Democracy as a movement aims to reclaim the freedoms and rights of all people and all living beings through everyday actions on everyday issues. In India, the ecological group Navdanya (navdanya.org) started the Earth democracy movement, which provides an alternative worldview where humans are embedded in the Earth Family, and are connected to each other through love, compassion, not hatred and violence and ecological responsibility and economic justice replaces greed, consumerism and competition as objectives of human life. Shiva (2005) explained that Earth Democracy is both an ancient worldview and an emergent political movement for peace, justice, and sustainability. Further, she stated that indigenous cultures worldwide have understood and experienced life as a continuum between human and non- human species and Earth democracy instigates the awareness of these connections by connecting the particular to the universals, diverse to common and local to global. Among the various other movements launched by the Ecological group Navdanya, (under the broad umbrella term of Earth Democracy) neem tree activism (movement mobilized and built at the local levels) was the most noteworthy as it won the biopiracy case. The success of the neem tree activism laid the path for other activism like basmati rice, Indian wheat. Further, neem victory brought to the forefront that most patents are based on the appropriation of indigenous knowledge, which violates the basic criteria of patent (novelty, nonobviousness, utility) as they

range from direct piracy to minor tinkering involving steps obvious to anyone trained in the techniques and disciplines involved. This study is focused on a more recent activism in India, the Bt Brinjal Seeds row that was initiated in July 2009 as part of the Seed sovereignty movement (Beej Swaraj). Following Mahatma Gandhi's inspiration from the Salt Satyagraha (Gandhi's non-violent protest against the British salt monopoly in colonial India) Navdanya declared the launch of "Beej Satyagraha" against Seed Laws and Patent Laws. These laws seek to make sharing and saving of seed a crime by making seed the "property" of companies like Monsanto, and forcing indigenous farmers to pay royalties for what was their (India's) collective heritage. The Beej Swaraj campaign, demands that Indian laws should not legalize patents on seed and food, and should review Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property's (TRIP) in order to exclude patents on seed and food. The movement pledged to protect sovereignty to save native seeds and grow food freely without MNCs domination and control. The mission statement of the movement was "*We have received the precious gift of biodiversity and seeds from nature and our ancestors and we pledge to protect our rich biological heritage and fundamental freedom to save and exchange seeds*" (navadanya.org)

Even though Navdanya was the initiator of the Beej Swaraj movement, numerous other actors like indigenous farmers, local women, scientists, student, lawyers, academicians and ecological activists, mobilized the movement. Out of this wide scope of research of understanding how activism is mobilized by multiple actors, this study focuses on brinjal (eggplant growers) farmers, particularly how they define sovereignty, how they construct themselves as actors, what are their ideologies, how they conceive certain specific objective, how objectives differ based on locales and how through differences coalitions are devised to mobilize the movement.

### **Framing research questions**

The Indian peasantry is the largest body of surviving small farmers in the world, where two thirds of India makes its living from the land. However, as farming continued to be disconnected from the earth, the biodiversity, and the climate, and linked to global corporations and global markets, and the generosity of the earth is replaced by the greed of corporations, the viability of small farmers and small farms were destroyed. In 1998, the World Bank's structural adjustment policies forced India to open up its seed sector to global corporations like Cargill, Monsanto, and Syngenta (Sreelata, 2012 July). The global corporations changed the input economy overnight. Farm saved seeds were replaced by corporate seeds, which needed fertilizers and pesticides and could not be saved. As seed saving is prevented by patents as well as by the engineering of seeds with non-renewable traits, seed has to be bought for every planting season by poor peasants. A free resource available on farms became a commodity which farmers were forced to buy every year. This increased poverty and lead to indebtedness. As debts increased and become unpayable, farmers were compelled to sell kidneys or even commit suicide (countercurrents.org). More than 25,000 peasants in India have taken their lives since 1997 when the practice of seed saving was transformed under globalization pressures and multinational seed corporations started to take control of the seed supply. Seed saving gives farmers life. Seed monopolies rob farmers of life. The global intellectual property law of the Information Age followed the seed monopolies, where developing nations like India had to be fully compliant

with the agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property (TRIPs). The WTO imposed deadline that from January 1, 2005, India would have Western-style intellectual property rights in everything from medicines to seeds. For more than a decade, the developing world had resisted this moment (Sunder, 2007). Ever since countries like Brazil and India were pressurized into signing TRIPs during the Uruguay Round of WTO negotiations (Sunder, 2007), they consistently argued that strong intellectual property rights helped the West but would devastate the rest.

Previous scholarship on globalization and intellectual property rights (Chander & Sunder, 2004; Sunder, 2007) have shown how Boyle's (1996) notion of the Romantic author under globalization have robbed Indian farmers of their social, cultural, economic identity as a producer and deemed them merely as "consumers" of costly seeds and costly chemicals sold by powerful global corporations through powerful local elites. This study differs from the previous studies as it aims to understand the local ruptures that were triggered by India's entry into the modern intellectual property world. Sunder (2007) mentioned the case of an award-winning farmer in Kerala who developed a high-yield method for planting rubber trees, but later when somebody tried to plant (rubber tree) in the same way, the farmer objected and stated that he would get a patent in this. Sunder (2007) noted an apparent shift in appropriating intellectual property in India, as the farmer who had only elementary school education had some idea about this particular law where you can stop somebody else from using his conceptualized method. However, this shift is neither complete nor uncontested as Sunder (2007) further demonstrated that there were constant contestation between the traditional view which promoted against monetary benefit in exchange of knowledge share and the above mentioned case. After a decade long resistance to intellectual property laws, many in India began to question how these laws could be beneficial to them. This led to an increase in appeals for GI (Geographical Indication Act of 1999) of goods, which was seen as a source of recognition and income for India's poor rural as protection will allow local artisans to stay in their communities and fend for themselves, without having to renounce their traditional work. As Sunder (2007) pointed out even though GIs certainly hold promise for the poor, they have limits as it protects only those goods or processes whose quality or reputation are shown to be "due exclusively or essentially to the geographical environment, with its inherent natural and human factors" (p. 114). Therefore, even though by reifying the negative and emphasizing on the need for attention to the other side of intellectual property Boyle (1996) invented the public domain, Sunder (2007) pointed out that this has obscured the inventiveness of traditional knowledge and rendered it as ancient, static, and natural. In continuation to Boyle's work and the prescient works of other intellectual property scholars like Vandana Shiva the space of discussing intellectual property's distributive and social effects is expanding through vast coalitions and activism from around the world. However, Tsing (2005) asserts that as global connections have become messier it is required to turn attention to the discontinuity and awkward connections. Therefore, this project aims to understand; "What are the local understandings of intellectual property? How are they conceived and circulated within the community? Do they serve different purposes to local communities and other interested parties? How are these understandings used within the local, social, and cultural system? How are they understood, circulated, and remixed within the communities, individually, and collectively? How do different actors with their own set of understanding and ideologies (created around certain local and specific meaning) use universal rhetoric to manage and device

coalitions? How do encounters across differences exceed boundaries to transform consciousness?"

### **Importance of this research**

Previous scholarship on the movements or struggles in India has always used the dominant lens to understand the problem. Chakraborty (1994) explained that Indian histories have been conceived through the process of translation, which resulted in the emergence of analytical history where through abstraction of capital everything is made exchangeable with one another. Through his conception of History 2, Chakraborty (1994) beckoned scholars to understand more affective narratives of life forms, which are porous but not exchangeable through an abstract term of equivalence. This study will attempt to fill in the gap, by focusing on understanding ideologies, meanings at the grass root level. In order to understand the Beej Swaraj (sovereignty) movement at the grass root level, I will use Tsing's (2005) conception of scale making to understand the indigenous narrative, how indigenous people construct their agency, how ideas are mobilized to bring about consciousness, and how in spite of differences they contribute to activism in their own way. Secondly, as Mirzoeff (2011) proposed understanding the contestation between the nation who incarnated authority and the vernacular that strived against dependence becomes necessary to understand how new political agents are formed. Finally, as Chakraborty (1994), noted sovereignty in India is conceived from the perspective of the state and in this construct, the conceptions of the indigenous people are lost. Therefore, this study is particularly as it attempts to understand the indigenous conception of sovereignty.

### **Making of scales**

Due to the extensive tentacles of corporate globalization farm saved seeds were replaced by corporate seeds in India and a free resource available on farms became a commodity. In 1993 instigated by various ecological activists groups, half a million Indian peasants pledged to resist classification of seeds as private property. In response to the crisis of agricultural biodiversity, ecological group Navdanya (navdanya.org) started the movement of seed saving. In their mission statement, the ecological organization stated that conservation of agricultural biodiversity is impossible without the participation of the communities who have evolved and protected the plants and animals that form the basis of sustainable agriculture. The program works to promote ecological agriculture based on biodiversity, for economic and food security. The prominent universal encouraged by Navdanya (the primary initiator of the Beej Swaraj movement) among its different collaborative activist groups were the principles of becoming self-sufficient & self-supporting and the philosophy of seed sovereignty conceived. However, as Tsing (2005) explained collaboration does not mean simple sharing of information, nor does it indicate that all collaborators share a common goal. Instead standardizing knowledge or goal suppresses certain truths that are incompatible with the universal. Beej Swaraj movement has brought together multiple players ranging from national ecological groups like Navdanya, state art and cultural groups, local women's alliance and local farmers, therefore, it becomes necessary to move beyond the assumption that solidarity indicates homogeneity. This is because as Tsing (2005) demonstrated each actor are engaged in their own scale-making project where they translate ideologies and meanings based on their understanding of the world. Additionally, Tsing (2005)

emphasized, "Differences invigorates social mobilizations" (p. 245). In order to understand how varied groups who disagree about the common cause and objects of concern locally reconfigure universalist causes, this study aims to unpack the scale making process of local brinjal (eggplant) farmers, who configure and translate meanings based on their local ideologies and understanding.

### **Vernacular discourse**

Chatterjee (1993a) argued that marginalization of the internal "other" in the post-colony by the political elites is likely to propel them to seek national and global acknowledgement of their plight by invoking the logic of Enlightenment (i.e. equality for all) on which the postcolonial nation is supposedly created. Mirzoeff (2011) asserted that vernacular images provide a different mode of predicting solutions to social problems. In this study, I will use Mirzoeff's (2011) concept of "vernacular" (p. 31), to understand how discourses work within and reinforce dominant logics of what makes common sense and how they challenge those logics. According to Ono and Sloop (2002), dominant discourse is concerned with political, social, and cultural norms and maintains, "The commonly accepted (and institutionally supported) understanding of what is just, good or bad" (p. 14). Based on Mirzoeff's (2011) concept vernaculars counter posed with dominant discourse signifies any position incommensurable with dominant or normative positions and it is not necessarily just a disagreement or conflict or inversion of dominant discourse instead a political agent in itself. Further, he explained that vernaculars emerge from marginalized communities and work on the basis of differences rather than litigation. Moreover, as Mirzoeff (2011) pointed out vernaculars do not just reflect culture, history, and differences but also produce them. In his innovative work on intellectual property laws, Boyle (1996) had stated the failure of intellectual property system; however, it is time now to recognize that utilitarian theory of intellectual property is without more, not working. Therefore, keeping in mind Tsing's (2005) conception that meanings are interpreted and translated by different actors present in different contexts it becomes particularly important to analyze the dominant and vernacular discourses, as it would then help to recognize how indigenous people are both receivers and producers of knowledge. This is because as Sunder (2007) explained, "Failing to promote poor people's capacity for creative work and their participation in global culture and commercial markets hinders development..." (p. 124).

### **India's conception of sovereignty**

The national discourses create a particular collective identity to legitimate particular ways of collective life by transcending individual differences as the subjects accept the extant identity positions. Therefore, discourse is constitutive of social relations where all knowledge, talk, and argument takes place within a discursive context through which meanings are shaped for its participants. Powerful groups define who makes up a nation, and those who are outside of it. Chatterjee (1993a) pointed out India is a high status based society and there are tremendous disparities between classes. Predominantly in urban middle and upper classes areas, peoples' socioeconomic and educational status puts them in "respectable positions" and provides them with relatively easy access to education, and jobs. According to Chatterjee (1993a), as postcolonial nations attempt to bring all masses under its fold, a considerable population remains

distanced from the evolving ideals of nation. These marginalized citizens are not, therefore, proper members of civil society and are not regarded as such by the institutions of the state. Balibar (1991) argued that when a society is conceived through the paradox of nationalism, the imagination of a nation-state, the effort of creating a unified community leads to further divisions in the society. Further, he asserted that though excess racism is linked to the fact that nationalism is formed in opposition to class struggle and shortfall of racism is linked to the fact that class struggle is repressed by nationalism, both in fact have combined effects. This is because he explained that the phenomenon of institutional racism comes out as a key player in the construction of the category "masses" (p. 204). Additionally, Foucault (1978) stated that when a society promotes political form of sovereign the value of pedigree becomes very important as in such a society power is constituted around the blood lineage. Post colonial India is primarily constituted through two ambivalent national discourses of "unity in diversity" and upper- caste Hindu hegemony. While the nation is constituted as a homogenized diversity through the discourse of "unity in diversity" which attempts to imagine an Indian nation that embodies cultural pluralism, overlooking caste, race religion, or linguistic differences that make up the composite whole (Sarkar, 1998). For a newly formed postcolonial nation, the language of political transformation was one of compromise, emphasizing secularism and democracy at the expense of justice and redistribution. Hence, the dominant group, stressed on "unity" through the logics of homogenized diversity. This excluded the subordinate groups defined by class differences and helped in the consolidation of hegemony in Indian political scenario. This nationalism excluded the "others" and constituted their vision of India based on three, not necessarily mutually exclusive, approaches: constituting and containing the "other"; constituting and containing the "other," its marginalization; and finally exclusion. The denial and omission of differences also subvert an understanding of the structuring of exclusion and oppression. Modernist scholars of nation emphasized the recency and constructedness of nations as social creations of the elites in pursuit of political and economic goals (Anderson, 1991; Giddens, 1985). They recognized however, that national subjects also participate in this construction by either buying into the discourse of the elites, by opposing it, or by constructing themselves as subjects independent of the elite construction. These initiates tensions or frictions among multiple groups competing to define a concept (sovereignty) according to their own interests. This is because not all subjects buy into the fiction of "the people" created by the powerful groups (Khan, 1994). Therefore, considering how India as a state conceives sovereignty, this study will use Tsing's (2005) conception of scales and friction and Mirzoeff's (2011) notion of vernacular to understand how indigenous people conceive sovereignty and how irrespective of differences they collaborate with others, which in turn mobilizes activism.

## **Methodology**

India being an Agrarian community there is a wide difference in language, ideology between farmers from different geographical area. This study will utilize multi level qualitative approach involving in- depth one- on- one interview with local farmers, focus group discussion with community members from two different rural communities in India. The two selected areas are the state of West Bengal and Karnataka focusing specifically in regions within the two states that have a significant number of brinjal (eggplant) growers. I selected these two areas not only because these two states have the maximum number of Beej Swaraj activist groups (Natarajan,

2013), but also because of their difference in terms of language, geographic locales, and ideologies. Apart from interviews, I plan to do discourse analysis of news published regarding the activism in those two selected areas as well as national news. I will use community newspapers example Deccan Herald (Southern India) and Ganasakti (Eastern India). I will look at three mainstream English language national newspapers in India: *The Times of India*, *The Hindu*, and *The Indian Express* to understand how local activism is interpreted at the national level. I will analyze articles from August 2009 to July 2012. I am choosing this time frame as during this period the controversy regarding Monsanto's illegally use of indigenous brinjal seeds to create GM seeds came into prominence, which triggered country wide uprising, questioning the need to reconsider patent law.

### **Relevance of the research project**

In the claim to invention of traditional knowledge as numerous scholarship pointed out (Boyle, 1996; Deloria, 2004; Mirzoeff, 2011) the concept of traditional knowledge, too, is a modern invention, which is created to further obscure indigenous people into the image of primitive. Although India's IP act Geographical Indication is seen as a potentially important source of recognition and income for India's rural poor, who have been displaced and forced further into poverty by globalization, the protection of only those goods or processes whose quality or reputation are exclusive to a specific region have adverse effects on indigenous economy. This is because it neglected other regions that even though produces similar products lacks in reputation and therefore have rendered culture as static. As Sunder (2007) noted that cultural rights often lead to the ironic production of authenticity or indigeneity, which conforms to traditional structures from the past, rather than celebrating cultures as diachronic peoples who are dynamic and heterogeneous. There have been extensive work focused on activism, but majority of the work that have focused in India have ignored the voice of the indigenous people, by constructing indigenous people and culture as primitive and therefore, unworthy of having any role in activism. Works on intellectual property of seeds and plants have likewise ignored the voice of the indigenous even though they project movements as Beej Swaraj as attempts to save indigenous knowledge and culture. This project is therefore unique as it aims to use the lens of scale making (Tsing, 2005) to portray the voice of the indigenous farmers, particularly how each individual actors form and attain agency, how images are formed, and what ideologies are embedded in those images. Ideas that are formulated via those agencies and how ideas are mobilized to bring about consciousness and how irrespective of differences they come together in social activism even when they each differ in their specific personal objective.

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