

## **RE-IMAGINING EDUCATION**

**Plenary talk by  
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I come from the faraway magical land of Rajasthan, India. My work in essence is about regenerating peoples' diverse knowledge systems and cultural imaginations of what constitutes happiness and progress. I work to inspire young people from all over India to understand that they are not school dropouts or failures but rather Walkouts. They have left the rat-race dream of the so-called mainstream global economy and mainstream education and are now ready to walk on to new possibilities based on localization.

My journey has led me from a place to where I believed that modern schooling was a solution to all of the world's problems to a place where I now see it as one of the roots of the problem. I used to think that the education system was broken and we needed to fix it. Over the years, I have understood it to be a well-running machine for destroying the human conscience, deep human connections and diverse human creativities. Today, I believe that modern schooling is one of the greatest crimes against humanity. It brands millions of innocent children as failures and renders many diverse ways of knowing and expressing as invisible. It forces people into the global economy while destroying their options for other ways of living. The Millenium Development Goals and the new Sustainable Development Goals, both of which have been drafted with beautiful intentions, perpetuate this monoculture of the mind and urgently require deep rethinking.

I would like to start my presentation by transporting you to New Delhi a few days ago. I was with over 5000 small farmers and representatives of several social movements from all over the country who had marched to challenge the new executive order by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, which overturned certain key provisions of the Land Acquisition Act. Restrictions on buying land are cited among barriers holding up projects worth almost \$300 billion in sectors such as rail, steel, mining and roads. So in a push to placate corporate investors, the new government decided to step in and remove its own transparency and

safeguards like the need for obtaining the consent of affected land-owners and carrying out social impact assessment when it wishes to acquire private lands. On Parliament Street, these 5000-plus mostly uneducated folk slept on the road waiting to hear whether the government was willing to review the appeal. Their beds consisted of a thin plastic cement bag on the cold ground. The neon red traffic light flashing all night was a reminder of the restlessness of city life.

Twenty four hours later, their demands were turned away by the government. This was expected because a dilution of the critical provisions of the Ordinance would have compromised Modi's image as a tough, decisive leader, besides disappointing his key constituency of big business. But facing opposition from allies and amid fears of being branded as anti-farmer, the government softened its stand on the [Land Acquisition Act](#), saying it is "open to accepting good suggestions on their land reforms."

During this time, the issue was framed as small farmers vs. development. The Finance Minister said: "Don't create an environment where infrastructure and industry become bad words." Several arguments were debated in the media which are worth observing:

- These villagers are uneducated and therefore unqualified to know what was best for their communities. They are being misguided by anti-national activists.

- These people do not want to do farming anymore. Farming accounts for very little of their daily income. The educated youth wants to sell their small parcels of land and move to the city.

- There are 180 million educated youth coming into the workforce in the next 10 years, we need to jumpstart more large-scale factories and special economic zones so that we can provide jobs to these young people and stave off massive unemployment. Removing barriers to land acquisition is the key to more development and economic growth.

As you can see, the links between the dominant global economy and modern schooling run very deep. The moral basis of corporate rule and unlimited economic growth rests on the rationale of the white man's burden. Basically it was our moral duty to civilize the 'illiterate savages'

by providing education to them lest we be accused of violence, exploitation, theft, etc. We had in one swift blow silenced their wisdom by deeming them as 'uneducated and incapable' and empowered ourselves to assume control of their resources and guide them how to lift themselves from poverty and become a 'developed', 'democratic', 'healthy', and now these days a 'sustainable' society. On top of this is our moral duty to provide formal sector jobs to all those unemployed who have been educated away from local agriculture and local crafts. To carry this out, the dominant logic tells us we need more economic growth and inviting more foreign direct investment, trade and multinational corporations are the best vehicles for this. The goals of education, development and progress cannot be questioned. There is no alternative; our imagination is trapped in a vicious cycle of reform.

I spend some time talking with the protestors. I ask them about their homes, their lands and their families. They tell me that the land is very important to them; they do not want to sell it even if paid more money. I ask them why their kids have not come with them to participate in this important protest. They tell me it is because that they are in school. I silently wonder whether the next generation of school-going villagers will have the same love of their lands and deep solidarity bonds to their communities.

You must have heard that there have been some 300,000 farmer-suicides in India since 1995. But what you don't know is that the modern education system is everyday murdering the dream of being a small farmer. This is strange because 65% of the population is still linked to farming. Today if a child by rare chance raises his or her hands and says they would like to be a farmer in school, they get severely humiliated. The only professions worth aspiring for are doctor, IT engineer or government servant. White-collar jobs are portrayed as more prestigious for marriage prospects.

Let me give you some more examples of what I have seen in village India:

The culture of schooling teaches children that their elders did not know how to farm properly and were not capable of managing their own affairs without the State. Manual work with the hands is shameful and drudgery. Sweating is bad unless it happens in a gym. Progress lies in replacing one's labor and one's community collaborations with large

scale mechanized technologies and shifting from growing food crops for consumption (she crops) to growing cash crop agricultural commodities for export like soya, cotton and sugar (he crops).

The culture of schooling teaches children that learning only happens in the classroom and knowledge is only in textbooks. What is worth knowing is what appears on black and white exams. Spending so much time in the four walls of the classroom and extra tutoring classes does not leave time to develop deep emotional and spiritual relationships with fields, trees, rivers and animals. So these slowly shift from being family members to becoming commodities.

The culture of schooling teaches children that competition and individual achievements are absolutely essential for success. In a system based on harsh external authority, children lose trust in themselves and each other. This has led to break down of the joint family system and commoning bonds of mutual sharing, caring and collaboration. It is amazing how rapidly the idea of family changes in one generation of schooling from being like an image of 100 people to now 4 – two parent and two kids. The majority of land grabbing has actually happened from the common grazing lands in villages.

The culture of schooling teaches children that their local languages are 'dialects' and their way of life is inferior and thus they lose faith in their own solutions, their own experiments and in making mistakes. They are taught that their salvation for their self-esteem lies in pursuing urban consumerism and their standards of beauty, sense of security and comfort. Their future is in the city. For this, there is a need to increase dependency on money, loans and the cash economy.

The culture of schooling teaches children that food should be standardized and generic. Our sense of taste has been colonized, particularly by white flour and sugar, provided by the government mid-day meal food scheme. We have lost the real and subtle taste of many things. I remember hearing that a few years earlier some communities in Rajasthan rejected free Monsanto maize when they discovered that neither their animals nor themselves liked the taste of the new variety... The politics of the living palate. Many of our educated children have rejected millets as well wild forest foods in favor of wheat and rice.

I hope you can see how modern education has been critical to the demise of human-scale farming and enslaving us into the global economy. In India today we are seeing a new role for government school teachers in the great land grab. They are becoming the new land mafia brokers in villages between urban private developers and villagers. They have access to government bureaucracy and also have some access to capital from their salaries. They also have relationships with the villagers. So they are able to convince villagers to sell their lands and buy them cheaply to re-sell to urban developers.

I don't believe that a genuine localization movement can be built unless we radically rethink education as a system. We talk about saving our environment, saving our seeds, saving cultural diversity... but we have outsourced from our lives our most precious gifts, our children, and at the same time, we have silenced, maimed and exiled our grandparents. It is important to note that there are very few spaces for genuine intergenerational dialogue left in industrial society.

I would like to conclude by highlighting a growing movement towards the idea of peoples' universities around the world. I have been involved with co-founding one these five years ago. These are very conscious attempts to both strip away the moral legitimacy of formal schooling and to resituate the idea of the university in peoples' diverse knowledge systems. We are trying to rebuild our cultural confidence that we can even question the idea of education. A lot of the important work today must be around unlearning, that is unraveling the fundamental beliefs and assumptions which we have built modern industrial society on.

We are not on the fringe. Even those in mainstream education recognize that they are just going through the motions, what they are doing is not really working. There are 3 key aspects which I would like to highlight from Swaraj University :

- 1) Questioning the Idea of Centralized Certification  
Healing ourselves from diploma disease
- 2) Questioning Who Can Be a Guru  
Power of the Informal Learning Hands and Heart and Nature and Silence

3) Questioning the idea of copyright and commodification of knowledge Culture of Collaborative Learning

If we want to really change the game, we need a new understanding of peoples' knowledge and power, a new re-imagining of education and wisdom, and a new kind of dialogue between the global north and south.