GRANDMOTHER'S UNIVERSITY
PROMOTING WOMEN'S WISDOM AND TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

MAYA GOBURDHUN*

Beginning of February 2007, Navdanya organised its first ever Grandmother’s University, gathering at the Bija Vidyapeeth learning centre, situated on its organic biodiverse farm in Ramgarh Village near Dehradun. The gathering was attended by over fifty participants, including about ten resource persons who have made seminal contributions in their sphere of activities.

It was strongly felt that such a gathering was necessary to protect and promote women’s traditional knowledge since the era of globalisation and liberalization has been posing a threat to this knowledge - be in the field of biodiversity, food or health. This was in fact underscored totally by all the resource persons in their presentation as also by the participants during the interactive sessions. Unfair laws such as the Seed Law, food related laws or laws designed to curtail the practice of midwives and their negative impacts on women’s traditional knowledge were discussed.

The Grandmother's University course was launched by Great Grand Mother Usha Maira. In her presentation Usha Maira spoke about Gandhi whom she had the privilege to physically touch as a young person. Taking on from that episode, Usha went on to speak about the importance of hands. In the highly mechanized era where hands are considered both “unsafe” (in the processing of food) and inefficient (on a mechanized farm for example), Usha Maira emphasized how important it is to use our hands for various activities. It is only the experienced hands of grandmothers or mothers who can first prepare the dough to its needed elasticity and then roll out rotes to its needed thickness. Likewise, embroidery by hand, handloom textiles, which are becoming a luxury and endangered item, and pottery making etc., all attest to the relevance and importance of using hands skilfully, and that skill is passed on to the next generations.

Singer Vidya Rao unravelled some of the intricacies of Indian classical music and acquainted us with some of the custodians of that music. Vidya learnt with maestros but also went in search of some special compositions to ‘tawaifs’ (Indian Courtesans) who in today’s world have been reduced to the status of prostitutes. However this was not always the case; in the past they were considered to be women well versed in refined ways and various arts, including ‘thumri’ (a musical genre). Very graphically Vidya described how, as these middle aged women taught their love songs, the whole concept of what is beauty, the connection between age and beauty came out of stereotypical boxes and acquired a new dimension. Today when so much importance is given to the body of the women and how it must look, these tawaifs through their music show us that beauty cannot be constructed but is a matter of grace and culture. Vidya also shared with her audience how the musician is intimately connected to her music in a spiritual experience. Her presentation was punctuated by evocative and vibrant renditions of compositions by Kabir and other poets.

Sudha Soni chose to take the participants through a “guided tour” of Kerala, the State to which she belongs. Taking a typical day in her life as a young girl growing up in Kerala, she showed the close links that exist between biodiversity and traditions, as for example in the maintenance of the sacred grove, where some specific plants and trees are tended with great care and purity. From her presentation, it transpired that traditions were based on knowledge regarding biorhythms both in Nature and the Human Body. People ate for example as per the biorhythm of seasonality or some taboos were imposed also to respect the biorhythm of the microcosm that the human body represents.

In her session Dr. Mira Shiva, deconstructed the power behind pharmaceuticals and the hazards they cause and this bolstered the relevance of traditional medicines. She explained the causes of the Alma Ata Declaration (1978), which stipulate that health is the right of all living beings. She

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* Maya Goburdhun is Director Navdanya
shared the importance of understanding the holistic concept of health as articulated in the Declaration on comprehensive primary health. She explained how patents on drugs cause distortions which are further aggravated when it is accompanied by biopiracy, and she pointed out the importance of understanding the diverse health cultures in our society and the need for health literacy to protect ourselves from exploitation in the name of medicine.

Dr. Shiva gave some examples of irrational and hazardous medicines which are aggressively marketed in spite of being known to cause congenital malformation and serious adverse drug reactions. She said that there was a shortage of essential and life saving medicines, and elaborated on the role of traditional medicine as well as the campaigns regarding Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights – 'rights' that put trade before public health. She gave the example of the pending case of the pharma multinational Novartis regarding Glenic - a medicament for chronic myeloid leukaemia. Novartis sells Glenic for Rs. 1,20,000 per month, whereas the generic equivalent costs a patient Rs. 10,000 per month. If Novartis wins the case the cheaper generics would not be available to the poor and the vulnerable would suffer the most.

Through the use of iconography and rituals Janet Chawla’s presentation brought out the close and intimate linkages that exist between the macrocosm of the earth and the microcosm of women’s bodies. For example, the concept of ‘narak’, commonly translated as hell, which the woman is supposed to be in during her periods or during childbirth, to use Janet’s words “can be understood as the site or energy of the unseen inner world – of the earth and the body”. And she goes on to add that “narak connotes filth but also signifies the fertility or fruitful potential of the earth and the women’s body”. She also emphasised the major contribution of ‘dais’, traditional midwives, in the field of childbirth and women’s health. Her session meshed informatively and excitingly with all the traditional knowledge the midwives of Garhwali had shared with the participants in the previous session. The fact that dais prefer not to use pharmaceuticals, such as pain inducing injections, was underscored by the midwives who showed the plant they stick in the hair of a women in labour to facilitate childbirth.

One of the dais narrated an incident, which illustrates the total dichotomy that exists between the way a clinical natal centre functions and the way a dai does. She told us about a woman who was in her eighth month of pregnancy and noticed that her baby’s movements had stopped. Her family rushed her to the health care centre and luckily asked the dai to accompany them. On realizing that the unborn baby must already be dead, the centre refused to attend to the woman. Ultimately, after much anguish and expenditure of finances,
energy and time, the family brought her back home where the dai, with the help of the plant already mentioned and with her expertise, helped the woman to deliver the still born baby. The clinical callousness of one system and the human and empathy laden approach of the other system come across very clearly in this anecdote. Also one can imagine how drastic the consequences would be in such a case if the practice of dais were to be made illegal.

Mira, Janet and the traditional midwives of Garhwal very clearly brought out how urgent it is to protect women’s traditional knowledge in the health sector. The presentations showed how this knowledge is anchored in biodiversity.

A morning session was shared by Shashi Tyagi and Rashmi Sharma. Shashi Tyagi, who has closely worked with communities in Rajasthan explained how by going back to traditional systems of rainwater harvesting like the ‘khadins’, her organization was able to revive agriculture in water scarce regions.

Rashmi Sharma spoke about the harmfulness of industrially processed food. Using several examples such as salt, oil and sugar she explained how harmful chemicals are. how such chemically ‘refinded’ products have lost their nutrient profile and have become health hazards. On the other hand, the artisanal way of cold pressing oil retains all its beneficial traits. Artisanal sugar such as gur (jaggery) and shakkar (a powdered form of jaggery) are full of vitamin B complex and devoid of the chemicals used to so-call purify sugar. Rashmi also delineated the role of multinational corporations and the market behind this ‘adulteration’ of processed food.

Women’s traditional knowledge in the field of cooking was showcased by Mrs. Badhwar and Kiran Badhwar who taught the participants simple, yet nutritious and tasty recipes.

The last session of the Grandmothers’ University was devoted to the seed issue and was shared by Vandana Shiva and Percy Schmeiser. They both talked of the dangers of seed pollution through genetically modified organisms (GMOs), the threat to biodiversity and the benefits of local seeds.

All sessions allowed time for ample interaction with the participants who either clarified certain issues or shared their experiences. During the interactive sessions, it transpired for example that problems regarding dams in Garhwal and in Mexico were quite similar and participants felt that may be one should use the borderless world to make common protests on common issues, thus giving globalisation a new dimension.

At the end of the three-day sessions, all participants and resource people were reinforced in their feeling that a space, such as the Grandmother’s University, which seeks to celebrate and promote the vast mine of knowledge women have in various fields such as agriculture, food and health, is very much needed.