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Natural Farming Movement

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Prologue

This conference is being organized basically to commemorate the meeting and subsequent dialogues of Lanza del Vasto with Gandhi. Through dialogues and meeting Lanza came to know, the true meaning of life and he imparted it to the whole humanity. Let me tell an important meeting I had here in Wardha 14 years ago, in 2003, on the occasion of International Seminar on Conflict Resolution, in which I attended as a participant. On that occasion I had opportunity to meet Shri Sunderlal Bahuguna, a noted Gandhian environmental activist. Since then, I have been regularly visiting him in the Uttarakhand in the northern part of India, and doing research on the Gandhian environmental movement in India. It was through Sunderlal Bahuguna that I came to know about a Japanese farmer and philosopher, Masanobu Fukuoka and his Natural Farming techniques, which is the main theme of this paper.

1. Introduction

Today, the agricultural sector is in a critical condition in the most parts of the world. In Japan, for example, the number of farmers has been rapidly decreasing in the last 50 years from 60 lakh families to 25 lakh families. The average age of the farmers has been rapidly increasing. It was 66 years as per 2010 data. If you walk around the countryside in Japan now, you would easily recognize that many parts of the country agricultural fields were abandoned. It is only because of the lack of farmers who are ready to engage in agricultural activities. The way of farming has also been drastically changed. After the industrial revolution and subsequent mechanization in the beginning of the 20th century, the green revolution in the middle of the century, and the recent biotechnological revolution, the agricultural sector have been highly industrialized and commercialized. Farmers have been reduced to mere industrial laborers, and fields have been converted to industrial factories.
Before 20 years ago, in 1997, one Japanese farmer visited Wardha. His name is Masanobu Fukuoka. When I met him 10 years ago in 2007, a year before his death, at his home in Ehime, Japan, he confessed that, at the time of his “meeting” with Gandhi-ji at Wardha, he was deeply convinced that, if Gandhi-ji were alive now, Gandhi would agree that the natural farming was the only way out from the disastrous situation the human being and the mother earth were facing now.

2. Masanobu Fukuoka and Natural Farming

Masanobu Fukuoka was born in 1913 in a village in Ehime, in the fourth largest island in Japan, Shikoku, in the southwestern Japan. He was a scientist, and he was working at the laboratory at the Customs office at Yokohama. In 1937, he suddenly fell ill, and was hospitalized. After a while, his condition became better, but he was not completely recovered both physically and mentally, and was roaming around in the Yokohama city. One day, in the early morning, when he was still half-asleep at a park. He told us that he had sudden encounter with God, and he understood that everything in this world is immaterial. After that kind of enlightenment, he quit his job at Yokohama and came back to his native farm in Ehime. Here he began his experiment of alternative way of farming. By 1950, he arrived at the conclusion that the natural farming would be the best method for sustainable agriculture.

The natural farming, or Fukuoka method, is based on four principles: no-tillage, no-fertilizer, no-pesticides, and no-weeding. Many people doubted whether this radical method was practical or realistic at all. From the interview, I had conducted in the month of September 2017, with Masanobu Fukuoka’s grandson, Hiroki Fukuoka learned many things about natural farming. The interview at the Fukuoka Natural Farm, where his grandfather, his father, and himself were practicing the method for more than 60 years. The total amount of yield from natural farming was just as same as the ordinary conventional way of farming. The appearance of the products from the natural farm would be worse, but the taste would be better than those from conventional farm. Some scholars argue that, in the conventional farming, weakening of the plants and vegetables were mainly due to the excessive use of chemical fertilizers which makes the plant susceptible to insects’ attacks. The pesticides used to control it have come ineffective because of the gaining of resistance by the pests. It leads to the creation of new varieties of insects and the resultant new diseases. What is needed is, according to Hiroki Fukuoka, the attitudinal change of costumers, who are now choosing the better appearance and less quality, and cheap agricultural products.

3. Natural Farming Movement in Japan

Unfortunately, in Japan, the natural farming is not so famous, and very few people
know the name of Masanobu Fukuoka, even in his native place, Ehime, where I am now living. However, of course, among the farmers who have been searching for alternative way of farming, or better way of farming, Masanobu Fukuoka has been a legendary figure. In Japan, there is one more legendary founder of natural farming. His name is Mokichi Okada, the founder of a religious sect, the Church of World Messianity. Mokichi Okada’s natural farming has more religious or sentimental in nature, and is a part of his distinctive religious philosophy. Most of the natural farmers in Japan adopted both the Fukuoka’s and Okada’s methods. That is why, in Japan, there are very few farmers, who have been following purely Fukuoka’s method. According to Hiroki Fukuoka, there are only two farmers’ families in Japan, who have been strictly following Fukuoka’s method. This comment made by the grandson of Masanobu Fukuoka may be a surprising one.

From the viewpoint of Masanobu Fukuoka the organic farming may not the best way of farming. However, I think, the organic farming is an important attempt in our search for better agricultural practices. In Japan, the organic farming has gradually gaining momentum with some supporters who practice the same. In 2006, the Japanese Government acknowledged the importance of the organic farming, and decided that both the central and local governments should promote organic farming. There is a specific Act for the Promotion of Organic Agriculture. Although the number of farmers, who are doing the organic farming, is only 0.5% of the total farmers in Japan, the number has been gradually increasing according Nakajima. (Nakajima 2015: 9-10). Also, the average age of farmers engaged in organic farming is relatively better as compared to conventional farmers. It is 59 years old in the case of organic farming (Nakajima 2015: 10). In 1999, the Japanese Agricultural Standards for Organic Products were set up by the government. However, the standards were in consonance with European situations. It is to be noted that the system of land use in Europe is entirely different from Japan. It excluded many indigenous organic farmers who developed their own ways, which were different from the international standards. A serious debate on this issue has been taking place in Japan whether we should follow the European standards or we will make our own standards taking note of the realities prevailing in the country (Nakajima 2015, Masugata 2017). The history of organic farming in Japan began in 1971. Many books written by Albert Howard, who started the organic farming movement in Indore, Madhya Pradesh, India, have been translated into Japanese language. Rudolf Steiner’s Biodynamic method and the Permaculture have also influenced the organic farmers in Japan.

4. Glocalization of Natural Farming

The natural farming movement in Japan is not so strong. But the natural farming has strong roots in various parts of the world. I call this phenomenon the Glocalization of natural farming.
The natural farming has spread globally, but rooted in different localities in different ways.


Masanobu Fukuoka visited India three times. The first visit was in 1987-88. Pannalal Dasgupta, a Bengali social activists, invited him, and Saiji Makino, a teacher of Japanese language at Shantiniketan, who was related to a Japanese Buddhist Sect, Nipponzan Myohoji, were accompanied with Masanobu Fukuoka as a translator. They visited Calcutta, Shantiniketan, Banaras, Bombay, Hyderabad, Rasulia, Pune, Madras, Pondicherry, Kanpur, Delhi, and Bhubaneshwar. They participated in the 28th All India Sarvodaya Conference, the 15th All India Science Congress, and met with the then Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, and M. Swaminathan. Masanobu was awarded the Deshkottam at the ViswaBharati.

The second visit was in 1991. SamalSinha (?), the Director of the Department for the Development of Degraded Land (?) at the Ministry of Forest & Environment, India, invited him. He visited Calcutta, Madras, Bangalore, Sundarbans (WB), Chambal canyon (MP), Delhi, Punjab, and Imphal. He met the then Prime Minister, NarasimhaRao and the then Minister of Forest & Environment, Kamal Nath.

It was in his third visit to India in 1997 when he came to Wardha. He visited Bombay, Nagpur, Wardha, Sevagram, Paunar, Kalpavriksh farm at Valsad in the Gujarat. He attended the Birth Anniversary meeting for Gandhi-ji on October 2, 1997.
The meeting with Masanobu Fukuoka definitely brought a deep impact on some people. Mr. Raju Titus is among such people. He lives in Rasulia in the Hoshangabad district in Madhya Pradesh. I stayed in his farm in the last August, and conducted interviews. He had almost given up farming because of the bad yield when he encountered with Masanobu Fukuoka’s One Straw Revolution. Soon after reading the book, he sold out the cattle, and started the natural farming in 1985. It was very fortunate for him that the condition of his farm got become better, and, in 1987, Masanobu Fukuoka himself visited his farm. Raju-ji told me that the encounter with Masanobu Fukuoka was the decisive moment, and since then, he continued the experiments of natural farming till date. The main productions from his farm are; wheat, goat, Subabul tree, and other vegetables. This combination is different from the Fukuoka Natural Farm in Japan; rice, wheat, various kinds of citrus fruits, and other vegetables. However, it is apparent that the natural farming was deeply rooted in the Titus Farm at Rasulia. This is an example of glocalization. Raju-ji told me about his confidence that, in one day, the whole world would follow the Fukuoka’s method.

5. Concluding Remarks

When I got a job in 2015 at Ehime University, which is situated only 30 minutes drive from the Fukuoka Natural Farm, I felt I was destined to involve in this glocal Natural Farming Movement. Twice in a year, since then, I have been visiting the farm with some students, and involving in the farming work. Whenever I visit the farm, it is interesting that, there are always some foreign guests from various parts of the world. The Fukuoka Natural Farm at Ehime is now a place for the glocal encounter and dialogue.

As Gandhi-ji pointed out in Hind Swaraj (Chapters 2, 3, & 8), in order to bring about the change, people have to be awakened, to be aware of the present condition, and to have the feeling of discontent. For the awakening, one needs to have the experiences of encounter and dialogue.

References
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