



Ecology and global solidarity

Swedish Folk Colleges for a more sustainable world

Julia Hedtjärn-Swaling and Camilla Josefsson

Ecology and Global Solidarity is one among the many courses offered at Folk Colleges in Sweden, as a means of equipping people to look at our globalised world through a different lens. In this article, two Swedish students talk about their motivation to enrol in this course and their eye-opening field experience with the indigenous communities in the Nilgiri mountains of India. They are assured that the course is equipping them to follow their dream of fighting for a more just and sustainable world.

'Olangae ithiya?' Every morning we greet the office staff in Kurumba and at least four other local languages. Working at Keystone Foundation in the Nilgiri mountains is surely a multi-cultural experience, especially for us, two Swedish youth volunteers coming to southern India for five months. The Nilgiris are home to several indigenous communities such as the Todas, Kotas, Kurumbas, Sholigas, Badagas and Irulas, and we get to learn about them on a daily basis. Being here, 2000 metres above sea level, is also a thrilling adventure. Following indigenous honey hunters and organic farmers in their everyday life is one of the most interesting parts of our one-year course, *Ecology and Global Solidarity*.

Folkbildning

We study at the 'folk college' of Biskops-Arnö near Stockholm. Folk colleges are informal, creative and very different in structure from the regular universities. It is the students themselves who learn and teach each other, while the teacher provides guidance. Students share thoughts, knowledge and seek new insights together. Most of the

folk colleges have a general course to enable people to finalise their high school and continue to university. The colleges also offer a variety of courses in, for example, arts, music and journalism. Our course, Ecology and Global Solidarity, is one of the travelling courses, through which young people are stimulated to look at our globalised world through a different lens.

Today there are 148 folk colleges in Sweden, catering to about 30,000 students each year. The schools receive financial support from the state and can therefore keep all tuition free of charge. Folk colleges are often run by community organisations, churches or county councils. Together they have influenced rural development in Sweden over the years. They use an alternative form of education called *folkbildning*. It is a form of participatory education that has been practised in the Nordic countries since the 19th century.

The aim of the folk colleges is to dissolve the gap between the elite and the common man. In fact it set the foundation for a movement that gave labourers, farmers and women more

knowledge thus liberating them to take an active part in initiating the process of democracy building in Sweden. Through education the labour class got the tools to fight for their rights, a key outcome of which is the well-known Swedish social security system. The results of *folkbildning* are not as noticeable today, but yet important. Nowadays people take the welfare system for granted. What our parents and grandparents fought for is about to disappear, and that is why *folkbildning* is still a must.

Most folk colleges are boarding schools which provide plenty of additional opportunities for learning in the evenings, often organised by the students themselves. At our school we have yoga, choir singing, pottery making, poetry readings, sports, photography, African dance, documentary film evenings, and an organic cafe. And don't forget, our college is situated on an island with views of cows grazing in the fields outside our window. The entire atmosphere is an inspiration to both body and soul. And for us, studying at the folk college is most about personal growth.

Experiencing other cultures

All kinds of people, no matter what age or background, can study at folk colleges. Each person, through his or her personal experiences, has something unique to offer. However, more emphasis is given to people who have only a short basic education, are unemployed or disabled, and to immigrants. Our class has only eight students. The two of us are 21 and 30 years old respectively and have very different experiences and backgrounds.

The purpose of our course is to raise awareness for the sustainable use of natural resources and to work for a righteous society. It is organised together with *Future Earth*, a network of NGOs in Sweden, South America and Asia, involved in ecological activities from a social perspective. To practise what we have studied, we have been given the opportunity to work with an Indian NGO within the Future Earth network. So, that is how we ended up at Keystone Foundation in the Nilgiri mountains. Keystone works together with indigenous communities on an ecological and economic basis to strengthen their position in society. They also try to showcase the important interactions between humans and nature through agriculture, land development, local governance, marketing of their own organic products etc.

Our stay in India is funded by Future Earth through Sida (the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency). Before coming to India, we had a two-week course at Sida's training centre. After that, we spent another two weeks at an organic farm in Sweden, which was different from India in many ways, but at the same time similar in thoughts and objectives.

Towards a sustainable world

While the poverty limit has been set at one USD a day for humans, it is ironic that a cow in Europe gets more in subsidies from the EU. Something has gone very wrong, and to passively stand aside and watch is to tolerate this immorality. We cannot accept this hypocritical worldview anymore and we sincerely believe that our world can be improved. We wish to take an active part in the on-going struggle to make the world a better place for all. This has been a strong reason for us to enrol in this course.

Former students who have completed this course are now working at Future Earth or in other NGOs. Practical experience, from both India and Sweden, will definitely help us in finding similar jobs. But, most importantly, we would never have learned so much had we only depended upon books for our education. This is truly a school of life.

Together we can succeed

Living in another country has made us see our own lives from another perspective, and in turn has made us question our lives, motives and purposes. For example, we now know more about the Kurumbas of the Nilgiris than the indigenous Samis in northern Sweden. Where should we put our effort? What can we actually do to make a difference? How can we truly live as we learn? Maybe the only place where we really can act effectively is at home.



An Irula women's group in southern India building their new Village Resource Centre, initiated by Keystone. Here they will be able to improve their income through value-addition from non timber forest products.

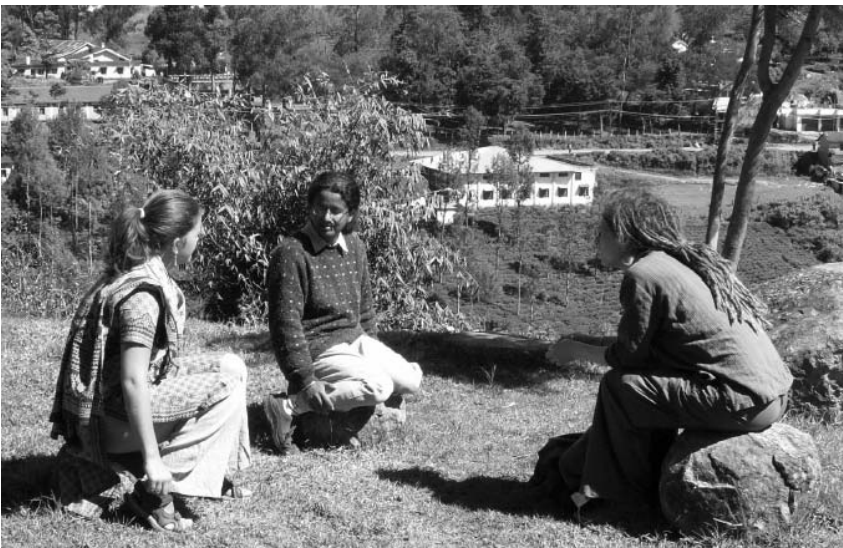
But seeing other people's work, in a different country's context, has made us realise that all of us are working for the same goal. There is only one world and we need to work as a team in order to make a difference.

When we return to Sweden, we hope to undertake some information sharing together with our classmates. We plan to organise a two-day festival to show a different image of India than the one that is normally seen in newspapers. We want to create interest and enthusiasm in the civil society by showing that it is possible to make a constructive change in the world. The two of us are also working on a cookbook, which will be a guide to South Indian food as well as a promotion on an organic lifestyle for a healthy planet. This cookbook is in its final stages of production and we hope to come up with an attractive fare of thoughts to spice up people's lives.

As many of us have realised, the world is in a critical condition today. However, knowledge gives us the power to question this condition. That is what folkbildung is really about. And folkbildung happens all the time, all around the world, through dialogues between people in their everyday life. We wish to inspire people to work towards a socially and ecologically sustainable earth. We can only succeed if we join hands and forces.

For more information:
www.keystone-foundation.org
www.framtidsjorden.se
www.folkhogskola.nu

camillajos@yahoo.se
juliahedswa@hotmail.com



Intercultural learning and solidarity: Julia (R) discussing with Anita from Keystone and Tobias from Future Earth.

