

YES! Magazine Winter 2003: What Would Democracy Look Like?

Earth Democracy - an interview with Vandana Shiva

by Sarah Ruth van Gelder and Vandana Shiva

Vandana Shiva is a physicist and an organic farmer, an instigator of India's historic tree-huggers movement, and a renowned author. She speaks internationally on the perils of globalization, while mobilizing fellow citizens to reclaim their rights to life itself.

Sarah Ruth van Gelder: Tell me about the Earth Democracy movement. Where did that notion come from, and what form is the movement taking?

Vandana Shiva: The notion comes from a very ancient category in Indian thought. Just like Chief Seattle talked about being in the web of life, in India we talk about *vasudhaiva kutumbkam*, which means the earth family. Indian cosmology has never separated the human from the non-human—we are a continuum.

When the issue of the patenting of life emerged, for example, there were two levels of response from those opposing this practice in India. The one level was resistance: This is immoral. Life is not an invention. Life cannot be a monopoly. You cannot sell us the seeds you stole from us, and you cannot charge us royalties for the product of nature's intelligence and centuries of human innovation.



photo by Linda Wolf

The second level was the reclaiming of democracy: people claimed the right to look after their biodiversity and use it sustainably. This came out of discussions among the movements we've been building at the grassroots.

I remember one meeting of 200 villagers who had been involved in seed saving and seed sharing with Navdanya, the trust that I founded to save seeds and promote organic agriculture. These 200 villagers gathered on World Environment Day in 1998 and declared sovereignty over their biodiversity—not sovereignty to rape and destroy, sovereignty to conserve. These 200 villagers, gathered in a high mountain village near a tributary of the Ganges, said, We've received our medicinal plants, our seeds, our forests from nature through our ancestors; we owe it to them to conserve it for the future. We pledge we will never allow their erosion or their theft. We pledge we will never accept patenting, genetic modification, or allow our biodiversity to be polluted in any form, and we pledge that we will act as the peoples of this biodiversity.

These discussions in villages all over India, in many different languages, led to amazing actions. Some wrote letters to Mike Moore, director-general of the WTO saying, We noticed you have passed a law called 'Trade-Related Intellectual Property Rights.' We also notice that under this law you want to monopolize life forms. Unfortunately, these are resources over which you have no jurisdiction, and you have overstepped your boundaries.

Similar letters went to the prime minister of India: You are the prime minister of this country, but we are the keepers of biodiversity. This is not your jurisdiction. You cannot sign away these rights. They were not given to you. We never delegated them to you.

But the ones that were the most beautiful were crafted literally under the village trees and addressed to Ricetec,

Inc., which patented Basmati rice, and to the Grace Corporation, which patented the name. The letters said, □We've used Basmati for centuries. ... Now we hear you've got a patent number for this, and you claim to have invented it. This kind of piracy and theft we know happens. There are people who steal in our village, and we treat them with understanding. We call them and ask them to explain what is the compulsion that led them to steal. So we invite you to come to our village and explain to us the compulsion that made you steal from us.□

These communities started in years past by saving locally bred seeds and saving biodiversity. Now they are seeking self-governance over food systems, water systems, and biodiversity systems.

If you think of the fact that corporate globalization is really about an aggressive privatization of the water, biodiversity, and food systems of the Earth, when these communities declare sovereignty and act on that sovereignty, they have developed a powerful response to globalization. Living democracy then is the democracy that is custodian of the living wealth on which people depend.

Sarah: Is the same language being used elsewhere to counter corporate globalization?

Vandana: There is, I think, a spontaneous resurgence of thinking that centers on protection of life, celebrating life, enjoying life as both our highest duty and our most powerful form of resistance against a violent and brutal system that globalizes not just trade, but fascism, and denies civil liberties and freedoms.

There isn't any one coordinated language for this movement, and that's the beauty of it. The WTO-related events in Seattle created the first experience of a rainbow politics□a successful pluralistic politics, without the working of a master mind, but with the currents and beauty that come out of free thinking. In the new politics, people have different ways of talking, but I feel the core will be living democracy and living economies [see YES! Fall 2002], and that it will include both taking personal responsibility to make change and being part of national and international movements for change.

Sarah: You've written about four types of insecurities□ ecological, economic, cultural, and political□and how each results in violence. Could you say something about why you consider each of these forms of insecurity?

Vandana: The ecological crisis is a severe form of insecurity, especially in conditions of poverty when rivers are polluted and you have no clean drinking water, when groundwater is exhausted and you're forced to migrate. There couldn't be a deeper insecurity than this. Many conflicts within Third World countries are related to the practice of exploiting resources faster than nature can renew them or diverting them away from where people need them. Dams in every society have become major sources of conflict. As water scarcity grows, neighbors, families turn against each other.

Sarah: Many people assume that scarcity has always been part of the human condition and that scarcity is closely related to population increases.

Vandana: In my 25 years of work on resource and environmental issues, one thing I have learned is that different parts of the planet are endowed in different ways. There may be little rainfall in the deserts of Rajasthan, but the culture of Rajasthan evolved to manage that amount of rainfall, and they have developed miraculous technologies for harvesting and storing what rain they get. They have sophisticated underground storage systems and water-harvesting systems so that not a drop is wasted. These technologies still sustain cities like Jodhpur and Jaipur. They have enough drinking water because they've developed a conservation culture, and they grow crops that don't need much water. The moment you think the desert of Rajasthan should be growing rice paddy or cotton, you create scarcity.

Scarcity is not a result of uneven endowments□that is diversity. Scarcity is having a mismatch between a culture and nature's giving. Cultures have evolved cultural diversity to mimic the biological diversity of

climates and ecosystems. It's when that relationship is disrupted that you get unsustainable population growth.

There is no society in which you've had so-called population explosions as long as societies have lived within the context of their rights to the resources and the ability to conserve those resources for the future. Just look at two situations. In England, the population explosion started with the enclosures of the commons—when peasants were uprooted from the land and had to depend on selling their labor. In India, 1800 is the watershed for the consolidation of colonial regimes. For centuries before 1800 our population had been stable. When you depend on the land, you know there are five people who can be supported. You work your society out so you have five. When you are selling your labor power on an uncertain basis, in an unstable wage market, you know that having ten is better than having five. So dispossession from the Earth's natural wealth is at the root of instability and population growth.

Sarah: So economic insecurity is actually created?

Vandana: Instead of leaving seeds in the hands of the peasants who co-evolve them in partnership with nature, seeds become a monopoly in the hands of five or six global corporations. Instead of water belonging to millions of local communities, water too is to be controlled by five or six global water giants. These are recipes that use economic systems to appropriate for the few the base of survival of the majority. The 80 percent who are dispossessed of the wealth of nature move into economic insecurity, because their livelihood as peasants, as fishermen, as farmers, as tribals, as forest dwellers, all depend on having the fisheries, the land, the forest, to make a living. When those rights are taken away, they become economic refugees—they become disposable people.

This economic model rested on the assumption that the favored 20 percent would gain security as a result of these policies. But recent events on Wall Street show us that this model creates economic insecurity both for the 80 percent who rely on natural wealth and for the 20 percent who rely on virtual wealth, because virtual money is a construct, and that construct can disappear as easily as it is created.

Either way, economic insecurity is the legacy of a finance-driven, capital-driven, corporate-driven economic model that is destroying our natural capital and the resilience of local economies.

Sarah: The third type of insecurity is cultural. You've made a connection between globalization and the rise of nationalist violence and right-wing repression. What kind of evidence have you seen that there are links?

Vandana: Well I'm a physicist, not a social scientist. But as a citizen of India, I have had to suffer the violence and brutality that comes with rising fundamentalism, and I've asked myself how a society that is the cradle of peace, the land of Gandhi and Buddha, could be reduced to one of the most volatile societies in the world.

One incident that contributed to my understanding of these links was the violence that erupted in the Punjab in the 1980s. As the magic of the Green Revolution started to disappear, as subsidies were removed and an artificial system of prosperity started to decay, the Punjab became the birthplace for anger and discontent. When you look at why people were fighting, you find they were fighting for their rivers, for fair prices, for a say on when dam waters should be released. None of this was decided locally or regionally—it was all decided from the capital, Delhi. So the discontent was against centralized regimes in which people had no share in shaping their future.

More recently there have been clear indicators of how fundamentalism is growing out of the economic insecurity of globalization. Let me just give you two examples. In the late 1990s, because of the pressures of globalization, onion prices went up from 2 rupees to 100 rupees. The ruling party lost what became known as —the onion elections— of 1998 because they allowed this price increase. The opposition parties used the onion as the symbol of their fight against globalization, and they won in every state. Immediately after that we saw a

round of fundamentalist violence.

In Gujarat, we had another set of regional elections, and the WTO, agriculture, and farmers' survival were the major issues. Farmers said they were being destroyed by globalization policies, and they voted the ruling party out of power. Immediately after that the fundamentalist wave erupted, the genocide and warmongering started, and while public attention focused on the violence, the globalization agenda was pushed further.

As decision making is centralized away from local communities to national governments—and ultimately to corporate board rooms, financial markets, institutions like the World Bank, IMF, and WTO—representative democracy loses its base in economic democracy. As local and national governments lose control over economic resources and priorities, elected leaders can no longer build a political base by championing programs responsive to family and community needs.

Political demagogues of the far right emerge to fill the void by channeling the anger and insecurity created by empire's program of scarcity, injustice, and exclusion into an us-versus-them politics that blames particular national, racial, culture, or religious groups. The rise of the LePens in France, the Fortuyns in Netherlands, Haider in Austria, and the Narendra Modis in India is a result. So there is a strong affinity between the forces of empire and a politics of hate that justifies policies of domination and exclusion. So long as people's attention is focused on fear and hatred of foreigners or members of a particular religious group, such as Muslims, they are distracted from organizing to deal with the system of institutional domination and exploitation that is the real source of their insecurity.

Sarah: That certainly sounds like what is happening in the United States also.

Vandana: Absolutely. It's a vicious cycle, and we need instead to create virtuous cycles that allow economic democracy to feed political democracy, cultural identities, and cultural diversity.

It comes back to deepening of democracy. What we have at this moment is democracy reduced to the rule of lies—lies in the way the popular will is being counted, as we saw in Florida in 2000, and lies in the way the people's wealth is being counted, as we see in today's accounting scandals. That false wealth is influencing who will rule—it's all just too false now.

Our system of food security is being destroyed in the name of economic growth and economic liberalization, and people don't have enough food to eat. Our farmers are being ravished by seed companies, being pushed into debt, and committing suicide. This system is going to cost lives even in the US, where people don't know how they'll pay for their health or retirement.

The way out of this violent cycle is to deepen democracy—to bring decisions that directly affect people's lives as close as possible to where people are and to where they can take responsibility. If a river is flowing through some communities, those communities should have the power and the responsibility to decide how the water is used and whether it is to be polluted. The state has no business giving to Coca-Cola the groundwater of a valley in Kerala, resulting in rich farmland going totally dry. Communities need to take back sovereignty and delegate trusteeship to the state only as appropriate.

What we have now is a regime of absolute rights in the hands of corporations with zero responsibility for the environmental and social devastation and the political instabilities they are creating. If we want to reactivate and rejuvenate democracy, we have to bring back the economic content.

Sarah: Let me wrap up with a personal question. Every time I've heard you speak or met you, you've had so much energy, not only intellectual energy, but personal or spiritual energy. I'm just wondering, what keeps you so alive?

Vandana: Well, it's always a mystery, because you don't know why you get depleted or recharged. But, this much I know. I do not allow myself to be overcome by hopelessness, no matter how tough the situation. I believe that if you just do your little bit without thinking of the bigness of what you stand against, if you turn to the enlargement of your own capacities, just that in itself creates new potential.

And I've learned from the Bhagavad Gita and other teachings of our culture to detach myself from the results of what I do, because those are not in my hands. The context is not in your control, but your commitment is yours to make, and you can make the deepest commitment with a total detachment about where it will take you. You want it to lead to a better world, and you shape your actions and take full responsibility for them, but then you have detachment. And that combination of deep passion and deep detachment allows me always to take on the next challenge because I don't cripple myself, I don't tie myself in knots. I function like a free being. I think getting that freedom is a social duty because I think we owe it to each other not to burden each other with prescription and demands. I think what we owe each other is a celebration of life and to replace fear and hopelessness with fearlessness and joy.

Vandana Shiva's books include: *Water Wars: Privatization, Pollution, and Profit*; *Stolen Harvest, the Hijacking of the Global Food Supply*; *The Violence of the Green Revolution: Third World Agriculture, Ecology and Politics*; *Biopiracy: The Plunder of Nature and Knowledge*; and many others.

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