



The BIG Thinkers

Leaving Certificate Politics and Society



Vandana Shiva

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Born (1952)



Background

Vandana Shiva is a prominent environmentalist, social activist, author, and critic of globalisation who was born at the foothills of the Himalayas in India. Her father was a forestry official and her mother a farmer. Shiva has spoken of how her mother inspired her through her feminism and her academic ability, earning a university education at a time when few women did so. But she also admired her mother's devotion to farming and the nurturing of the earth. These early maternal influences shaped both her feminism, and environmentalism.

Context

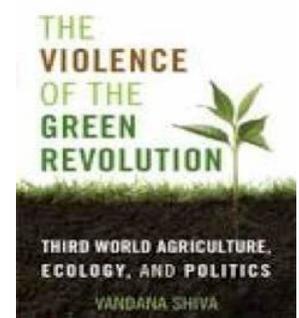
Shiva's academic background is in science and the philosophy of science. The twin fields of science and philosophy form the basis for understanding Shiva's key ideas, which relate largely to her opposition to aspects of globalisation that she sees as destructive of life and society. At a scientific level, she is a vocal critic of the impact of the 'Green Revolution' and the advent of Genetically-Modified Organisms (GMOs) on indigenous farming practices in India. She has claimed that *'the Industrial Revolution gave a mechanistic idea of the universe... the idea that everything is hard matter, unrelated to each other is still guiding a lot of science...genetic engineering is based on that hard matter, genes in isolation, genes determine everything...'* Her work on quantum theory convinced her that *'real science is the science of interconnectedness, of non-separation, that everything is related...the soil, the plants, the pollinators, the food that's produced...all of it in the whole'*. This notion of interconnectedness is a crucial theme in her work. Her doctoral thesis, which explored ideas of non-locality in quantum theory, stemmed from her belief that science is *'taught in a one-eyed fashion-all about how to unleash things into the environment but not the impact...'*

She decries the impact of globalisation and the advent of genetically modified food on the ecology of the earth. She has stated that *'we need a new paradigm for living on the earth because the old one is clearly not working.'* She accords a spiritual importance to seeds, drawing on the Vedic tradition in Hinduism, claiming that *'everything begins as seed ...the source of life and the source of the renewal of life'*. She has stated further that *'the desire to save seeds comes from an ethical urge to defend life's evolution'*. This conviction has inspired her work on the notion of *'seed freedom'*, which she argues is compromised by the actions of multinational companies who seek to patent seeds and then charge farmers for their use.



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Shiva's criticism of the 'Green Revolution'

To understand Shiva's significance, it is necessary to explore the context of the so-called 'Green Revolution', which she so strongly criticises, and its impact on India in the period since the 1960s. The 'Green Revolution' refers to an international effort to tackle world hunger through the introduction of new, high-yielding, disease-resistant varieties of food grains to developing countries. The American scientist Dr Norman Borlaug is credited as the main figure behind the research that led to the agricultural innovation behind the 'Green Revolution'. Following successful intervention in Mexico, where new technologies combined with the introduction of a new variety of wheat led to that country becoming an exporter of wheat by the 1960s, the Indian government invited Borlaug to undertake similar work on the sub-continent, which was facing huge difficulties in feeding its people because of war and massive population growth. Borlaug and his research team succeeded in developing a new variety of rice grain called IR8. Such was the perceived success that Borlaug was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1970.

However, opponents like Shiva have criticised what they see as the appalling consequences of these scientific developments for farmers. Broadly speaking, she has argued that the Green Revolution, through its use of fertilizers and pesticides, has led to pollution, a loss of indigenous seed diversity and traditional agricultural knowledge, and a dependence of poor farmers on costly chemicals. Shiva has characterised the Green Revolution as *maldevelopment*, arguing that '*maldevelopment militates against equality in diversity, and superimposes the ideologically constructed category of western technological man as the uniform measure of the worth of classes, cultures and genders*'. The following highlights key aspects of Shiva's opposition to the 'Green Revolution'.



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The Green Revolution as 'violent globalisation'

A strident opposition to globalisation is at the heart of Shiva's thinking. She frequently employs metaphors relating to violence to articulate her views. She has claimed that '*globalisation is a violent system, imposed and maintained through use of violence. As trade is elevated above human needs, the insatiable appetite of global markets for resources is met by unleashing new wars over resources*'. In 2001, she said: '*globalisation is giving rise to new slavery, new holocausts, new apartheid. It is a war against nature, women, children and the poor. A war which is transforming every community and home into a war zone. It is a war of monocultures against diversity, of big against small, of war time technologies against nature*'.

Shiva is particularly critical of large western chemical corporations who seek to promote their products in the developing world for profit without regard to the economic and cultural sensitivities of local contexts. For instance, she has claimed that '*technologies of war are becoming the basis of production in peacetime. Agent Orange, which was sprayed on Vietnam, is now being sprayed on our farms as herbicide along with Round Up and other poisons*'. In a 2011 speech, she claimed that fertiliser should be banned as it was '*a weapon of mass destruction. Its use is like war because it came from war*'.

Seed freedom

Shiva's opposition to globalisation extends beyond concern about the damaging impact on the earth of the use of chemicals to a concern about the fundamental rights of human beings to grow their own seeds. She argues that the efforts of chemical corporations to move Indian farmers away from centuries old practices of subsistence farming to growing a monoculture was aggressively promoted by the World Trade Organisation and the International Monetary Fund in the 1980s and 1990s, with disastrous consequences for biodiversity and indigenous farming practices.

These consequences relate to the impact of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs). Shiva has claimed that *'until the 1960s, India was successfully pursuing an agricultural development policy based on strengthening the ecological base of agriculture and the self-reliance of peasants'*. But the advent of monoculture as promoted by biochemical corporations, where farmers, tempted by high yields, purchased seed strains that required the application of large amounts of fertilisers and pesticides, led to a shift towards productivity over diversity and created a *'new seed imperialism'*. She has equated the practice of monoculture with *'a monoculture of the mind'* which *'cuts off the impacts on the relationships that make nature work and make human society work'*, referring here to the interconnectedness of things which is such a key theme of her life's work.

Patenting of seeds

It is no surprise therefore that a further aspect of the Green Revolution that has been widely opposed by Shiva is the patenting of seeds. Shiva has stated that *'the diversity of species, their intrinsic value, their integrity is vital. The right of our farmers to have seed, the most fundamental source of a livelihood in a poor country...we forget the scale of what smallness means...we only see the big...'*

In 1994, the World Trade Organisation's Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) Agreement allowed for the patenting of life forms. Shiva argued that moves to patent seeds meant *'a claim to creation'* where wealthy global corporations sought *'to own and control life'*. She equated the efforts of such companies to a new form of imperialism, invoking memories of the exploitation of the New World by the west in the 15th and 16th centuries, with the WTO as *'the new Vatican'* and the exploitation by the corporations comparable to *'the second coming of Columbus.'* She has stated that the greed of these companies is such that *'they want to own our biodiversity and water. They want to transform the very fabric and basis of life into private property. Intellectual Property Rights (IPRs) on seeds and plants, animals and human genes are aimed at transforming life into the property of corporations. While falsely claiming to have "invented" life forms and living organisms, corporations also claim patents on knowledge pirated for the Third World. The knowledge of our mothers and grandmothers is now being claimed as inventions of western corporations and scientists'*. She has described such actions as *'biopiracy'* and equated patenting with *'biological theft'*. Shiva has founded a movement called *Navdanya* which is dedicated to safeguarding the integrity of seeds to be free from domination by western biotechnology companies and patenting controls, and which also promotes her wider philosophical and ecological beliefs.

Monsanto, BT Cotton and farmer suicide

The promotion of BT cotton in India by the corporation Monsanto is a case study highlighted by Shiva. This type of cotton has been genetically modified to resist the bollworm and is planted widely in India. Shiva is a strident critic of Monsanto which she says *'is privatising the seed...they control 95% of the cotton in India, 95% of the soil'*. In a searing criticism of Monsanto, she has declared:

'In the world based on interdependence rather than domination, exclusion, extermination, Monsanto would not push a TRIPS agreement that treats the farmers whose seeds Monsanto has patented at "thieves". Monsanto, Syngenta, Riceretec and other Biopirates would recognize that (the breeding of seeds) is based on prior breeding by farmers.'

If Biotech corporations could see that humanity depends on biodiversity, and food security needs pollinators and diverse plant species, they would not deploy genetically engineering BT crops which kill bees and butterflies, they would not create herbicide resistant plants and wipe out plant diversity'.

Even more starkly, she has accused Monsanto of 'genocide', describing the region of Maharashtra as India's 'suicide belt.' She claims that 284,000 farmers have committed suicide as they cannot afford the costs associated with planting the cotton and they are mired in debt. In 2014, she stated that: *'farmers are dying because Monsanto is making profits - by owning life that it never created but it pretends to create. That is why we need to get rid of the GMOs. That is why we need to stop the patenting of life'*.

Ecofeminism and gender justice

In her book 'Earth Democracy', Shiva states: *'gender equity requires seeing women in their full humanity- as producers and creators, as custodians of culture, as political decision makers, as spiritual beings'*. This quote reflects Shiva's strong feminist viewpoint. She compares the way women are treated by patriarchal society with how the earth is treated by capitalist society. On the Navdanya website, she claims that the role of women has been dismissed by *'the reductionist mechanistic paradigm of "growth" based on GDP, which measures only what is commodified and traded, not what nourishes us. Economies based on greed and profits have exploited the earth and women. It has created the illusion of limitless growth on a planet with limits'*. She puts forward the idea of ecofeminism, where women's vital role in sustaining the earth and the economy, is recognised, and where all people are equally responsible for tending the well-being of the earth and society.

Useful weblinks:

- [Students can follow Vandana Shiva on Twitter](#)
- Vandana Shiva short videos <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ER5ZZk5atIE> (TedX Talk)
- <https://vimeo.com/17376439>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PUEQD7hmdUQ>
- www.navdanya.com