

A Return to the Earth

Vandana Shiva's Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture in India

BY KEN PRESTON-PILE

I recently returned from a two-week Reality Tour with Global Exchange (see Jerlina Love's article on page 34) where we met Dr. Vandana Shiva, a well-respected environmental activist who carries on the legacy of Mahatma Gandhi. Shiva turned toward activism when she organized the *Navdanya* (Nine Crops) movement. Shiva founded Navdanya as a program of the Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology — a participatory research initiative formed to provide direction and support to environmental activism. Navdanya arose out of a search for nonviolent farming, which protects biodiversity, the earth and our small farmers. Navdanya refers to the nine crops that represent India's collective source of food security.

THE BIRTH OF NAVDANYA

Since its inception, Navdanya has been struggling against numerous challenges, including:

- The threat of chemical agriculture and genetic engineering to public health, and nutrition decline;
- The high costs of production resulting from hybrid and genetically engineered seeds, chemicals and irrigation, which combined with falling prices and decline in farm credit push farmers into the debt trap. Thousands of farmers committed suicide in India in the last two decades because of debt they were unable to repay. Navdanya arose in response to the so-called "Green Revolution" of the 1940s to 1960s when modern agricultural techniques greatly increased farm production around the world.

Unfortunately, those techniques were fraught with environmentally detrimental processes, such as the use of chemical fertilizers and insecticides.

The main aim of the Navdanya biodiversity conservation program is to support local farmers, rescue and conserve crops and plants that are being pushed to extinction, and make them available through direct marketing. As an insurance against such vulnerability, Navdanya pioneered the conservation of biodiversity in India and built a movement for the protection of small farmers through promotion of ecological farming and fair trade to ensure healthy, diverse and safe food. The movement has spread throughout India through its partner organizations and farmers' networks.

NAVDANYA SHIFTS THE FARMING PARADIGM

Navdanya is actively involved in the rejuvenation of indigenous knowledge and culture. The campaign has raised awareness of the hazards of genetic engineering, and has defended people's knowledge and food rights in the face of globalization and biopiracy. Biopiracy, as defined in the American Heritage Dictionary, is "the commercial development of naturally occurring biological materials, such as plant substances or genetic cell lines, by a technologically advanced country or organization without fair compensation to the peoples or nations in whose territory the materials were originally discovered." Navdanya developed its own seed bank and organic farm spread over an area of 20 acres in Uttranchal, northern India. Over the past 20 years, Navdanya has trained 200,000 people on biodiversity conservation and organic farming, and is currently working in over 5,000 villages in India.



Stealing Beauty

Cyclamen, a common houseplant, faces a life indoors if climate change persists. Researchers predict that "the ideal climate for Cyclamen will become increasingly rare and might have totally disappeared by the 2050's. Some species of Cyclamen are adaptable enough and could survive climate change, but many would probably disappear." — Science Daily

Navdanya's pioneering research on the hazards of chemical farming, the costs of industrial agriculture and the risks of genetic engineering have led to a paradigm shift. Their research has proved that contrary to the dominant assumptions ecological agriculture is highly productive and is the only lasting solution to hunger and poverty. Biodiversity-based farming has changed the economic status of the member farmers across the country. Organic agriculture provides not only a source of safer, healthier, tastier food, but it also yields a solution to rural poverty.

NAVDANYA'S THREE SWARAJ: SEED FOOD, AND WATER

Gandhi taught the importance of *swaraj* (self-rule, or responsibility for one's own domain). The Navdanya movement focuses on three primary areas:

Seed Sovereignty (*Beej Swaraj*): Inspired by Gandhi's Salt *Satyagraha* — in which he led thousands of Indians to disobey the British Empire's unjust salt laws in 1930 — this campaign resists Seed Laws and Patent Laws that seek to make the sharing and saving of seed a crime, and make seed the "property" of Monsanto, a multinational agricultural biotechnology corporation, forcing farmers to pay royalties for what is their collective heritage.

Food Sovereignty (*Anna Swaraj*): Launched in 2001, this campaign has committed more than 2,500 villages to protect their food from multinational control through strategies such as letter writing campaigns.

Water Sovereignty (*Jal Swaraj*): Begun in 2005, this campaign protects India's water from privatization and commodification, and raises awareness of traditional water harvesting methods and India's diverse river cultures.

GLOBAL EXCHANGE TOUR OF NAVDANYA FARM

The final stop in our tour offered us a chance to witness first-hand the great work of the Navdanya farm. We learned



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— Dr. Vandana Shiva

that more than 70,000 farmer members participate in the Navdanya program. When a farmer becomes a member, Navdanya picks up field grain at the farmer's house at 10 percent above the government price. The program offers a large seed bank to any interested farmer. Navdanya offers a training workshop for farmers in organic practices. The farm grows organic produce, experiments with different varieties, uses intercropping to keep weeds down and employs cow urine as an insecticide. Navdanya engages in sustainable practices, such as composting, rain water collection for watering and solar panels for power.

MEETING WITH DR. VANDANA SHIVA

In addition to touring the Navdanya farm, our group enjoyed a personal meeting with Shiva. She related that the massive power of multinational corporations produces the greatest challenge that India faces today. For example, U.S. companies sell cotton in India for half the price they sell it for in the U.S. The U.S. government subsidizes the farmers for the other half. Indian growers cannot compete at this price, so they go out of business.

In addition, Monsanto has marketed terminator seeds — which do not produce seeds that can be harvested and used for the following year's planting — as well as expensive chemical fertilizers to Indian farmers who cannot afford to keep buying them. These forces combine to cause farmers to go into debts they can't afford to pay. Culturally, farmers feel great shame when they can't repay their debts. So, many end up committing suicide.

The power of corporations has negatively influenced Indian politics. For example, India passed the Special Economic Zone Act, a law that authorizes the Indian government to repos-

The Canary in the Mineshaft

“Rising temperatures are responsible for pushing dozens of frog species over the brink of extinction in the past three decades, according to findings being reported...” The fate of amphibians — whose permeable skin makes them sensitive to environmental changes — is seen by scientists as a possible harbinger of global warming's effects. “Disease is the bullet killing frogs, but climate change is pulling the trigger,” J. Alan Pounds, scientist at the Tropical Science Center in Costa Rica, said. “Global warming is wreaking havoc on amphibians and will cause staggering losses of biodiversity if we don't do something first.” — The Washington Post



“You only know who you are when you know what you love.”

— Dr. Vandana Shiva



less land and give it to multinational companies who aren't accountable to India's laws. Part of India's technology boom comes at the expense of farmers, who lose land to multinational companies setting up shop both in cities and increasingly in the rural areas. Besides land, these companies use vast amounts of water and pollute the environment. In addition, the government is grabbing more and more farmland for supermarkets and housing. Shiva says she feels that the government's laws are increasingly providing more "freedom for global corporations, but dictatorship for normal people."

SHIVA'S RESPONSE TO CURRENT CHALLENGES

To respond to the negative forces, Shiva insists that the new *swaraj* for Navdanya and others to embark upon must

be multi-pronged to address the intersecting issues of land, seed, water and food sovereignty. To achieve *swaraj*, we must be inspired by the earth, and we must remember Gandhi's principle of *svadeshi* — work locally and within our capacities. By using these precepts, we can build economies at the local level.

Most recently, Shiva authored *Earth Democracy* published by South End Press. *Earth Democracy* offers a set of principles based on inclusion, nonviolence, reclaiming the com-

mons and freely sharing the earth's resources. These ideals, Shiva believes, will serve as unifying points in our current movements, an urgent call to peace and the basis for a just and sustainable future.

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Shiva encouraged us to measure our actions in the following way: "Think of the

lowest person and see if your actions are impacting that person's life." Shiva's final advice to us: "Follow your heart and do what nourishes you. You can't just respond to the negative. You only know who you are when you know what you love. Activism has its fashions, too. If you follow those fashions, you will burn out. You must find your own passion. That will give you the power to resist."

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Resources:

Navdanya: <www.navdanya.org>

[Earth Democracy](#) by Vandana Shiva (South End Press)



“A human being is a part of the whole called by us universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feeling as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.”

— Albert Einstein