

Protecting the Earth with Dr. Vandana Shiva

John Dear | May. 29, 2007 | On the Road to Peace

As I follow the regular, dire reports on global warming, I recall my visit two years ago along the foothills of the Himalayas, near the border of China and Nepal, north of Dehredun in India. There I met Dr. Vandana Shiva, a leading anti-globalization and environmental activist, a brilliant, engaging scientist and Gandhian activist.

She has taken up a formidable challenge -- to resist globalization and protect farmers, not to mention the earth itself. Her strategy -- to harvest every endangered seed and indigenous plant, restore the soil to its original richness, and save the seeds from corporate patent theft by creating "seed banks." A modern-day Noah, gathering for the future the herbs of the world.

I toured Navdanya Farm, her farming commune and laboratory for biodiversity conservation and farmers' rights, then moved on to see Bija Vidyapeeth, a college she founded to teach sustainable living and global alternatives. There one learns new ways to cook, garden, compost, farm, organize politically, and do yoga.

The fields of Navdanya Farm teem with every imaginable crop and spice. Over 600 species of plants grow there, along with 250 types of rice. Among the fields pace graceful white egrets. Here agricultural scientists also undertake Gandhian nonviolent resistance to protect the earth.

I toured the seed banks, dark cavernous rooms below ground, their walls stacked with tin cans holding indigenous seed. Seed is the latest target of the multinational corporations. They're out to apply copyrights, force farmers to come to them, check in hand, for the right to plant next year's crops. But at the farm, seeds are kept copyright-free. Seeds are reserved for humanity. Seed banks are being set up all over India -- a kind of Gandhian nonviolence with a creative twist.

"Gandhi's Salt March was so imaginative, so inspirational," Dr. Shiva said. "Unjust laws must be disobeyed if we are to create a moral order. Gandhi shifted the mind of the world. Environmentalists started to do with forests what Gandhi did with salt. A huge forest *satyagraha* campaign was started in India in the 1980s. Thirty-nine people were killed, but now there are forest *satyagraha* campaigns around the world. Why? Unjust laws are not meant to be obeyed. We must have the courage to break them nonviolently to protect humanity and the earth."

"When the new world order called 'globalization' was laid out, the powerful sought to create a monopoly on seeds, control all the farms, and claim patents for every seed. Five companies would control all the food in the world, and so, all health. Gandhi opposed England with the spinning wheel by getting people to make their own clothes. So we grow every crop, save all the seeds, and build model farming villages so that we can take care of our own lives."

Satyagraha is the courage to non-cooperate with injustice, Gandhi taught. *Swadhesi* means making your own things through your own hard work. *Swaraj* is the ability to govern yourself, not just on the state level, but at every level -- personal, communal, regional and international. Instead of a pyramid, with the top crushing the bottom, Gandhi envisioned oceanic circles, where every person is the center of the world, where everyone relates with respect and dignity to everyone else. So we support *satyagraha*, *swadhesi*, and *swaraj*.

Dr. Shiva spent many years studying and opposing free trade agreements. "Free trade is meant only for a handful of businesses," she said. "It does not promote freedom for people with small shops. Wal-mart requires the disappearance of all small shops. This so-called free trade will lead to the total control of society, nature, economics and politics, a new economic totalitarianism. Today we no longer have a state, but a corporate state. All decisions regarding agriculture around the world are now run by the [World Trade Organization]. Globalization has reduced all agriculture to three crops -- soy, corn, and potato, which creates disease. A billion people go hungry. Another billion get sick from these wrong foods. This crazy system leads to poverty. Gandhi urged us to work with the earth to produce for ourselves what we need and to non-cooperate with such injustices."

"The WTO is wrecking the world's agriculture," she continued. "We have no farming communes. By 2004, 16,000 farmers had committed suicide in India within a few years because of the debts they owed. The violence of chemicals used on earth are the new weapons of mass destruction. So this is war, and we are a peace movement, protecting the species and farmers and all people. We don't call people consumers. Anyone who eats participates in the food chain. We have to be conscious about food and choose what to eat. So we have started three Gandhian movements.

"First, we started a campaign not to pay India's unjust tariffs for water. When we announced this campaign, the government postponed the collection. Now we will protest the diversion of the rivers to Delhi, so that this water will remain for the villages. We work village to village, creating units of water democracy. We are fighting privatization and river diversion.

?Second, we disobey these new patent laws claiming ownership of all seeds. Gandhi collected salt. We grow indigenous seeds and collect them and save them, which is a crime. We violate the patent laws. A higher moral duty calls us to break these patent laws. We are starting seed banks and cooperate with the higher law that seeds belong to all six billion people, not six companies.?

Apparently, there are now some 1,600 existing seed banks on the planet. Norway, for example, is stashing seeds from every one of the world's known food crops in a frigid vault some 600 miles from the North Pole.

?Third, we protest Coke which uses toxic chemicals to wash bottles and leaves the chemicals in the ground water. So we targeted the Coke plant in Kerela. They shut down the plant. Some 87 other Coke plants pollute the water. We are trying to protect our water, and we have more protests coming up. These movements carry on Gandhian philosophy and are run primarily by women. The environmental movement is more robust here in the Third World because the issues are so deadly. These are terrible times and exciting times and we do our best.

?The tsunami was a dress rehearsal for the disasters that are coming ahead,? Dr. Shiva concluded. ?The ice caps are melting. Islands and coastal areas will disappear. This is where we are headed. We have to take responsibility for what we are doing to the earth, and help protect it.?

Walking through her beautiful fields and learning about her extraordinary projects and campaigns reminded me once again that every one of us can make a difference, that every one of us can get involved in the struggle to protect creation, and that our work for peace includes, of course, making peace not just with people and animals, but creation itself. Heroes of nonviolence like Dr. Shiva inspire me to do my part and sustain my hope.

John Dear's new book, *Transfiguration* (Doubleday, with a foreword by Archbishop Tutu) is available from www.amazon.com [2] or your local bookstore. His trial for a recent antiwar protest has been rescheduled for June 14 in Albuquerque. For more information, see: www.johndear.org [3].

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