

EVERYTHING I NEED TO KNOW I LEARNED IN THE FOREST

by Vandana Shiva

A lyrical storyteller, Vandana Shiva begins from the roots of the Chipko movement in India, under the canopy of the Himalayan forests while listening to the teachings of the forest. Her evolution of ideas, first based in the history of science and then in the creation of an Earth University on her own Navdanya's farm, suggests a mind's journey to see nature as live, diverse, and as a source for harmony and self-perfection.

My ecological journey started in the forests of the Himalaya. My father was a forest conservator, and my mother became a farmer after fleeing the tragic partition of India and Pakistan. It is from the Himalayan forests and ecosystems that I learned most of what I know about ecology. The songs and poems our mother composed for us were about trees, forests, and India's forest civilizations.

My involvement in the contemporary ecology movement began with Chipko, a nonviolent response to the large-scale deforestation that was taking place in this Himalayan region. In the 1970s, peasant women from my region in the Garhwal Himalaya had come out in defense of the forests. Logging had led to landslides and floods, and scarcity of water, fodder, and fuel. Since women provide these basic needs, the scarcity meant longer walks for collecting water and firewood, and a heavier burden.

Women knew that the real value of forests was not the timber from a dead tree, but the springs and streams, food for their cattle, and fuel for their hearth, and they declared that they would hug the trees, and the loggers would have to kill them before they killed the trees.

A folk song of that period said:

These beautiful oaks and
rhododendrons,
They give us cool water
Don't cut these trees
We have to keep them alive.

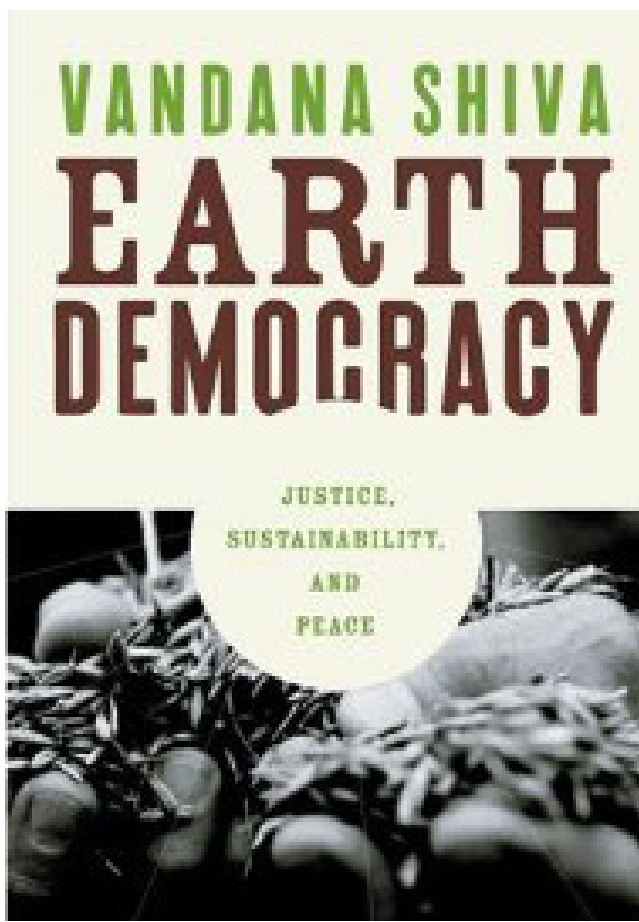
In 1973, I had gone to visit my favorite forests and swim in my favorite stream before leaving for Canada to do my PhD. But the forests were gone, and the stream was reduced to a trickle.

I decided to become a volunteer for the Chipko movement, and I spent every vacation doing *pad yatras* (walking pilgrimages), documenting the deforestation and the work of the forest activists, and spreading the message of Chipko.

One of the dramatic Chipko actions took place in the Himalayan village of Adwani in 1977, when a village woman named Bachni Devi, led a resistance against her own husband, who had obtained a contract to cut trees. When officials arrived at the forest, the women held up lighted lanterns although it was broad daylight. The forester asked them to explain. The women replied, "We have come to teach you forestry." He retorted, "You foolish women, how can you prevent tree felling by those who know the value of the forest? Do you know what forests bear? They produce profit and resin and timber."

The women sang back in chorus:

What do the forests bear?
Soil, water, and pure air.
Soil, water, and pure air
Sustain the Earth and all she bears.



BEYOND MONOCULTURES

From Chipko, I learned about biodiversity and biodiversity-based living economies; the protection of both has become my life's mission. As I described in my book *Monocultures of the Mind*, the failure to understand biodiversity and its diverse functions is at the root of the impoverishment of nature and culture.

The lessons I learned about diversity in the Himalayan forests I transferred to the protection of biodiversity on our farms. I started saving seeds from farmers' fields and then realized we needed a farm for demonstration and training. Thus Navdanya Farm was started in 1994 in the Doon Valley, located in the lower elevation Himalayan region of Uttarakhand Province. Today we conserve and grow one-hundred thirty varieties of rice, one-hundred fifty varieties of wheat, and hundreds of other species. We practice and promote a biodiversity-

intensive form of farming that produces more food and nutrition per acre. The conservation of biodiversity is therefore also the answer to the food and nutrition crisis.

Navdanya, the movement for biodiversity conservation and organic farming that I started in 1987, is spreading. So far, we've worked with farmers to set up more than one hundred community seed banks across India. We also help farmers make a transition from fossil-fuel and chemical-based monocultures to biodiverse ecological systems nourished by the sun and the soil. Biodiversity has been my teacher of abundance and freedom, of cooperation and mutual giving.

RIGHTS OF NATURE ON THE GLOBAL STAGE

When nature is a teacher, we co-create with her—we recognize her agency and her rights. That is why it is significant that Ecuador has recognized the "rights of nature" in its constitution. In April 2011, the United Nations General Assembly—inspired by the constitution of Ecuador—organized a conference on harmony with nature as part of the celebration of Earth Day. Much of the discussion centered on ways to transform systems based on domination of people over nature, men over women, and rich over poor into new systems based on partnership.

The UN secretary general's report, "Harmony with Nature," issued in conjunction with the conference, elaborates on the importance of reconnecting with nature: "Ultimately, environmentally destructive behaviour is the result of a failure to recognize that human beings are an inseparable part of nature and that we cannot damage it without severely damaging ourselves."

Separatism is indeed at the root of disharmony with nature and violence against nature and people. As the prominent South African environmentalist Cormac Cullinan points out, apartheid means separateness. The world joined the anti-apartheid movement to end the violent separation of people on the basis of color. Apartheid in South Africa was put behind us. Today, we need to overcome the wider and deeper apartheid—an eco-apartheid based on the illusion of separateness of humans from nature in our minds and lives.

THE DEAD EARTH WORLDVIEW

The war against the earth began with this idea of separateness. Its contemporary seeds were sown when the living earth was transformed into dead matter to facilitate the industrial revolution. Monocultures replaced diversity. “Raw materials” and “dead matter” replaced a vibrant earth. Terra Nullius (the empty land, ready for occupation regardless of the presence of indigenous peoples) replaced Terra Madre (Mother Earth).

This philosophy goes back to Francis Bacon, called the father of modern science, who said that science and the inventions that result do not “merely exert a gentle guidance over nature’s course; they have the power to conquer and subdue her, to shake her to her foundations.”

Robert Boyle, the famous seventeenth century chemist and governor of the Corporation for the Propagation of the Gospel among the New England Indians, was clear that he wanted to rid native people of their ideas about nature. He attacked their perception of nature, “as a kind of goddess,” and argued that “the veneration, where with men are imbued for what they call nature, has been a discouraging impediment to the empire of man over the inferior creatures of God.”

The death of nature idea allows a war to be unleashed against the earth. After all, if the earth is merely dead matter, then nothing is being killed. As philosopher and historian Carolyn Merchant points out, this shift of perspective, from nature as a living, nurturing mother to inert, dead, and manipulable matter was well suited to the activities that would lead to capitalism. The domination images created by Bacon and other leaders of the scientific revolution replaced those of the nurturing earth, removing a cultural constraint on the exploitation of nature. “One does not readily slay a mother, dig into her entrails for gold, or mutilate her body,” Merchant wrote.

WHAT NATURE TEACHES

Today, at a time of multiple crises intensified by globalization, we need to move away from the paradigm of nature as dead matter. We need to move to an ecological paradigm, and for this, the best teacher is nature herself.

This is the reason I started the Earth University/ Bija Vidyapeeth at Navdanya’s farm.

The Earth University teaches Earth Democracy, which is the freedom for all species to evolve within the web of life, and the freedom and responsibility of humans, as members of the earth family, to recognize, protect, and respect the rights of other species. Earth Democracy is a shift from anthropocentrism to eco-centrism. And since we all depend on the earth, Earth Democracy translates into human rights to food and water, to freedom from hunger and thirst.

Because the Earth University is located at Navdanya, a biodiversity farm, participants learn to work with living seeds, living soil, and the web of life. Participants include farmers, school children, and people from across the world. Two of our most popular courses are the one-month course “The A-Z of Organic Farming and Agro-ecology,” and “Gandhi and Globalization.”



Courtesy of Montessori High School at University Circle, Cleveland, Ohio

THE POETRY OF THE FOREST

The Earth University is inspired by Rabindranath Tagore, India's national poet and a Nobel Prize laureate. Tagore started a learning center in Shantiniketan, in West Bengal, India, as a forest school, both to take inspiration from nature and to create an Indian cultural renaissance. The school became a university in 1921, growing into one of India's most famous centers of learning.

Today, just as in Tagore's time, we need to turn to nature and the forest for lessons in freedom. In "The Religion of the Forest," Tagore wrote about the influence that the forest dwellers of ancient India had on classical Indian literature. The forests are sources of water and the storehouse of a biodiversity that can teach us the lessons of democracy—of leaving space for others while drawing sustenance from the common web of life. Tagore saw unity with nature as the highest stage of human evolution.

In his essay *Tapovan (Forest of Purity)*, Tagore writes: "Indian civilization has been distinctive in locating its source of regeneration, material and intellectual, in the forest, not the city. India's best ideas have come where man was in communion with trees and rivers and lakes, away from the crowds. The peace of the forest has helped the intellectual evolution of man. The culture of the forest has fuelled the culture of Indian society. The culture that has arisen from the forest has been influenced by the diverse processes of renewal of life, which are always at play in the forest, varying from species to species, from season to season, in sight and sound and smell. The unifying principle of life in diversity, of democratic pluralism, thus became the principle of Indian civilization."

It is this unity in diversity that is the basis of both ecological sustainability and democracy. Diversity without unity becomes the source of conflict and contest. Unity without diversity becomes the ground for external control. This is true of both nature and culture. The forest is a unity in its diversity, and we are united with nature through our relationship with the forest.

In Tagore's writings, the forest was not just the source of knowledge and freedom: It was the source of beauty and joy, of art and aesthetics, of harmony and perfection. It symbolized the universe.

In "The Religion of the Forest," the poet says that our frame of mind "guides our attempts to establish relations with the universe either by conquest or by union, either through the cultivation of power or through that of sympathy."

The forest teaches us union and compassion.

The forest also teaches us enoughness: as a principle of equity, how to enjoy the gifts of nature without exploitation and accumulation. In "The Religion of the Forest," Tagore quotes from the ancient texts written in the forest: "Know all that moves in this moving world as enveloped by God; and find enjoyment through renunciation, not through greed of possession." No species in a forest appropriates the share of another species. Every species sustains itself in cooperation with others.

The end of consumerism and accumulation is the beginning of the joy of living.

The conflict between greed and compassion, conquest and cooperation, violence and harmony that Tagore wrote about continues today. And it is the forest that can show us the way beyond this conflict.

Vandana Shiva is internationally respected as an activist for biodiversity and against corporate globalization, and author of Stolen Harvest: The Hijacking of the Global Food Supply; Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability, and Peace; Soil Not Oil; and Staying Alive.

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