What they believe: 17. Vandana Shiva
Ecology warrior

‘Earth Mother’, ‘the eco-feminist Gandhi’ or else ‘that Indian eco-terrorist’, or ‘scourge of biotech’ or ‘anti-science Luddite’ or ‘post-capitalist visionary’ – Vandana Shiva (herself above and some of her books below) is labelled in such ways and many more. Champion of nature, she is a awesome woman.

In the Mahabharata, the Sanskrit epic of ancient India, Shiva is the god who is the standard of invincibility, might, and terror, and also the figure of honour, delight, and brilliance. Duality and ambiguity confuses and is alien to those educated in the ‘cut and dried’ Western convention, but is normal and natural for those whose way of being is sinuous in the traditions of Eastern philosophies of life and nature.

Vandana Shiva (1952 - ) is well named. It does not work well to label her just as an ecologist or activist or author or leader. She is all of these and other things. She is concrete, in her actions as shown above, happy to be photographed hugging a tree in solidarity with the Chipko eco-feminists, and naming transnational corporations who she sees wrecking agriculture and thus the planet. The titles and themes of her many books, six shown above, confront extremely troublesome phenomena. An example is the disaster of Bhopal in the state of Madya Pradesh in December 1984, when a vast leak of toxic gas from a pesticide plant owned by the US corporation Union Carbide (which later became a subsidiary of Dow Chemical) killed thousands and injured tens of thousands of people. The implications of this event, from which the local communities still suffer, have shaped Shiva Vandana’s thinking and that of her elder sister Mira, as have the uprisings of the Chipko ‘tree-hugger’ women whose direct actions, following Mohandas Gandhi’s teaching, protect trees from loggers.
Box 1

Rights of Nature

Edited extract from Vandana Shiva’s closing declaration as chair of the Rights of Nature Ethics Tribunal, Lima, Peru, 6 December 2014.

We know that the fossil fuel age is over, and yet those who can make quick money by mining the last reserves of gas or coal or oil are making their last, desperate attempt, because the mining itself, the extraction itself, the drilling itself, is really intended just to extend ways of organising human life in such a way that we are dependent on non-renewables.

We are talking of lives being lost today. I come from the Himalayas. I was born there and grew up there. Last summer in the state of Uttarakhand we had the most extreme climate event. Over four days we received extremely heavy rainfall, about 375 percent more than during a normal monsoon. The glacial lakes were melting and those lakes burst. The floods that were caused took 20,000 lives. Homes are gone, roads are gone, schools are gone, bridges are gone and it is going to take a minimum of 50 years to rebuild the lives of those who survived. Every person in those beautiful valleys of our mountains is saying that it is human action, it is human greed, it is human sin and stupidity that is making Mother Nature react. That’s the reading of all communities that are related to the Earth and have not separated themselves.

We have also perpetuated a war against our human bodies, which are made of the Earth. All the disease epidemics that were mentioned again and again and again, in every case are reflections of that war against the Earth, against human beings and against human bodies.

Fake productivity

The fossil fuel age allowed the belief that human beings, creative work, skills, knowledge that comes from relationship to Mother Earth, can all be discarded. And that’s what allowed it to be said that indigenous people don’t have knowledge – they are primitive. That’s what allowed it to be said that when you get rid of people from the land, for example, in agriculture, you have a more productive agricultural system. The calculations of more food are done on the basis of false productivity, which only counts labour as input. The more people displaced from the land, the more peasants destroyed, the more food sovereign communities devastated, by definition the more productive the agriculture. What is not counted is the fossil fuels. What is not counted is the chemicals. What is not counted is the water. What is not counted is the financial inputs. What is called a productive agricultural system is actually a negative economy, using 10 units of input to produce 1 unit of food. Together with violations of the Rights of Mother Earth, we have deepening poverty and hunger.

This tribunal was called a Seed Tribunal. It is a seed sown. The creativity we derive from the Earth cannot be stopped. It cannot be extinguished. And it is from this that we need to go beyond the culture of fear that has been created, by attacks and criminalisation on defenders of the Earth. You know that corporations are criminalising savers of seeds, and we having to deal with making people confident that they can continue to save seeds. And work with seeds according to the laws of the Earth, not the corporate laws that create a monopoly.

A time to rejoice

Let us celebrate this year, the World Food Day, 16 October, as the day of the Rights of Mother Earth and her giving us food, and turn it into a day of thanksgiving, turn it into a day of gratitude, and turn it into a day of commitment to refusing to allow the destruction of potential and capacity. I think we have started on a beautiful, exciting journey of finding new paths collectively. This is a small seed that I can see growing into a magnificent tree with many branches. Let’s nourish it, water it and hug it.
**Attacked in the New Yorker**

In August last year, she was attacked in the New Yorker by staff writer Michael Specter. His main substantive assault in ‘Seeds of doubt’, an 8,000+ word profile, was on her belief that genetically modified seeds are an abomination. He made clear that he is in favour of biotechnology for the usual reasons — more food for the world, in the context of molecular biology being a scientific wonder of the world. He also got personal, indicating that she has inflated her academic credentials and wilfully exaggerated the number of Indian farmers whose suicides are a result of debt caused by being dependent on genetically modified seeds.

His own views are indicated by those he quotes. Gordon Conway, a former president of the Rockefeller Foundation, said ‘It is absolutely remarkable to me how Vandana Shiva is able to get away with saying whatever people want to hear. She is lionised, particularly in the West, because she presents the romantic view of the farm. Truth be damned. People in the rich world love to dabble in a past they were lucky enough to avoid — you know, a couple of chickens running around with the children in the back yard’. Mark Lynas, the writer who was against genetic modification and then changed his mind, said ‘She is blinded by her ideology and her political beliefs. That is why she is so effective and so dangerous. She is very canny about how she uses her power. But on a fundamental level she is a demagogue who opposes the universal values of the Enlightenment’.

He also cites economists from the US and Germany who have calculated that the failure to market the genetically modified Golden Rice Two ‘in the past decade has caused the loss of at least 1,424,680 life years in India alone’. He himself says ‘Her statements are rarely supported by data, and her positions often seem more like those of an end-of-days mystic than like those of a scientist’. He summarises a lot of what people who hate Vandana Shiva think about her views, the way she expresses them, and her influence particularly on people who are hostile to transnational corporate power and in particular to biotechnology.

**Her counterblast**

She is a few-holds-barred activist, for sure. A week after the New Yorker’s date of issue, she released ‘Seeds of truth’, a 5,000+ word counterblast. ‘I wonder why a journalist who has been bureau chief in Moscow for The New York Times and bureau chief in New York for the Washington Post… would submit such a misleading piece. Or why The New Yorker would allow it to be published as honest reporting, with so many fraudulent assertions and deliberate attempts to skew reality’, she began.

‘“Seeds of doubt” contains many lies and inaccuracies that range from the mundane … to grave fallacies that affect people’s lives. The piece has now become fodder for the social media supporting the biotech industry. Could it be that rather than serious journalism, the article was intended as a means to strengthen the biotechnology industry’s push to “engage consumers”?’

Cannon G. Vandana Shiva. Ecology warrior, and other stories
Farmers, students and activists protesting in Chennai, India, 2013. A representative was quoted in The Hindu. ‘Monsanto is the poster child of corporate greed and corporate crimes against citizens and the environment. Our governments project it as a corporation which will save our farmers and farming. But Monsanto has not hesitated to sue and jail farmers in the name of intellectual property rights’.

Her response does not address all of Michael Spector’s assault, but on genetically modified seeds in India, his main focus, she is impressive:

Monsanto entered the Indian market illegally in 1998. We sued them on 6th Jan in 1999. Before Monsanto’s entry to the market, local seeds cost farmers between Rs 5 and Rs 10 per kg. After Bt Cotton was allowed into the market Monsanto started to strengthen its monopoly through (i) ‘Seed Replacement’, in which Monsanto would swap out farmers seeds with their own, claiming superiority of their ‘product’, and (ii) ‘Licensing Agreements’ with the 60 companies that were providing seeds in the Indian market at the time. Monsanto ensured a monopoly on cotton seeds in India and priced the seeds at Rs 1,600 for a package of 450 gms (Rs 3555.55 per kg, out of which the royalty component was Rs 1,200). Rs 3555.55 is approximately 711 times Rs 5, the pre-Bt price…

I do say Monsanto’s patents prevent poor people from saving seeds…This is true in most parts of the world. Specter makes it appear as though Indian farmers are protected and have always been, merely by mentioning The Farmers’ Rights Act of 2001. I happen to have been a member of the expert group appointed by our Agriculture Ministry to draft that very act. We have worked very hard to make this happen and I am very proud of the fact that India has built Farmers Rights into its laws. But the farmers are not completely protected since Monsanto has found clever ways around the laws…This issue has many pending cases in Indian courts.

This section in Specter’s piece is designed to… mislead his readers to echo Monsanto’s attempt to hide the catastrophic implications of a seed monopoly and Bt-Cotton’s failure in India as it tries to enter new markets in Africa proclaiming its success in India. Indian farmers can’t choose to buy genetically modified or hybrid varieties. Choosing would require choice, an alternative. Monsanto has systematically dismantled all alternatives for
the cotton farmer. Monsanto’s hold on corn, soya and canola is almost as strong as their monopoly on cotton. About $10 billion is collected annually from US farmers by Monsanto, as royalty payments. Monsanto has been sued for $2.2 billion by Brazilian farmers for collecting royalty on farm-saved seeds. The seed market is no longer governed by market forces. The element of choice is missing. The farmer can only choose if he has an option.

Crash bang wallop! She ends by saying ‘The spirit of service inspired by the truth, conscience and compassion cannot be stopped by threats or media attacks. For me, science has always been about service, not servitude. My life of science is about creativity and seeing connections, not about mechanistic thought and manipulated facts’. Finally, she quotes Albert Einstein.

The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant.

We have created a society that honours the servant and has forgotten the gift.

Or does she? Anybody checking on the internet will find that sleuths say that yes, Einstein did believe and write something rather like this, but not the words that Vandana Shiva quotes.

Enemies – she has plenty of these – may cite this as an example of ‘there she goes again’, roping in great thinkers as if they are fans of hers from beyond the grave. Fans – she has plenty of these too – may say that the statement is more or less what Einstein believed and wrote, except that he was not into the sacred. Thus he certainly did say ‘I prefer an attitude of humility corresponding to the weakness of our intellectual understanding of nature and of our own being’.

The reaction, as with investigation of the exact nature of her PhD degree, depends on what and whose side you are on. Her hint that Michael Specter has been disingenuous in representing himself just as a seeker after truth, is given weight by his piece in the New Yorker published on 10 April, ‘Roundup and risk assessment’, which supports Monsanto and criticised the WHO International Agency for Research on Cancer for classifying glyphosate, the active ingredient in Roundup, of which around 750,000 tonnes are used worldwide every year, as a probable human carcinogen.

The Gandhi comparison

In interviews, like one with Scott London in 1998, she says that her parents were followers of Gandhi, and that she is also. Her father, a forester, inspired her to work with the Chipko ‘tree-hugging’ women at first in the Himalayan state of Uttarakhand where she was born, who put their bodies in the way of chainsaws, stopped some logging, and changed the hearts and minds of politicians up to and including Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi. She still identifies with the Chipko movement, which has analogies with Mohandas Gandhi’s ‘salt march’ to expose and fight against the British Raj monopolising salt, which resulted in headlines the world over.

There are other analogies. Both were educated in the West, Mohandas Gandhi in London as a barrister, Vandana Shiva in Canada in nuclear physics. Using the present tense, both are fully able to discuss and debate in Western style, while having a view of
European civilisation – including ‘the Enlightenment’, as shallow and destructive, and being more interested in action. In that and other senses they are both leaders of popular political movements, with all the rhetorical implications. Neither has a great interest in being ‘reasonable’. Both have lifelong links with like minds, as for him the theosophist Annie Besant and vegetarian Henry Salt, and for her the ‘deep green’ Edward Goldsmith and Jerry Mander. He made a point of wearing Indian peasant clothes on formal occasions, including a visit to the British prime minister at 10 Downing Street. She wears a sari like many Indian women, and also has a prominent \textit{tilak} on her forehead, the Hindu mark to preserve the energy of that \textit{chakra}.

Both, while usually cheerful, have no attachment to the philosophy, politics and economics of materialism, and as Hinduism does, put human affairs in a cosmic context, as she makes clear in her contribution to the book \textit{Vedic Ecology}. She clearly is sure that there is a world war being waged right now, between might and right, and that the time to hesitate is ended. She will agree with Jiddu Krishnamurti’s observation that ‘it is no measure of health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society’. She ends the 1998 interview with Scott London by saying

\begin{quote}
I’m absolutely confident that things will change. I believe that we will see a lot of destruction, but if we can see the right patterns and draw the right lessons from that destruction, we might be able to rebuild before it’s too late… Even if we can't, life will rebuild itself. The global economy might collapse, but Gaia won't, and people's ingenuity won't. We will rebuild society, we will rebuild local economies, we will rebuild human aspirations. The kind of global monoculture in which everyone feels as if they have to run faster than they are running to stay in the same place cannot continue. I think we will become disenchanted with the glamour of globalisation.
\end{quote}

\textbf{Box 3}

\textit{Books by Vandana Shiva}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textit{Social Economic and Ecological Impact of Social Forestry in Kolar} (co-author), 1981.
\item \textit{Chipko movement: India’s Civilisational Response to the Forest Crisis} (co-author), 1986.
\end{itemize}