

SOWING THE SEEDS OF RESISTANCE

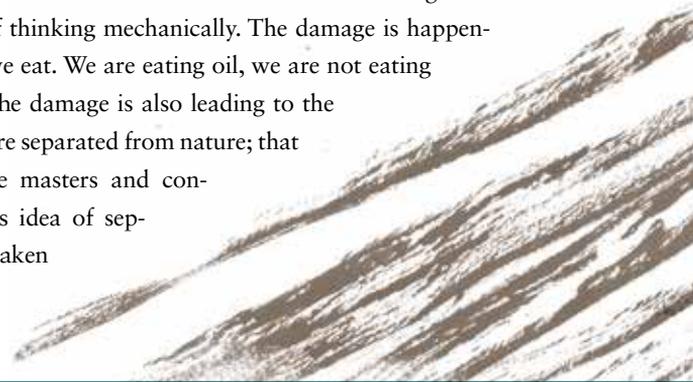
AN INTERVIEW WITH
VANDANA SHIVA
BY **BENJAMIN JOYEUX**

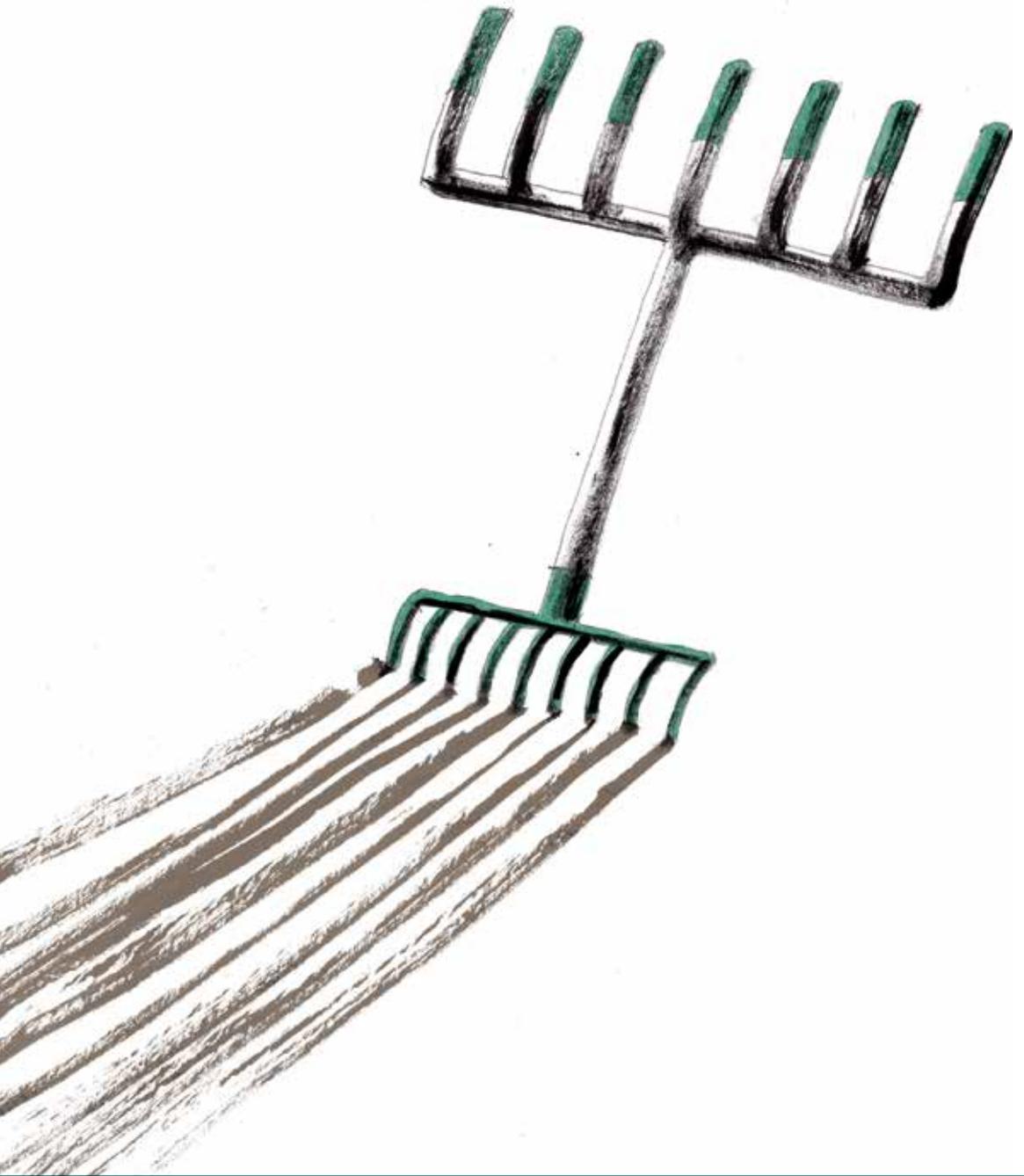
Each one of us is interlinked with other human beings, but also with all other living things in the world. This complex web of life is disrupted by the relentless greed of corporate giants seeking to control and capture every aspect of agriculture, down to the last seed. The health, livelihoods, and ecosystems on which we all depend are at stake.

BENJAMIN JOYEUX: Dr. Vandana Shiva, for many years now, you have led an international fight against biopiracy and the corporate appropriation of life. This has gained you international acclaim. What does defending and reclaiming the commons mean for you?

VANDANA SHIVA: We live in a world of relationships. We are not isolated atoms, fragmented and alone. We are not separate from nature. This is an illusion of the Cartesian, Newtonian, mechanistic paradigm which created and dominated the intellectual architecture of the industrial revolution – which is nothing more than a fossil fuel track for humanity, a track we realised was very wrong.

That is what the entire COP 21 Paris agreement is about: the awareness of 200 years of wrong choices regarding energy. But it became a chance to question how we think. And I think the damage to the human brain has been the most intense in terms of what the fossil fuel age has done to us, in terms of thinking mechanically. The damage is happening to the food we eat. We are eating oil, we are not eating food anymore. The damage is also leading to the illusion that we are separated from nature; that somehow we are masters and conquerors. And this idea of separation is then taken further to define





human society as atoms at war with each other: therefore you need a dictator to keep us in order. No. The world is a world of relationships. It's a world of self-organised beings in mutually beneficial relationships. And the nature of life is to be self-organised, as the Chilean scientist Mathieu Raman said: *"There are autopolitic systems, they are self-organised and that's life, that's freedom, that's how we should be in democracy. And then there are externally controlled systems, allocated systems. Industrial farming is an allocated system. Fake democracies are allocated systems."*

So if we have to recover our capacity to be truly free, we have to understand our relationship with the Earth, which creates our ways of life, and our relationships within the community. All of this means reclaiming the commons. It's when we start realising that the nature of the way life is organised – the "web of life" – is a commons, that we then stop imagining that a Monsanto or a Bayer putting one toxic gene into a plant is inventing life, which is a man-made machine that they have manufactured. No! A seed is a seed – it reproduces and multiplies on its own. Sadly, when you put a contaminant, it also multiplies with the contaminant; but it is not being made by that pollution. It is making itself. Just as much as a river flows on its own. If someone puts mercury into it, the mercury is a part of the river but the

mercury is not making the river. So these are very fundamental illusions of what will allow the push for GMOs or the very mistaken idea that corporations are the "inventors" of the seed. Corporations are there to be the owners of the seeds. Their only concern is their right to collect royalties and they're pushing our farmers to suicide.

I have been dealing with this tragedy of 300 000 farmers pushed to suicide because of debt – a debt caused by an increase of more than 70% in the price of seeds. This false technology also increased the cost of the pesticides because it is not working to control pests, just as herbicides are not working to control weeds. After all, when you have the wrong thinking about how the world works, you will come up with the wrong tools. And your technologies will fail, no matter how much you repeatedly call it innovation. It is a failed technology. And repeating failures is not the kind of innovation we need.

Sadly, in the debate we've had in India recently around GMO mustard seeds and the Bt cotton¹ suicide, there are people who say: *"But seeds in nature have a short shelf-life system and only corporations have the power to bring in new models."*

No, a seed is life itself. It's the beginning of the fruit system. It is where life is renewed. It is where freedom is sung. It is where the

commons start. Because the seed is a “commons”, not just for humans. The seed is a “commons” for the pollinators; the pollen of that plant which they fertilised. The plant gives the pollen to the bee. The bee gives fertility to the plant in deep mutual support of each other. That what a “commons” is.

How did you first become aware of and involved in this struggle to defend the commons?

VANDANA SHIVA: I first heard about this phenomenon of creating genetically engineered crops in order to own the seed patents and then imposing free trade agreements in 1997, in an interesting meeting near Geneva (in Megève, France). That’s the day I made a commitment: I’m going to protect the seed. I will look at the genetic engineering at the scientific level. We defined the issue of biosafety in the UN treaties and now we have a UN law on biosafety. It’s because of these laws that Europe is largely GMO-free. India has not yet any GM food crop but they are trying to push the GMO mustard seed and we are against it.

The illusion of corporations being inventors of seed and the issue of patents are part of a very big issue. I work with our government to draft laws that don’t allow patents on seeds, plants, and animals. Argentina has such laws; Brazil has such laws. But the most important advancement in starting to reclaim the seed as a “commons” began with creating community seed-banks, rather than privatised seeds, in the hands of now three corporate giants. When I started this work, they said there would be five giants. They’re down to three. Before we know it, there’ll be just one, and then it’ll collapse; but before this collapse we want to make the world a different place so that life can thrive. People from 320 community seed banks went to Navdanya². They have nutritional seeds,

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1 Genetically modified organism (GMO) cotton variety

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delicious seeds. My team has just come back. They have just found five varieties of the Moong dhal. Diversity is the way of nature. And as long as we have communities and seed breeders, we will have diversity. When three giants have seeds in their hands, they will breed failed toxic monocultures. The seeds help farmers come out of that crisis of climate change, whether that crisis manifests itself through extended droughts, the super cyclone of Orissa, or the tsunami tragedy in Tamil Nadu.

Bill Gates and his corporate lab said: “*We are inventing a sort of surgeons*”. How are they still making their seeds? There are for fighting biopiracy – which is nothing more than pirating our knowledge – pirating indigenous biodiversity and then saying: “*This is my invention*”. That is a very important part of my own personal fight, alongside Navdanya.

In 1984, Union Carbide’s pesticide plant exploded in the city of Bhopal. Today, Carbide is owned by Dow, and Dow and DuPont are linked. So in a way, the Bhopal disaster is the responsibility of Dow and DuPont. That was the moment when I started a campaign saying “*No more Bhopal, let’s plant a Neem!*” Because the Neem tree gives us our best natural control system. Our grand-mothers used it. Our great grand-mothers used it. We joined hands with the Greens in the European Parliament and IFOAM, the international organic movement. And over 11 years we fought the biggest government of the world: the US Department of Agriculture. Joining hands with the big toxic company called WR Grace to claim that they had invented the use of Neem for the best control. It took 11 years, but we won, because we worked in solidarity.

2 Navdanya is a network of seed keepers and organic producers, spread across 18 states in India.

What is the impact that corporate giants' control of agriculture has on small-scale farmers? How can they resist in the face of such odds?

VANDANA SHIVA: We have a beautiful Basmati here. India has 200,000 rice varieties. Our farmers' plant breeding was a breeding in and of the commons; a shared activity. A corporation in America took our Basmati and attempted to patent it. Corporations taking over the seeds to push their chemicals brings new disease problems. We have a lot of allergies related to weeds, such as gluten allergies. Every third person now has a gluten allergy. But the weed itself is not contributing to gluten allergies. Breeding for industrial purpose is the cause. That's why we have such weeds in India, yet without the gluten allergies.

Monsanto claimed to have invented the "end of weeds". Before that, they had to apply for that patent. So biopiracy has been a very big fight. We have also realised that these are the same corporations selling the chemicals that have shaped industrial farming, based on fossil fuels. Chemicals are made from fossil fuels whether they're synthetic fertilisers or synthetic pesticides. They are all made from fossil fuels. They're petrol-based and natural gas-based. These chemicals are what we want to clean away. They are the same chemicals that led to the creation of mustard gas, which poisoned and killed us during the war, with French troops as the primary victims.

This expertise in war was turned into an expertise in how we grow our food. And for nearly 70 years, humanity has been fed the belief that without the chemicals, we will not have food security. Our work has shown that we actually grow more food and better food without these chemicals. That's why a big part of Navdanya's secondary work is promoting ecological farming, and training farmers in agro-ecology. We have trained more than a million farmers. Of course, farmers eat. But farmers have to sell something because it's their livelihood. What they grow directly impacts on the health of the people. Farmers do not grow commodities; they grow health. And when they grow healthy crops, building biodiversity, the people who eat that food grow healthy. These farmers push Navdanya to create a distribution system with them as the starting point.

When we look at the biodiversity model of agriculture in contrast to the toxic, poisonous fossil fuel model of these three corporations, which are Bayer-Monsanto, Dow-Dupont, and Syngenta – we're talking here about three poison manufacturers whose rules have become law. And they will merge together. Monsanto and Bayer are not merged today, but they were previously. The owners want to be the same. This is a game of musical chairs to confuse the public. But we won't be confused, because our vision is freedom. We don't need this free trade agreement they push. They

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push the World Trade Organisation, thinking they own it; we think we are building a movement of people to help them against the grabbing of our seeds; against the grabbing of our agriculture. So now they want to bring in TTIP and TPP to complete the task they have set for themselves, towards absolute intellectual property, and harmonisation of regulations. So that Europe loses its safety standards and has to go under the United States wing where there is no regulation or labelling on GMOs. The poor majority of American citizens have absolutely no idea what they're eating. That's why the US is the second nation in the world when it comes to diseases related to food.

What's the future of the commons now in this great battle for the seeds? And how can Green parties contribute?

VANDANA SHIVA: We are now working to make the connection of “food as a commons” deeper. The idea of “the seed as a commons” has grown through the seed networks and community seed-banks. We're now working on “food as a commons”. And behind me, this is the beautiful Annapurna. She is the Goddess of food. We are creating communities within cities, and villages start relating to each other. We want to get rid of this model, in which four commodities are produced by three or four trading giants, while the seeds and the chemicals come from the same toxic corporations, with everyone forced to eat toxic food, and agriculture destroyed everywhere. No: we can have local food systems that increase the incomes of our farmers and reduce the cost of good, organic food. We address the problems of disease, hunger, and poverty at the same time. So the Green movement of today has to become a movement for justice. It has to become a movement for freedom. It has to become a movement for ending the rule of poisoners. It has to become a movement to end the rules of corporations. And for all of this, we have to reclaim the “commons” at many, many levels, including the commons in our minds. Be able to think differently outside the prison of the materiality box. That's the reason we have organised the tribunal

on the 14th to 16th of October. Bart Staes was there, because we work very closely with the Greens in the European Parliament, and we do want to start an all-encompassing programme to end a century of ecocide and genocide by these companies that control our food and agriculture. Reclaim the commons of our seed, reclaim the commons of our food, but most importantly, reclaim the commons of true democracy.



VANDANA SHIVA

is a renowned Indian scholar, as well as an environmental, eco-feminist, and anti-globalisation activist. She has authored many books, and has been key in movements around intellectual property rights, biodiversity, bio-technology, genetic engineering, and in the fight to hold multinational corporations to account for environmental destruction and human rights abuses. Central to her work is the idea of rejecting corporate patents on seeds and advocating for 'seed freedom' through her organisation, Navdanya.



BENJAMIN JOYEUX

is a lawyer, ecologist, libertarian and anti-globalisation activist. He is currently a communications advisor to the French speaking delegation of Green members of the European Parliament; and is the co-author, with Edouard Gaudot, of *l'Europe c'est nous* (Les Petits Matins, April 2014).