

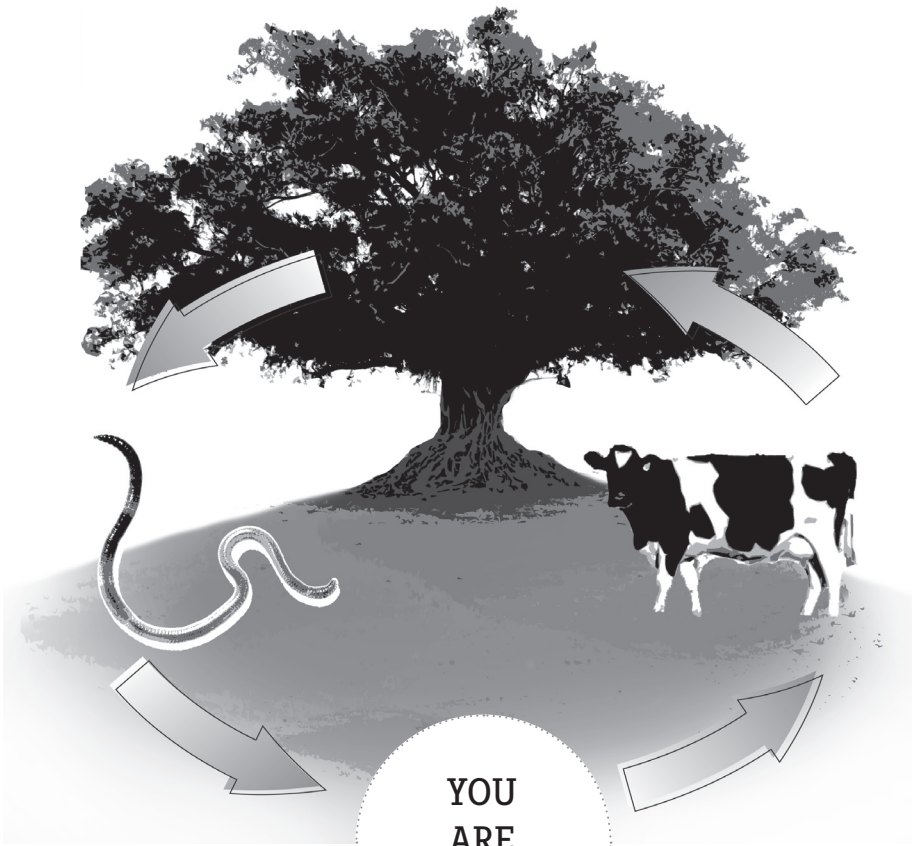
The River vs. Water, Inc.

**Antonia
Juhasz**
INTERVIEWS

**Vandana
Shiva**

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SPRING 2006

Dr. Vandana Shiva is a physicist, ecologist, activist, and author of hundreds of papers and articles and more than 15 books. She is the founder and director of the Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Natural Resource Policy in India. Her work runs the gamut from establishing community seed banks to defending farmers and everyone else who eats food from the dire socioeconomic, environmental, and health consequences of genetically modified crops; from writing and agitating about water privatization to writing and agitating about corporate thievery of natural knowledge. Her latest book is entitled *Earth Democracy* (South End press).



YOU
ARE
HERE

I'd like to ask you about the relationship between research and activism, and how you think people will incorporate the ideas from your books into their own activism.

Well, I came from science and academia; I was part of the “normal” culture, where you write to publish, you write for yourself. Then I gave up academia, and since I founded the Research Foundation in 1982, everything I write is about my engagement. My

engagement has always been twofold: the research I can do, and the knowledge people have, joining into a major force for transformation. My books are about a deep synthesis of the knowledge that comes out of action. Every book of mine is about issues that I see as needing a response—for example, genetic engineering and intellectual property rights, which I started to write about in 1987. One of the most touching moments in my life was walking the streets of Seattle during those amazing protests against

the World Trade Organization, when a youngster came and held my hand and said, “I’m here because of [your book] *Biopiracy*.” That’s what my hope is, and that’s why I write—otherwise, I wouldn’t try.

In your latest book, *Earth Democracy*, you provide some beautiful examples of local models of living democracy taking place. Can you talk about your favorites?

What happened in villages, as we spread the word about the practice of genetic engineering and corporate monopolies on seed, was that, extremely naturally, people started to create these village defense committees—the local name was Jaiv Panchayat, which also translates into “living democracy.” It was something that multiplied and spread so fast, partly because that part of India—that 70% of India that still lives in what I call a biodiversity economy—that’s their ethics! They don’t have to “learn” that activism, or learn that the cow, the tree, and the earthworm are all part of one extended family.

[This kind of activism] spread. In the state of Orissa, communities were so strong that when the Department for International Development tried to privatize the local water tanks and ponds, people said, “No, this is our resource! It’s collective common property!” From the source of the Ganges down to the Bay of Bengal, people

organized and said, sorry, the River Ganga is sacred, it is our mother, and she is not for sale! In fact, right now, one of the pilgrimages of the Ganges is happening. It used to be 20,000 [people] a decade ago—last year’s was 10 million people, and this year there will be 20 million people walking. Walking to just take one little pot of water, a glass of water, and walking with that Ganges water back to their village, as a tribute to the sacred river. And this whole living democracy Jaiv Panchayat movement was able to take that ethics, that culture, and put that culture into political mobilization. So that’s something that touched me deeply and continues to inspire me. They’ve now used the history of that to declare their opposition to a new seed law, which would make it illegal for India’s farmers to save their own seed—not just Monsanto’s seed, but their own seed—5 million people have signed a pledge saying, sorry, saving seed is a duty to the earth. So I see this as a huge movement that will continue to grow, continue to give hope in a period in which 70% or 80% of India has been written off under the globalization project.

What do you mean, written off?

In the sense that they’re not supposed to exist—their ecological space is being stolen. Their water’s being taken, their seeds are being taken, their land’s being taken, their livelihoods are

being taken. That's what globalization is. The other wonderful, very inspiring movement was the one that tribal women started against Coca-Cola's appropriation of local water supplies in Plachimada, Kerala. It has spawned a whole new movement of communities around every Coke and Pepsi plant. We're now organized nationwide, and the local elected village bodies are serving notices in place after place and saying, sorry, we don't give you permission, Coca-Cola: In this democracy we have the right to decide how our water will be used, and we definitely don't want it to be used for you to make superprofits. Yesterday, I was having a meeting with schools for a campaign on junk food, and it was so touching—the kids were saying, “And we have to ban Coke and Pepsi...”

These are not singular things; they're not limited. They are unleashing a new energy of transformation that is within the people's own self-organizing.

Can you talk about how living democracy relates to other terms that we use, like direct or participatory democracy?

In terms of the political participation of people, living democracy would include direct democracy and participatory democracy. But it is broader in that it includes the democracy of all life. It therefore has a very deep

ecological basis. I think that we need that, because there's too much conflict between those who want to work for nature, and those who want to work for human beings. We are so polarized as movements between the human rights movements and the animal rights movements. In India, our government is passing a law—and I'm part of the drafting team—to recognize the rights of tribals, the indigenous communities in the forests, that have never been recognized. And yet, because the tigers are dying, you've got a tiger lobby that says the tribals can't have rights because the tiger will die, and then the tribal community says, we can't have conservation because we need our rights. I really hope that living democracy, articulated as the broader democracy of all life, will help us transcend these polarizations and work to protect all species while defending every human right of every excluded community.

I'm interested in how you see living democracy translating into a model that could eventually replace representative democracy.

Representative democracy has always had deficiencies, but its deficiencies have increased hugely under globalization, where there's two total blocks that make representative democracy not function at all. The first block is the fact that most decisions aren't even made at the national level, where

representative democracy is supposed to function. You elect people to parliament, but parliament has no role in deciding WTO rules—it's totally bypassed. So it's already made impotent by globalization and rule-making at the global level under corporate influence. But the second reason it's being rendered totally impotent is because there's no gap between those who are in business and those who are professional politicians—especially in India. Increasingly, we are seeing business directly entering into the Indian parliament; they now don't even have to bribe the parliamentarian or the minister—they *are* the minister! Just like in the White House. In a way, the White House has become the model, where corporations rule and run for office; they have the money to finance their own elections at every level. And the situation is so insular that no popular mobilization can break through it, because it's being driven by money power.

And these people who hijacked representative democracy and what thin levels of protection it gives people are not going to give up power on their own. The contest has disappeared, it's all become unipolar in every society. You might have two parties, but it's like musical chairs for the same ideology—the music is the same, it's just a rotation between people of the same class and the same corporate leaning. I think the biggest thing we need to do today is to start, through our actions,

to reclaim the spaces in which we want to be able to make our decisions, and build another political framework by shifting power out of the hands of those who turned representative democracy into corporate rule.

And we would maintain an elected government, and maintain the power of the government to regulate?

Yes, absolutely. And that's why the issue of subsidiarity—devolving power down to the most local level possible on any given issue—is so important. Living democracy basically works like a tree: It grows from the roots upwards, from the people and their organizing capacity. But you do need the canopy, in a storm—and you get storms, including Monsanto, wars, militarization. And therefore you need a thin layer, a very thin layer, of regulatory structures protecting people on the bottom. But that national regulatory system can only be pro-people if it is getting its life blood from a base of self-organized communities, taking care of their water, their food, their farming, their health—and making demands on the system for the appropriate share.

So, you imagine an electoral system, in which officials are elected by the public, that would be essentially cleansed through a living democracy process?

In my experience, the community as a whole, as an integral, organic body of equal human beings, is the only way to create real democracy. The moment you start to get into electoral processes, you start excluding the women, you start excluding the tribals, you start excluding the landless, et cetera. And that is why in the Indian decentralized democracy system, we do have laws that say the village as a whole has rights. Now, it doesn't have to be a village. It could be a street in San Francisco. And of course functions will get delegated, just as they are in any structure in any organization—some people will be too busy, someone's good at keeping the books, someone else is good at calling meetings—but that works in an organic system. Elections at all other levels would work, but the elections would be around highly defined power, where the power that can be exercised by people directly stays in their hands. And that is not negotiated.

Let me bring this to the issue of propaganda, then: how corporations in particular, in partnership with the media, change the dialogue within which we're able to function—how they have made it palatable that water should be considered a commodity, that air and rain and land, things that should be considered communal, are now considered private property.

The main way in which propaganda has been used to try and dull people's thinking about what water is, what food is, what the land is, is by first and foremost redefining everything that we get from the earth as purely raw materials and commodities. In the case of biodiversity, life forms are transformed into information, and that information in the genetic code is treated as property by the company that can read the genetic code with a silly little machine. They didn't even use their minds, but it becomes their intellectual property. And it is by taking living organisms out of their life context and turning them into a fragment of expression, only genetic information, that they're able to change the discourse from thinking about life as a cow, as a pig, as a neem tree, as a basmati plant, into a transfer of information—and commodification of information should not really trouble anybody. In this way, society, through propaganda, is cut off from the consequences of their actions.

I can give you a very clear example of how this would work, in the case of the privatization of Delhi's water supply, which was going to be based on the commodification of the Ganges. They were starting to call the water that comes from the Ganga "raw water." And the water at the other end of the pipe, where they would be selling that water, would be a product. It's by this mutation that they change the status of what you're dealing with, so

water as a living resource, plants as a living resource, disappear. And with them disappear the relationships of people with living plants and living rivers. One of the big changes in perception, and I think it was so obvious in the whole [2005] G8 summit, is to make people appear like pathetic creatures who can't do anything for themselves. "Third World" societies, helpless little beings: just waiting for that dollar to drop, the food aid to drop into their land. It's this denial of the capacity of human beings, of living resources, of equal systems, which is at the heart of the corporate propaganda that enables privatization, that enables takeover and the creation of property in that which should never be private property, that which should always belong to the commons.

Who's the "they" who started using the term "raw water"? And how did the use of "raw water" translate to the public mind?

Well, the chain is the World Bank and its contracts, and the language is already defined in those contracts. The contracts enforced by the Bank are then between the company and the public utility. So then the public utility starts talking that language. And if we weren't able to challenge it and bring the language back to the people's right to water, we would not have had the kind of discourse we've had over the last two or three years in this city.

We've managed to block the privatization—they haven't managed it yet—but the Bank also doesn't give up. This language gets crafted by the corporations working with the Bank during their annual meetings, and then they come in and pour this ready-made jargon on countries. And [they] turn countries which have water into water-poverty situations, countries that know how to grow rice into places where you need a huge loan to be taught how to grow rice. People who know how to plant a tree need to borrow 300 million bloody dollars to continue to do what they did and now be in debt for 20 years.

So, for example, the World Bank requires that a country that grows rice using small-scale practices for local consumption must instead grow corn using industrial agriculture practices to export to the global market. People who grew rice lose their ability to provide for themselves and their communities, while land once used for rice is now used for corn and the nation, in turn, must import its rice. However, prices for corn—as with all food commodities—are volatile, while the country competes with dozens of others for its share of the market. The money it receives for its corn does not offset the price for imported rice and the needs of the increasing number of landless and hungry former farmers. The country is unable to repay its loans and the cycle of dependence rolls on and on.

And it's extremely clever. I believe the public relations companies work with all of them; [it's] the work of Burson-Marsteller behind the scene. The [biggest] advertising is the genetic engineering propaganda, and there we know Burson-Marsteller played a very big role. They were hired by Monsanto to constantly say it was all about feeding the hungry; they used to put out huge full-page ads. The other day, an Indian newspaper did a whole-page story on me, and about what I've done for the environment, and then the last two paragraphs, in good "balanced" reporting, were a quotation from the website of the Hudson Institute, a right-wing think tank in the U.S., saying, "Vandana Shiva will starve the people because she is fighting GMOs [genetically modified organisms], which is the only way to feed the people." And you can tell a lie 5,000 times, when you have the money to say it 5,000 times. A movement can do actions for one year, two years, three years. Eventually, you can't sustain it—meetings, conferences, public hearings, citizen mobilization. And corporations just hope that by lying and lying and lying, and continuing their propaganda, they can make reality disappear.

That would bring us back to where we started, which is the importance of our continued action and our continued research and writing to counter their propaganda.

Absolutely. Because it's about a fight for the planet's resources, but the fight is taking place through a capture of the mind. We can only liberate our rivers and our seeds and our food, and our educational systems, and our political systems, and redefine and deepen democracy, by first liberating our minds and decolonizing our minds. And that's why resisting propaganda through every intellectual means available to every human being becomes an absolutely important part of freedom in today's world.

What are the other modes of taking the important research and essentially decolonizing material and spreading it more widely?

I think that for the West, of course, the internet is a very accessible means; it's not for countries like India, where a tiny, tiny percentage have access to the web. We're always stuck with this since we work at both levels—very local, also very global—we have to have, always, two levels of communication. One is through the internet with our friends internationally, and the other is through street theater, through pamphlets, through wall writing—which is very popular in India; it is not yet illegal. If you go to the villages, you will see huts painted with "Monsanto go home!" or "Coca-Cola go home!" One wall painting has no cost; it's merely the commitment of an individual to put a slogan on his or her wall. And

then thousands see it. Millions will see it. So those are some of the means that are available and accessible. And I think we need to use every communication available, in every country.

The other thing we are doing is creating alternative learning systems. After all, let's recognize that our universities came out of dealing with scholasticism and the power of the church. They came out of dealing with the domination of that time. But now they have become the dominant forces of our time, and they are being used to service corporate power. They are not being allowed to function as public institutions. They're being privatized. It means that for younger generations, there will be no place that we can know what's really going on. So we have created on our farm in Dehra Dun a school called Bija Vidyapeeth, which literally means the School of the Seed. We do short courses; next week we are going to be doing a course on intellectual property rights and biopiracy and biodiversity. At the national level, I've just been appointed to a new university, which is going to function like an open university and it'll be complementary to Bija Vidyapeeth. Activists will be there and they will learn everything about the Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights agreement at the WTO, about patent laws and all of these piracies and thefts, and they'll go back more informed.

How would you define personal freedom, within the context of living democracy and earth democracy?

I see living society the way I see living systems. I don't see society as an aggregation of atomized, fragmented individuals. That's why I don't go down the Hobbesian path.* I see society as organic, in which every level has an autonomous existence, and a self-organizing capacity, but in relationship with other self-organizing systems. Which means that your freedom, your personal freedom, is then in the context of total consciousness and awareness of other people's personal freedom. It is that awareness which I call compassion, I call solidarity. And it's through compassion and solidarity that you do not have the irresponsibility built into personal freedom the way it has in Western philosophy and political science, with the terrorizing by these guys who exaggerate certain human tendencies. Personal freedom is real. A person is a full subject. But a person is not a subject in isolation: We are in family, we are in friendships, we are in community, we are in working contexts, we are in certain towns, we are living in certain lands—all that does define levels of who we are and our identities and therefore, also, our searching for our freedoms. Because all those freedoms have to be carried together.

* *Philosophy of self-interest most often attributed to English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) which views life is essentially nasty, brutish, and short.*



by Zane Davis