

The Seed and the Spinning Wheel

Dr.Vandana Shiva*

Gandhi's creative vision of Swadeshi, Swaraj, Satyagraha and Sarvodaya inspires us to build living economies and living democracies. In his legacy we find hope, we find freedom, we find our own creativity. Gandhi's philosophy is a living philosophy both because it is not dead and because when it informs our actions, they become charged with life. Only through Gandhi do we begin, with constructive action and turn it into our best resistance.

Gandhi Lives – as a perennial source of inspiration and political innovation to defend our freedoms. Globalization as a project is a plan to extinguish all freedoms of people through the total control of trade, technology and property rights. The freedoms of rivers to flow and organisms to evolve, of farmers to save seeds and grow crops, of consumers to be free to choose what they eat and know how their food is produced. These fundamental freedoms of all species and ordinary humans are being robbed in the name of “free trade” or globalization.

My ideas and actions to defend life's freedom and diversity have come from Gandhi. Without his legacy it would be impossible to even imagine a response to the totalitarianism built in to the project of owning life, owning seeds, owning water. Patents on life and the new biotechnologies are today's tools of imperialism, and they are a core part of the

global “constitution” called the WTO (World Trade Organisation) rules of free trade in the form of Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPs). The phrase “Trade Related” had to be forcefully linked to intellectual property precisely because intellectual property has no place in a trade treaty and patents should not have been extended to cover life forms as they were under Act 27.3(b) of TRIPs which forces countries to patent life forms, in particular micro-organisms and genetically engineered plants and animals. These rules and laws were made by and for corporations. As a Monsanto spokesperson stated about the drafting of TRIPs “we were the patient, the diagnostician, the physician.”

Patents of life are a total control system. They allow corporations to claim ownership over life forms – micro-organisms, plants, animals. They allow corporations to define the acts of saving and sharing seeds as “intellectual

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* Dr.Vandana Shiva is a world-renowned scientist and environmentalist, Founder, Research Foundation for Science, Technology & Ecology – e-mail: navdanya@gmail.com

property crimes.” And they allow the crime of biopiracy – the theft of traditional knowledge - and biopiracy to be treated as a right.

This is why, in 1987, when I first came to know about GATT (General Agreement on Trade & Tariff) and TRIPS and Patents on life, I searched for ways to defend the freedom of biodiversity and the freedom of peasants. And Gandhi’s spinning wheel inspired my dedicating my life to saving seeds to save small farmers and protect life.

Spinning Freedom

It was to regenerate livelihood in India that Gandhi thought of the spinning wheel as a symbol of liberation and a tool for development. Power driven mills were the model of development in that period of early industrialization. However, the hunger of mills for raw material and markets was the reason for a new poverty, created by the destruction of livelihoods either by diverting land biomass from local subsistence to the factory, or by displacing local production through the market.

When Gandhi described the Charkha in 1908, in the Hind Swaraj as a panacea for the growing pauperism of India, he had never seen a spinning wheel. Even in 1915, when he returned to India from South Africa, he had not actually seen a spinning wheel. But he saw an essential element of freedom from colonialism in discarding the use of mill woven cloth. He set up handlooms in the Satyagraha Ashram at Sabarmati, but could not find a spinning wheel or spinners, who were normally women. In 1917, Gandhi’s disciple Ganga Behn Majumdar started a search for the spinning

wheel, and found one in Vijapur in the Baroda State. Quite a few people there had spinning wheels in their homes, but had long since consigned them to the lofts as useless lumbers. They now pulled them out, and soon Vijapur Khadi gained a name for itself. And Khadi and the spinning wheel rapidly became the symbol for India’s independence movement.

The spinning wheel symbolized a technology that conserves resources, people’s livelihoods and people’s control over their livelihoods. In contrast to the imperialism of the British textile industry, the ‘Charkha’ was decentered and labour generating, not labour displacing. It needed people’s hands and minds, instead of reacting them as surplus, or as mere inputs into an industrial process.

Gandhi’s spinning wheel is a challenge to notions of progress and obsolescence that arise from absolutism and false universalism in concepts of science and technology development. Obsolescence and waste are social constructs that have both a political and ecological component. Politically, the notion of obsolescence gets rid of people’s control over their lives and livelihoods by defining productive work as unproductive and removing people’s control over production in the name of progress. Parochial notions of productivity, perceived as universal, rob people of control over their means of reproducing life and rob nature of her capacity to regenerate diversity.

The seed, for example, reproduces itself and multiples. Farmers use seed both as grain as well as for the next year’s crop. Seed is free, both in the ecological sense of reproducing itself, as well as in the economic

sense of reproducing the farmers livelihood. As my involvement in these issues grew, the seed started to take shape as the site and symbol of freedom in the age of manipulation and monopoly of life in its diversity. Ethically and ecologically, unrestrained biotechnology development gives new tools for manipulation; patents offer new tools for monopoly ownership of that which is by its very nature free. I thought of Gandhi's Spinning Wheel which had become such an important symbol of freedom, not because it was big and powerful, but because it was small and could become alive as a sign of resistance and creativity in smallest of huts and poorest of families. In smallness lay its power.

The seed too is small. It embodies diversity. It embodies the freedom to stay alive. And seed is still the common property of small farmers in India. Seed freedom goes far beyond freedom for the farmer from corporations. It indicates freedom of diverse cultures from centralized control. In the seed, ecological issues could combine with social justice. I could see that it was the seed that could play the role of Gandhi's spinning wheel in this period of re-colonisation through "free-trade."

In spite of many blocks and pressures, I launched a national programme to save seed diversity in farmers' fields in cooperation with the movements I have been working with over many years. We call it "Navadanya", which literally means nine seeds and is a beautiful symbol of the richness of diversity.

While the fundamental changes we are working towards can only be achieved in the

long-term, at the small scale level, Navadanya has already had major impact in the villages in which we work. Realizing that our small efforts in the conservation of indigenous seed diversity are not enough, we have also joined hands with the farmers' movement to urgently mobilize public opinion against the emerging threat of multinational corporations gaining monopoly control on all life through the new biotechnologies and intellectual property rights.

The Suicide Economy of Corporate Globalisation

As seed saving is prevented by patents as well as by the engineering of seed with non-renewable traits, seed has to be bought for every planting season by poor peasants. A free resource available on farm becomes a commodity which farmers are forced to buy every year. This increases poverty and leads to indebtedness. As debts increase and become un-payable, farmers are compelled to sell kidneys or even commit suicide. More than 25,000 peasants in India have taken their lives since 1997 (till 2005) when the practice of seed saving was transformed under globalization pressures and multinational seed corporations started to take control of the seed supply. Seed saving gives farmers life.

From the Suicide Economy to Living Economics

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both because it is not dead and because when it informs our actions, they become charged with life. Only through Gandhi do we begin, with constructive action and turn it into our best resistance. Our seed saving is a resistance to seed monopolies and seed patents. And when our government begins to implement TRIPS as it has done through three amendments of our Patent Act and the creation of new plant variety legislation, we remember Gandhi's words "As long as the superstition that people should obey unjust laws exists, so long will slavery exist". And we renew our commitment to the Bija Satyagraha. Like Mahatma Gandhi started the Salt Satyagraha to protest against the colonization of salt by the Salt Laws imposed by the British Empire, people's movement in India are committed to the Bija Satyagraha based on non-cooperation with

unjust and immoral IPR laws being imposed by MNC's and the rich countries.

From the seed, our swadeshi efforts have grown to organic farming or jaivik kheti, fair and just trade and swadeshi in the form of biodiversity conservation has evolved organically into the Swaraj of Jaiva Panchayat or living democracy, resisting on the resistance of Satyagraha – non-cooperation with immoral, unjust laws that force patenting of life.

Gandhi's non-cooperation wits legacy lives, and gives us hope to shape ever new instruments to keep life in its diversity and integrity free. Gandhi's legacy carries the seeds for the freedoms of humans and all species. Gandhi's legacy is humanity's hope.

