

The Revolution Will be Powered by Shakti Energy

Lessons from Vandana Shiva's Navdanya Biodiversity Farm

John Clark

I traveled to Dharamsala, India in 2005 to set up a one-month summer study program, in collaboration with the Louisiana Himalaya Association, and have taken groups of students there periodically since then. During last summer's trip, we visited renowned ecofeminist theorist and activist Vandana Shiva's Navdanya Biodiversity Farm. We toured the fields and the seed bank, heard lectures by staff members specializing in various areas of agroecology, and were extremely fortunate that Shiva herself could speak to our small group about Navdanya and the ecofeminist politics of Earth Democracy.

"Navdanya" means both "nine seeds" and "new gift." The farm is engaged literally in seed saving and the creation of seed banks, with the goal of preserving and promoting the biodiversity that is threatened in our age of monoculture and monopoly. But Navdanya is also concerned with defending and fostering natural and cultural diversity, and thus participating in nature's ever-renewing gift of the growth and flourishing of human and ecological communities.

Navdanya works with seed savers and organic farmers in twenty-two states in India. It has established 122 community seed banks, trained over 900,000 farmers in sustainable agriculture, and created India's largest organic farmer's network. It has collected and saved over 4,000 varieties of rice, many other grain varieties, and hundreds of genera of ornamental, timber and medicinal plants. It has also created a learning center called Bija Vidyapeeth (Earth University).

The Earth Democracy that is promoted at Navdanya is an ecopolitics founded on principles such as swadeshi, bioregionally-based production; swaraj, decentralized democratic self-rule, decision-making by the gramsabha, the local assembly; satyagraha, non-violent direct action; sarvodaya, working together for the common good; and jaiiv kheti, organic farming that creates a "sustenance economy" based on "mutuality and reciprocity."

The symbol of both Navdanya and Earth Democracy is the seed. It symbolizes birth, life, creativity, regeneration, and the power of nature. In short, Shakti energy.

Navdanya might well be the most important place in India that we could possibly have visited—indeed, one of the most important places in the entire world. For it will be from Navdanya and projects of similar inspiration that what I call "the gift of hope" will emanate throughout the world. There is no place that better expresses the ecofeminist spirit of creative, transformative energy that we desperately need in order to escape from our present predicament and to regenerate the Earth community and our own human communities.

We have reached a crisis in both Earth history and human history. Some have suggested that the gravity of the crisis should be expressed through the idea of a new geological era called the "Anthropocene" identifying humans as the cause of the crisis. However, this distorts the reality, since the cause is not a generic *Anthropos* or humanity. Consequently, others have suggested that we call our era the "Capitalocene," identifying the real underlying cause as capitalism. This is a distinct advance toward deeper understanding. However, if we take such a "real cause" approach, we will need at least three terms to specify the major determinants of our era. We will need "Capitalocene"

to identify Capital as a preeminent cause, “Technocene” to identify the technological Megamachine (and the primordial Machine, the State), and, not least of all, “Androcene” to identify Patriarchy.

Yet, none of these terms identifies precisely the nature of the change from the previous era, the “Cenozoic,” or “new era of life.” “Cenozoic” describes what happened in the biosphere and was recorded directly in the fossil record. Its successor must therefore focus not on what we or our institutions are doing, but on what the Earth itself is now undergoing.

Thus, the most accurate term is “Necrocene,” the “new era of death.” Ours is the age of the Sixth Mass Extinction of life on Earth.

A synonym for Necrocene is “Thanatocene.” It suggests that Earth History has been a struggle between the forces of life, Eros, and those of death, Thanatos. The evolving richness and diversity of life on Earth has expressed the generative and liberatory work of Eros. The disappearance of species, populations, ecosystems, cultures, and communities under the reign of Empire now manifests the destructive and dominating work of Thanatos.

Only one major ecological philosophy, ecofeminism, has put this struggle between life and death, creation and destruction, at the center of concern. The Necrocene can only be ended by global social ecological revolution, and this revolution must be ecofeminist, or it will fail.

Shiva notes that patriarchy depicts human nature as inherently “violent, acquisitive, exploitative, and destructive,” while ecofeminism stresses the “capacity to care and to share, to love and protect, to be guardians not owners of nature’s gifts, and to find strength and security in diversity, not in oppressive monocultures.”

Any revolution that does not address and replace all forms of domination—not only economic and technological forms, but also the ideology, imaginary, ethos, and institutions of patriarchy—will be followed by an inevitable regression to new forms of domination.

What is the meaning of a revolution powered by Shakti? Shiva explains that Shakti is the primordial energy that pervades all things, symbolized as the goddess Shakti in all her forms. Its manifestation is called prakriti or nature.

Much as in the Daoist dialectical cosmology of complementary yin and yang forces, prakriti, “the feminine and creative principle,” generates the world in cooperation with a “masculine principle,” purusha. Shakti energy is the force of cosmic freedom, and, we might say, of cosmic anarchy.

It is personified as Lalitha (“the Player”), because its nature is lila (play), that is, “free spontaneous activity.” Shiva notes that although the ecofeminist revolution is led predominantly by women, the process of liberation through Shakti energy is “trans-gender.” Success will depend on both women and men discovering themselves as expressions of Shakti energy, “the principle of activity and creativity in nature, women and men.”

Navdanya’s work as part of this revolution has involved resistance to Monsanto’s terminator technology, and other depredations of agribusiness. It continues the century-long tradition of satyagraha (the “force of truth” through direct action) of the Sarvodaya (Gandhian) and Chipko (“tree hugger”) movements.

Chipko started in September 1986, when women in the Doon Valley blockaded the mining operation that had been devastating their forests and waterways for twenty years. Despite popular misconceptions, “tree-hugger” does not really connote inordinate fondness for trees. It refers to the radical activity of putting oneself between the tree and the chain saw, or in front of the truck or bulldozer. It means risking one’s life to defend the sources of life.

The best depiction of the practical meaning of Shakti energy might be found in the words of village elder, Itwari Devi. Devi explains the inspiration of Chipko, and, implicitly, that of Navdanya:

“Shakti (strength) comes to us from these forests and grasslands; we watch them grow, year in and year out through their internal shakti, and we derive our strength from it. We watch our streams renew themselves and we drink their clear and sparkling water—that gives us shakti.

“[The food we produce] gives us not just nutrition for the body, but a moral strength, that we are our own masters, we control and produce our own wealth. That is why ‘primitive,’ ‘backward’ women who do not buy their needs from the market but produce them themselves are leading Chipko. Our power is nature’s power, our shakti comes from prakriti.”

The women of the Chipko movement and Navdanya offer us a revolutionary message of hope. They show us that there are powerful sources of creative energy in a world of passivity and resignation, powerful forces of rebirth and regeneration in a world of destruction and decline.

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His recent books include *Between Earth and Empire: From the Necrocene to the Beloved Community* and *The Impossible Community: Realizing Communitarian Anarchism*.

The former and a new edition of the latter are forthcoming from PM Press.

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Fifth Estate #403, Spring 2019

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