

Title: Thirty Minutes with Dr. Vandana Shiva

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I recently had the privilege of interviewing Dr. Vandana Shiva, internationally renowned Indian scientist and environmentalist. Dr. Shiva was in Eugene for three weeks as a visiting scholar with the Wayne Morse Center for Law and Politics at the University of Oregon.

We sat next to each other in overstuffed chairs. It felt like we were meeting for a relaxed coffee and talking about the work we both care so much about.

In her warm, conversational style Dr. Shiva shared how she became involved in her work on food security, food sovereignty, and biodiversity.

In 1982 Dr. Shiva founded the Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology and later developed “Navdanya” in 1991. Navdanya is a national Indian movement to protect native seed and other resources and to promote organic agriculture and fair trade. Navdanya has successfully conserved more than 2,000 rice varieties and established 34 seed banks. Navdanya has more than 70,000 farmer members.

In 1984 the Union Carbide India Limited (UCIL) pesticide plant in Bhopal, India leaked a poisonous gas that in varying estimates killed between 4,000 and 15,000 people and caused 558,125 injuries. Around the same year, mass violence erupted in Punjab, India resulting in many lives lost.

These tragic events further propelled Dr. Shiva on her passionate path to create change. She focused her work on creating sustainable solutions for farmers, food security, and biodiversity.

We also discussed how her work relates to NCAP’s mission to inspire ecologically sound solutions to reduce the use of pesticides.

She shared stories of how so many Indian farmers had incurred overwhelming debt from buying expensive inputs like fertilizers, seed and herbicides. At first, farmers had welcomed what was the Green Revolution approach to food production – intense monocropping and use of fertilizers, and herbicides to increase production. The traditional farming ways were pushed aside for the more “modern” green revolution strategies. It became apparent that the green revolution had all kinds of societal and environmental consequences.

Dr. Shiva told about the higher rates of cancer in the Punjab region due to the heavy use of pesticides. She talked about high suicide rates among farmers who felt so crushed by debt that taking their lives was the preferred way out. She described how these same farmers, burdened by pesticide debt, took their lives by drinking pesticides.

At the heart of Navdanya and Dr. Shiva's work is the effort to bring back traditional forms of agriculture that enhance organic practices and forego the use of pesticides creating greater biodiversity and enabling farmers to farm without huge amounts of debt.

Dr. Shiva also shared how she has devoted her life to protecting important plant and food crop resources from biopiracy – meaning living resources are patented and taken out of the public domain where farmers are then unable to save the seed and to selectively breed their own crops. She has stood up to power, and in the face of corporations like Monsanto, to fight biopiracy efforts and she has won.

Dr. Shiva and her team have protected the neem plant, basmati and wheat and have fought efforts to patent these resources. These resources remain protected in the public domain because of her efforts and the support of so many Indian farmers.

Inspiring work from an inspiring woman leader.

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