

EARTH DEMOCRACY

*Justice, Sustainability,
and Peace*

VANDANA SHIVA



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INTRODUCTION

Principles of Earth Democracy

Earth Democracy is both an ancient worldview and an emergent political movement for peace, justice, and sustainability. Earth Democracy connects the particular to the universal, the diverse to the common, and the local to the global. It incorporates what in India we refer to as *vasudhaiva kutumbkam* (the earth family)—the community of all beings supported by the earth. Native American and indigenous cultures worldwide have understood and experienced life as a continuum between human and nonhuman species and between present, past, and future generations. An 1848 speech attributed to Chief Seattle of the Suquamish tribe captures this continuum.

How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us.

If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them?

Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every clearing and humming insect is holy in the memory and experience of my people. The sap which courses through the trees carries the memories of the red man.

This we know; the earth does not belong to man; man belongs to the earth. This we know. All things are connected like the blood which unites our family. All things are connected.

Earth Democracy is the awareness of these connections and of the rights and responsibilities that flow from them. Chief Seattle's protest that "the earth does not belong to man" finds echoes across the world:

“Our world is not for sale,” “Our water is not for sale,” “Our seeds and biodiversity are not for sale.” This response to privatization under the insane ideology known as corporate globalization builds Earth Democracy. Corporate globalization sees the world only as something to be owned and the market only as driven by profit. From Bangalore in 1993, when half a million Indian peasants pledged to resist the classification of seeds as private property required by the Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) agreement of the World Trade Organization (WTO) to Seattle in 1999 and Cancun in 2003 when protests stopped the WTO ministerial meetings, the corporate globalization agenda has been responded to creatively, imaginatively, and courageously by millions of people who see and experience the earth as a family and community consisting of all beings and humans of all colors, beliefs, classes, and countries.

In contrast to viewing the planet as private property, movements are defending, on a local and global level, the planet as a commons. In contrast to experiencing the world as a global supermarket, where goods and services are produced with high ecological, social, and economic costs and sold for abysmally low prices, cultures and communities everywhere are resisting the destruction of their biological and cultural diversity, their lives, and their livelihoods. As alternatives to the suicidal, globalized free market economy based on plundering and polluting the earth’s vital resources, which displaces millions of farmers, craftspeople, and workers, communities are resolutely defending and evolving living economies that protect life on earth and promote creativity.

Corporate globalization is based on new enclosures of the commons; enclosures which imply exclusions and are based on violence. Instead of a culture of abundance, profit-driven globalization creates cultures of exclusion, dispossession, and scarcity. In fact, globalization’s transformation of all beings and resources into commodities robs diverse species and people of their rightful share of ecological, cultural, economic, and political space. The “ownership” of the rich is based on the “dispossession” of the poor—it is the common, public resources of the poor which are privatized, and the poor who are disowned economically, politically, and culturally.

Patents on life and the rhetoric of the “ownership society” in which everything—water, biodiversity, cells, genes, animals, plants—is property express a worldview in which life forms have no intrinsic worth, no integrity, and no subjecthood. It is a worldview in which the rights of farmers

to seed, of patients to afford able medicine, of producers to a fair share of nature's resources can be freely violated. The rhetoric of the "ownership society" hides the anti-life philosophy of those who, while mouthing pro-life slogans, seek to own, control, and monopolize all of the earth's gifts and all of human creativity. The enclosures of the commons that started in England created millions of disposable people. While these first enclosures stole only land, today all aspects of life are being enclosed—knowledge, culture, water, biodiversity, and public services such as health and education. Commons are the highest expression of economic democracy.

The privatization of public goods and services and the commoditization of the life support systems of the poor is a double theft which robs people of both economic and cultural security. Millions, deprived of a secure living and identity, are driven toward extremist, terrorist, fundamentalist movements. These movements simultaneously identify the other as enemy and construct exclusivist identities to separate themselves from those with whom, in fact, they are ecologically, culturally, and economically connected. This false separation results in antagonistic and cannibalistic behavior. The rise of extremism and terrorism is a response to the enclosures and economic colonization of globalization. Just as cannibalism among factory-farmed animals stops when chicken and pigs are allowed to roam free, terrorism, extremism, ethnic cleansing, and religious intolerance are unnatural conditions caused by globalization and have no place in Earth Democracy.

Enclosures create exclusions, and these exclusions are the hidden cost of corporate globalization. Our movements against the biopiracy of neem, of basmati, of wheat have aimed at and succeeded in reclaiming our collective biological and intellectual heritage as a commons. Movements such as the victorious struggle started by the tribal women of a tiny hamlet called Plachimada in India's Kerala state against one of the world's largest corporations, Coca-Cola, are at the heart of the emerging Earth Democracy.

New intellectual property rights enclose the biological, intellectual, and digital commons. Privatization encloses the water commons. The enclosure of each common displaces and disenfranchises people which creates scarcity for the many, while generating "growth" for the few. Displacement becomes disposability, and in its most severe form, the induced scarcity becomes a denial of the very right to live. As the use of genetically modified seed and sex-selective abortions spread, large groups of people—especially women and small farmers—are disappear-

ing. The scale and rate of this disappearance is proportional to the “economic growth” driven by the forces of neoliberal corporate globalization. However, these brutal extinctions are not the only trend shaping human history.

On the streets of Seattle and Cancun, in homes and farms across the world, another human future is being born. A future based on inclusion, not exclusion; on nonviolence, not violence; on reclaiming the commons, not their enclosure; on freely sharing the earth’s resources, not monopolizing and privatizing them. Instead of being shaped by closed minds behind closed doors, as the hawkish right-wing Project for the New American Century was, the people’s project is unfolding in an atmosphere of dialogue and diversity, of pluralism and partnerships, and of sharing and solidarity. I have named this project Earth Democracy. Based on our self-organizing capacities, our earth identities, and our multiplicities and diversity, Earth Democracy’s success concerns not just the fate and well-being of all humans, but all beings on the earth. Earth Democracy is not just about the next protest or the next World Social Forum; it is about what we do in between. It addresses the global in our everyday lives, our everyday realities, and creates change globally by making change locally. The changes may appear small, but they are far-reaching in impact—they are about nature’s evolution and our human potential; they are about shifting from the vicious cycles of violence in which suicidal cultures, suicidal economies, and the politics of suicide feed on each other to virtuous cycles of creative nonviolence in which living cultures nourish living democracies and living economies.

Earth Democracy is not just a concept, it is shaped by the multiple and diverse practices of people reclaiming their commons, their resources, their livelihoods, their freedoms, their dignity, their identities, and their peace. While these practices, movements, and actions are multifaceted and multiple, I have tried to identify clusters that present the ideas and examples of living democracies, living cultures, and live economies which together build Earth Democracy. Economy, politics, culture are not isolated from each other. The economies through which we produce and exchange goods and services are shaped by cultural values and power arrangements in society. The emergence of living economies, living cultures, and living democracies is, therefore, a synergistic process.

Living economies are processes and spaces where the earth’s resources are shared equitably to provide for our food and water needs and

to create meaningful livelihoods. Earth Democracy evolves from the consciousness that while we are rooted locally we are also connected to the world as a whole, and, in fact, to the entire universe. We base our globalization on ecological processes and bonds of compassion and solidarity, not the movement of capital and finance or the unnecessary movement of goods and services. A global economy which takes ecological limits into account must necessarily localize production to reduce wasting both natural resources and people. And only economies built on ecological foundations can become living economies that ensure sustainability and prosperity for all. Our economies are not calculated in the short term of corporate quarterly returns or the four- to five-year perspective of politicians. We consider the evolutionary potential of all life on earth and re-embed human welfare in our home, our community, and the earth family. Ecological security is our most basic security; ecological identities are our most fundamental identity. We are the food we eat, the water we drink, the air we breathe. And reclaiming democratic control over our food and water and our ecological survival is the necessary project for our freedom.

Living democracy is the space for reclaiming our fundamental freedoms, defending our basic rights, and exercising our common responsibilities and duties to protect life on earth, defend peace, and promote justice. Corporate globalization promised that free markets would promote democracy. On the contrary, the free markets of global corporations have destroyed democracy at every level. At the most fundamental level, corporate globalization destroys grassroots democracy through the enclosure of the commons. The very rules of globalization, whether imposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or by the WTO, have been written undemocratically, without the participation of the most affected countries and communities. Corporate globalization undermines and subverts national democratic processes by taking economic decisions outside the reach of parliaments and citizens. No matter which government is elected, it is locked into a series of neoliberal reform policies. Corporate globalization is in effect the death of economic democracy. It gives rise to corporate control and economic dictatorship.

When economic dictatorship is grafted onto representative, electoral democracy, a toxic growth of religious fundamentalism and right-wing extremism is the result. Thus, corporate globalization leads not just to the death of democracy, but to the democracy of death, in which

exclusion, hate, and fear become the political means to mobilize votes and power.

Earth Democracy enables us to envision and create living democracies. Living democracy enables democratic participation in all matters of life and death—the food we eat or do not have access to; the water we drink or are denied due to privatization or pollution; the air we breathe or are poisoned by. Living democracies are based on the intrinsic worth of all species, all peoples, all cultures; a just and equal sharing of this earth's vital resources; and sharing the decisions about the use of the earth's resources.

Living cultures are spaces in which we shape and live our diverse values, beliefs, practices, and traditions, while fully embracing our common, universal humanity, and our commonality with other species through soil, water, and air. Living cultures are based on nonviolence and compassion, diversity and pluralism, equality and justice, and respect for life in all its diversity.

Living cultures that grow out of living economies have space for diverse species, faiths, genders, and ethnicities. Living cultures grow from the earth, emerging from particular places and spaces while simultaneously connecting all humanity in a planetary consciousness of being members of our earth family. Living cultures are based on multiple and diverse identities. They are based on earth identity as both the concrete reality of our everyday lives—where we work, play; sleep, eat, laugh, or cry—and the processes which connect us globally.

“All things are connected,” Chief Seattle tells us. We are connected to the earth locally and globally. Living cultures based on the recovery of our earth identity create the potential for reintegrating human activities into the earth's ecological processes and limits. Remembering we are earth citizens and earth children can help us recover our common humanity and help us transcend the deep divisions of intolerance, hate, and fear that corporate globalization's ruptures, polarization, and enclosures have created.

Ancient concepts of living peacefully as one while evolving in biologically and culturally diverse trajectories cross our interconnected earth family and inspire Earth Democracy. The ancient wisdom and tradition of nonseparability and interconnectedness that we revive is evident in quantum theory; the space-time continuum of general relativity, and the self-organized complexity of living organisms.

Earth Democracy, in the contemporary context, reflects the values, worldviews, and actions of diverse movements working for peace,

justice, and sustainability. We live in times when the combination of representative democracy and economic globalization has generated new fears, new insecurities, new fundamentalisms, and new violence. The 2004 elections, both in India and in the US, show how in the face of job loss and the destruction of livelihoods a fundamentalist religious discourse fills the space. This discourse polarizes society and allows cultural differences to be used as a wedge to divide people from the issues that tie them together—their jobs, the environment, human rights, and one common humanity.

Earth Democracy allows us to reclaim our common humanity and our unity with all life. Earth Democracy relocates the sanctity of life in all beings and all people irrespective of class, gender, religion, or caste. And it redefines “upholding family values” as respecting the limits on greed and violence set by belonging to the earth family. Family values of the earth family do not allow for the privatization of water or the patenting of life, since all beings have a right to life and well-being. In the earth family that acknowledges, as Chief Seattle did, that “all things share the same breath, the beast, the tree, the man.... The air shares its spirit with all the life it supports,” one part of the international community cannot destabilize the climate, enclose the atmospheric commons, or ignore the rights of other species and other countries by creating 36 percent of the world’s CO₂ pollution.

Earth Democracy protects the ecological processes that maintain life and the fundamental human rights that are the basis of the right to life, including the right to water, the right to food, the right to health, the right to education, and the right to jobs and livelihoods. Earth Democracy is based on the recognition of and respect for the life of all species and all people.

Over the past three decades, my conception of Earth Democracy has been concretized through my engagement with diverse movements. Ecology movements, conservation movements, and animal rights movements have based their struggles around the intrinsic worth and value of all species. Human rights movements have been rooted in the recognition of the universal human rights of all people. In Earth Democracy, the concern for human and nonhuman species comes together in a coherent, nonconflicting whole that provides an alternative to the worldview of corporate globalization, which gives rights only to corporations and which sees human and other beings as exploitable raw material or disposable waste.

Earth Democracy connects us through the perennial renewal and regeneration of life—from our daily life to the life of the universe. Earth Democracy is the universal story of our times, in our different places. It pulsates with the limitless potential of an unfolding universe even while it addresses the real threats to our very survival as a species. It is hope in a time of hopelessness, it brings forth peace in a time of wars without end, and it encourages us to love life fiercely and passionately at a time when leaders and the media breed hatred and fear.

Principles of Earth Democracy

1. All species, peoples, and cultures have intrinsic worth

All beings are subjects who have integrity, intelligence, and identity, not objects of ownership, manipulation, exploitation, or disposability. No humans have the right to own other species, other people, or the knowledge of other cultures through patents and other intellectual property rights.

2. The earth community is a democracy of all life

We are all members of the earth family, interconnected through the planet's fragile web of life. We all have a duty to live in a manner that protects the earth's ecological processes, and the rights and welfare of all species and all people. No humans have the right to encroach on the ecological space of other species and other people, or to treat them with cruelty and violence.

3. Diversity in nature and culture must be defended

Biological and cultural diversity is an end in itself. Biological diversity is a value and a source of richness, both materially and culturally that creates conditions for sustainability. Cultural diversity creates the conditions for peace. Defending biological and cultural diversity is a duty of all people.

4. All beings have a natural right to sustenance

All members of the earth community, including all humans, have the right to sustenance—to food and water, to a safe and dean habitat, to security of ecological space. Resources vital to sustenance must stay in the commons. The right to sustenance is a natural right because it is the right to life. These rights are not given by states or corporations, nor can

they be extinguished by state or corporate action. No state or corporation has the right to erode or undermine these natural rights or enclose the commons that sustain life.

5. Earth Democracy is based on living economies and economic democracy

Earth Democracy is based on economic democracy. Economic systems in Earth Democracy protect ecosystems and their integrity; they protect people's livelihoods and provide basic needs to all. In the earth economy there are no disposable people or dispensable species or cultures. The earth economy is a living economy. It is based on sustainable, diverse, pluralistic systems that protect nature and people, are chosen by people, and work for the common good.

6. Living economies are built on local economies

Conservation of the earth's resources and creation of sustainable and satisfying livelihoods are most caringly, creatively, efficiently, and equitably achieved at the local level. Localization of economies is a social and ecological imperative. Only goods and services that cannot be produced locally—using local resources and local knowledge—should be produced nonlocally and traded long distance. Earth Democracy is based on vibrant local economies, which support national and global economies. In Earth Democracy, the global economy does not destroy and crush local economies, nor does it create disposable people. Living economies recognize the creativity of all humans and create spaces for diverse creativities to reach their full potential. Living economies are diverse and decentralized economies.

7. Earth Democracy is a living democracy

Living democracy is based on the democracy of all life and the democracy of everyday life. In living democracies people can influence the decisions over the food we eat, the water we drink, and the health care and education we have. Living democracy grows like a tree, from the bottom up. Earth Democracy is based on local democracy, with local communities—organized on principles of inclusion, diversity, and ecological and social responsibility—having the highest authority on decisions related to the environment and natural resources and to the sustenance and livelihoods of people. Authority is delegated to more distant levels of governments on the principle of subsidiarity. Self-rule and self-governance is the foundation of Earth Democracy.

8. Earth Democracy is based on living cultures

Living cultures promote peace and create free spaces for the practice of different religions and the adoption of different faiths and identities. Living cultures allow cultural diversity to thrive from the ground of our common humanity and our common rights as members of an earth community:

9. Living cultures are life nourishing

Living cultures are based on the dignity of and respect for all life, human and nonhuman, people of all genders and cultures, present and future generations. Living cultures are, therefore, ecological cultures which do not promote life-destroying lifestyles or consumption and production patterns, or the overuse and exploitation of resources. Living cultures are diverse and based on reverence for life. Living cultures recognize the multiplicity of identities based in an identity of place and local community—and a planetary consciousness that connects the individual to the earth and all life.

10. Earth Democracy globalizes peace, care, and compassion

Earth Democracy connects people in circles of care, cooperation, and compassion instead of dividing them through competition and conflict, fear and hatred. In the face of a world of greed, inequality, and overconsumption, Earth Democracy globalizes compassion, justice, and sustainability.