

Ecological Balance in an Era of Globalization

Vandana Shiva

In 1992, the Earth Summit in Rio marked the maturing of ecological awareness on a global scale. The world was poised to make a shift to sustainability. However, the Rio process and the sustainability agenda were subverted by the free-trade agenda. In 1993, the Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) was completed, in 1995 the World Trade Organization (WTO) was established, and world affairs grew increasingly dictated by trade and commerce. The normative political commitment to sustainability and justice was replaced by the rule of trade and the elevation of exploitation, greed, and profit maximization as the organizing principles of the market, the state, and society. Instead of the state regulating the market for the good of society, global economic powers and commercial forces are now regulating the state and society for the benefit of corporations. Instead of commerce being accountable to state and society, economic globalization is making citizens and their governments accountable to corporations and global economic bodies.

Economic globalization is not merely an economic phenomenon related to reduction of tariff barriers and removal of “protectionist” policies. It is in fact a normative process that reduces all value by commercial value. Free trade is, in reality, the rule of commerce. Both GATT and WTO basically undo the Rio agenda. Five years after Rio, we do not have Rio plus five but Rio minus five.

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On the one hand, the search for ecological balance in an era of globalization requires an assessment of the social and ecological impact of globalization. On the other hand, it requires an imagination and a realization of an alternative order that puts ecological balance and social and economic justice rather than trade at the center of economic policy.

Globalization is not a natural, evolutionary, or inevitable phenomenon, as is often argued. Globalization is a political process that has been forced on the weak by the powerful. Globalization is not the cross-cultural interaction of diverse societies. It is the imposition of a particular culture on all others. Nor is globalization the search for ecological balance on a planetary scale. It is the predation of one class, one race, and often one gender of a single species on all others. "Global" in the dominant discourse is the political space in which the dominant local seeks control, freeing itself from local, regional, and global sources of accountability arising from the imperatives of ecological sustainability and social justice. "Global" in this sense does not represent the universal human interest; it represents a particular local and parochial interest and culture that has been globalized through its reach and control, irresponsibility, and lack of reciprocity.

The Three Waves of Globalization

Globalization has come in three waves. The first wave was the colonization of the Americas, Africa, Asia, and Australia by European powers over the course of 1,500 years. The second wave was the imposition of the West's idea of "development" on non-Western cultures in the postcolonial era of the past five decades. The third wave of globalization was unleashed approximately five years ago as the era of "free trade," which for some commentators implies an end to history, but for us in the Third World is a repeat of history through recolonization. Each wave of globalization is cumulative in its impact, even while it creates a discontinuity in the dominant metaphors and actors. Each wave of globalization has served Western interests, and each wave has created deeper colonization of other cultures and of the planet's life. [...]

The Community, the State, and the Corporation

Globalization has distorted the relationship between the community, the state, and the economy, or, to use Marc Nerfin's more colorful categories, the relationship between the citizen, the prince, and the merchant. It is privileging the economy and its key actor, the corporation, insofar as the state and the community are increasingly becoming mere instruments of global capital.

The appeal of globalization is usually based on the idea that it implies less red tape, less centralization, and less bureaucratic control. It is celebrated because it implies the erosion of those bureaucratic impediments that drive up the ecological costs of trade and exchange in general.

During the past fifty years, the state has increasingly taken over the functions of the community and the self-organizing capacity of citizens. Through globalization, corporations are taking over the functions of the state and citizens. Food provisioning, health care, education, and social security are all being transformed into corporate projects under the code words of "competitiveness" and "efficiency." People's rights and the public domain are being eroded by exporting the economic label of "protectionism" to cover all domains: ethical, social, and political. The protection of the environment and the protection of people's security are treated as nontariff trade barriers that need to be dismantled.

While the state is being required to step back from the regulation of trade and commerce, it is being increasingly called in to regulate citizens and remove communities that are an "obstruction" to free trade. Thus, the state is becoming leaner in dealing with big business and global industry, and it is becoming meaner in dealing with people.

In the North and in the South, the principle of "eminent domain" is still applied to the state takeover of people's land and resources, which are then handed over to global corporations. For example, in India, under the new infrastructure policies, foreign companies can enjoy up to 100 percent equity participation, but the government will acquire the land, displace people, and deal with "law and order" problems created by displacements.

In the United States, the federal, state, and local governments are appropriating citizens' homes and farms to hand over to large corporations. In Hurst, Texas, a suburb of Fort Worth, the government appropriated the land of more than 100 home owners, handing it over to its largest taxpayer, the Northeast Mall. Additionally, 4,200 residences were destroyed in Detroit, Michigan, so that General Motors could build a new plant. Quite clearly, it is the property of the powerful corporations that is being protected by the state in every part of the world under the new free-trade regimes, while the property of the ordinary citizen has no protection.

Another area in which the role of the state is actually increasing is in intellectual property rights (IPRs). As larger areas are being converted into "intellectual property" through patents – from microbes to mice, from seeds to human cell lines – the state is being increasingly called on to police citizens to prevent them from engaging in everyday activities, such as saving seeds and exchanging knowledge. Our most human acts have been criminalized – in relationship to ourselves, to one another, and to other species through IPR legislation that is being forced on all countries and all people. [...]

Globalization as Environmental Apartheid

"Apartheid" literally means "separate development." However, in practice, apartheid is more appropriately a regime of exclusion. It is based on legislation that protects a privileged minority and that excludes the majority. It is characterized by the appropriation of the resources and wealth of society by a small minority based on privileges of race or class. The majority is then pushed into a marginalized existence without access to resources necessary for well-being and survival.

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Erstwhile South Africa is the most dramatic example of a society based on racial apartheid. Globalization has in a deep sense been a globalization of apartheid. This restructuring of the control over resources in such a way that the natural resources of the poor are systematically taken over by the rich and the pollution of the rich is systematically dumped on the poor.

In the pre-Rio period, it was the North that contributed most to the destruction of the environment. For example, 90 percent of historic carbon dioxide emissions have been by the industrialized countries. The developed countries produce 90 percent of the hazardous wastes produced around the world every year. Global free trade has globalized this environmental destruction in an asymmetric pattern. While the economy is controlled by Northern corporations, they are increasingly exploiting Third World resources for their global activities. It is the South that is disproportionately bearing the environmental burden of the globalized economy. Globalization is thus leading to an environmental apartheid.

The current environmental and social crisis demands that the world economy adjust to ecological limits and the needs of human survival. Instead, global institutions, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund and the WTO, are forcing the costs of adjustment on nature and women and the Third World. Across the Third World, structural adjustment and trade liberalization measures are becoming the most serious threat to the survival of the people.

While the last five decades have been characterized by the "globalization" of maldevelopment and the spread of a nonsustainable Western industrial paradigm in the name of development, the recent trends are toward an environmental apartheid in which, through global policy set by the holy trinity, the Western TNCs, supported by the governments of the economically powerful countries, attempt to maintain the North's economic power and wasteful lifestyles of the rich by exporting the environmental costs to the Third World. Resource- and pollution-intensive industries are being relocated in the South through the economics of free trade.

Lawrence Summers, who was the World Bank's chief economist and was responsible for the 1992 *World Development Report*, which was devoted to the economics of the environment, actually suggested that it makes economic sense to shift polluting industries to Third World countries. In a memo dated December 12, 1991, to senior World Bank staff, he wrote, "Just between you and me, shouldn't the World Bank be encouraging more migration of the dirty industries to the LDC?" Summers justified his economic logic of increasing pollution in the Third World on three grounds. First, since wages are low in the Third World, the economic costs of pollution arising from increased illness and death are the least in the poorest countries. According to Summers, "Relocation of pollutants to the lowest wage country is impeccable and we should face up to that." Second, since in large parts of the Third World pollution is still low, it makes economic sense to Summers to introduce pollution: "I've always thought that countries in Africa are vastly under polluted; their air quality is probably vastly inefficiently low compared to Los Angeles or Mexico City." Finally, since the poor are poor, they cannot possibly worry about environmental problems: "The concern over an agent that causes a one in a million change in the odds of prostate cancer is obviously going to be much higher in a country where people survive to get prostate

cancer than in a country where under five mortality is 200 per thousand." He recommended the relocation of hazardous and polluting industries to the Third World because, in narrow economic terms, life is cheaper in the poorer countries. The economists' logic might value life differentially in the rich North and the poor South. However, all life is precious. It is equally precious to the rich and the poor, to the white and the black, to men and women.

In this context, recent attempts of the North to link trade conditionalities with the environment in platforms such as WTO need to be viewed as an attempt to build on environmental and economic apartheid. The destruction of ecosystems and livelihoods as a result of trade liberalization is a major environmental and social subsidy to global trade and commerce and those who control it. The main mantra of globalization is "international competitiveness." In the context of the environment, this translates into the largest corporations competing for the natural resources that the poor people in the Third World need for their survival. This competition is highly unequal not only because the corporations are powerful and the poor are not but also because the rules of free trade allow corporations to use the machinery of the nation-state to appropriate resources from the people and prevent people from asserting and exercising their rights.

It is often argued that globalization will create more trade, which will create growth, which will remove poverty. What is overlooked in this myth is that globalization and liberalized trade and investment create growth by destroying the environment and local, sustainable livelihoods. They, therefore, create poverty instead of removing it. The new globalization policies have accelerated and expanded environmental destruction and displaced millions of people from their homes and their sustenance base. [...]

Northern Dumping in the South

The United States generates more than 275 million tons of toxic waste every year and is the leading waste-exporting country in the world. The United States is one of the 161 countries that has signed the Basel International Convention but has not ratified it (along with fifty-eight other countries); parties to the convention, such as India, are not allowed to trade in hazardous wastes with nonparties to the convention. However, notwithstanding the convention, the United States continues its long tradition of exporting its toxic wastes, finding loopholes for dumping them on the South. The United States is thus violating international law in sending shipments of its waste, often mislabeled as recyclables, to India.

In the first half of 1996, approximately 1,500 tons of lead wastes were imported to India. Greenpeace findings state that the amount of toxic lead waste imported from industrialized countries into India has doubled since 1995. Imports from the United States, Australia, South Korea, Germany, the Netherlands, France, Japan, and the United Kingdom account for about 67 percent of the total import of lead wastes to India. The Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) accounted for 98 percent of the 400 million metric tons of toxic waste generated worldwide.

Toxic waste such as cyanide, mercury, and arsenic is being shipped as "recyclable waste" – a deliberate attempt to mislead and disguise the true nature of the wastes. In reality, there is no such use or demand to recover such toxic chemicals because it is pure waste. The imported waste often ends up in backyard smelting organizations, not the commercial sector as stated by the government. Many of the importing units do not possess the technology or the expertise to process the chemicals they are importing; therefore, they inadvertently cause more harm to the environment and their communities because of their ignorance concerning the chemicals that they are dealing with. Eighty-five hundred such units operate in Maharashtra alone.

Developed countries are offering lucrative prices (in Indian terms) to Indian "recycling" companies to take their material for "processing." India is being used as a dumping ground by the Northern industrialized countries because the cost of treating and disposing waste in a sustainable manner in the North has become highly expensive. Costs have become so high because of stringent laws that ban dumping, burning, and burying waste. Dumping in the developing world therefore becomes justified on grounds of economic efficiency.

The cost of burying one ton of hazardous waste in the United States rose from \$15 in 1980 to \$350 in 1992. In Germany, it is cheaper, by \$2,500, to ship a ton of waste to a developing country than to dispose of it in Europe. Countries such as Germany find it cheaper to export their waste to a landfill than to recycle it themselves. Because India does not charge any landfill costs, the profits made in waste trade has made the industry even more attractive.

In 1966, the Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology (RFSTE) filed public interest litigation seeking a ban on all hazardous and toxic wastes into India. In response, on May 6, 1997, the Supreme Court of India imposed a blanket ban on the import of all kinds of hazardous and toxic wastes into the country. The court also directed state governments to show cause why immediate orders should not be passed for the closure of more than 2,000 unauthorized waste-handling units identified by the central government in various parts of the country. The Supreme Court directed that no import be made or permitted of any hazardous waste that is already banned under the Basel International Convention, or to be banned after the date specified therein by the court.

A court statement established that 2,000 tons of hazardous wastes were being generated every day in India without adequate safe disposal sites. This ban applies to state governments as well as the central government to give authorization for the importation of hazardous wastes.

Today, toxic waste dumping has become a national issue, and several nongovernmental organizations are working specifically on the banning of toxic waste import and dumping and related issues. Srishti, Greenpeace, Toxics Link Exchange, Public Interest Research Group, WWF-India, and the RFSTE are Delhi-based movements that are concerned with hazardous wastes and toxics issues and that, in particular, are opposing the importation of toxic wastes. Furthermore, some of us are involved in creating awareness within India as to the actions of transnational and local industries who often openly defy existing environmental laws regarding importation, treatment, handling, and disposal of hazardous wastes. [...]

New social and environmental movements are emerging everywhere in response to the widespread destruction of the environment and of the livelihoods that depend on biodiversity and in response to piracy of our indigenous resources and indigenous innovation. In India, the intricate link between people's livelihoods and biodiversity has evolved over centuries. Economic liberalization is threatening to sever this link by treating biodiversity as a raw material for exploitation of life forms as property and of people's livelihoods as an inevitable sacrifice for national economic growth and development. It is also eroding the level of governing control that people have over their lives.

In February 1995, the tribal people from different parts of India were in Delhi on an indefinite fast to force the government to recognize their declaration of "self-rule." The National Front for Tribal Self-Rule, a national organization of organizations of tribal people, has conducted a civil disobedience movement since October 2, 1995, for the establishment of self-rule. As they state,

We have carried the cross of virtual slavery for much too long in spite of independence. Other rural folks are also in a similar state. Yet, now that everything is clear and there is unanimity in the establishment as also among members of parliament and experts, the change must not be delayed. We will not tolerate this. Even otherwise, on the issue of self-governance we need not be solicitous. It is a natural right. In the hierarchy of democratic institutions gram-sabha is above all, even parliament. This is what Gandhi preached; we will not obey any law which compromises the position of gram-sabha. In any case we resolve to establish self-rule with effect from October 2, 1995. We will have command over our resources and will manage our affairs thereafter.

(Declaration, "Front for Tribal Self-Rule," Delhi, February 1995)

The struggle of the tribal people was successful.

The passing of the Provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act that came into effect in December 1996 represents a landmark piece of legislation as far as acknowledging the legal rights to self-rule of the tribal people are concerned. Section 4(b) and (d) of the act state the following:

- A village shall ordinarily consist of a habitation or a group of habitations, or a hamlet or a group of hamlets comprising a community and managing its affairs in accordance with traditions and customs.
- Each gram-sabha shall be competent to safeguard and preserve the traditions and customs of the people, their cultural identity, community resources and the customary mode of dispute resolution.

The implementation of the Panchayati Raj Act in Scheduled Areas has already set the precedent for the recognition of communities as competent authorities for

decision making on resource use, cultural values and traditions, and community rights to common resources as the building block of a decentralized democracy.

More than 100 villages in and around the thick forests of Nagarhole in Karnataka have established self-governments to safeguard their livelihood under the provisions of a law passed by the Parliament that came into effect on December 24, 1996. However, this law has yet to be passed by the Karnataka Assembly to implement it in that state.

The people have formed gram-sabhas and established task forces to implement the self-rule program. In some of the villages, they have erected gates at the entrance, and only the chief of the tribal community/village has been entrusted with the power to give permission to any outsider to enter their village. The villagers are freely collecting the minor forest produce, and even they are adjudicating the problems themselves rather than going to the police or court.

The Movement for Declaration of Community Rights to Biodiversity: The Case of Pattuvam Panchayat

Nationwide people's movements have succeeded to date in stalling any legislation passing parliament that would promote IPRs over biodiversity. Such opposition signifies the degree of democratic dissent being generated at the grassroots level to laws affecting people's livelihoods and rights over their resources. People's movements against erosion, exploitation, and usurpation of biodiversity are numerous and widespread throughout the country. A small community in southern Kerala has taken a bold step to protect its biodiversity. On April 9, 1997, in a remote part of Kerala, hundreds of local people gathered to declare their local biodiversity as a community-owned resource that they will collectively protect and that they will not allow to be privatized through patents on derived products or varieties.

The community is known as the Pattuvam Panchayat. The Panchayat has set up its own biodiversity register to record all biodiversity of species in the region. It has stated that no individual, TNC, or state or central government can use their biodiversity without the permission of the Pattuvam Panchayat. The people of Pattuvam have taken a pathbreaking step by declaring their biodiversity a community resource over which the community as a whole has rights. This step demonstrates a commitment to rejuvenating and protecting their biodiversity and knowledge systems from the exploitative forces of economic liberalization.

Movements are occurring in other parts of India as well whereby communities are declaring the biodiversity and knowledge as the common heritage of local communities. For example, in Dharward in Karnataka and in Chattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, declaration ceremonies have been held announcing that biodiversity is a community resource and that privatization of biodiversity and indigenous knowledge through patents is theft. [...]

I have started a national movement for the recovery of the biological and intellectual commons by saving native seeds from extinction. Seed is the first link in the food chain. It is also the first step toward freedom in food. Globalization is leading to total control over what we eat and what we grow. The tiny seed is becoming an instrument of freedom in this emerging era of total control. Our slogan is, "Native seed – indigenous agriculture – local markets."

Through saving the native seed, we are becoming free of chemicals. By practicing a "free" agriculture, we are saying no to patents on life and to biopiracy. Gandhi called such resistance "Satyagraha": the struggle for truth. Navdanya is a "Seed Satyagraha" in which it is the most marginal and poor peasants who are finding new hope.

A central part of the Seed Satyagraha is to declare the "common intellectual rights" of Third World communities who have gifted the world the knowledge of the rich bounties of nature's diversity. The innovations of Third World communities might differ in process and objectives from the innovations in the commercial world of the West, but they cannot be discounted just because they are different. But we are going beyond just saying no. We are creating alternatives by building community seed banks, strengthening farmers' seed supplies, and searching for sustainable agriculture options that are suitable for different regions.

The seed has become, for us, the site and the symbol of freedom in the age of manipulation and monopoly of its diversity. It plays the role of Gandhi's spinning wheel in this period of recolonization through free trade. The "Charkha" (spinning wheel) became an important symbol of freedom not because it was big and powerful but because it was small and could come alive as a sign of resistance and creativity in the 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. In the seed, cultural diversity converges with biological diversity. Ecological issues combine with social justice, peace, and democracy.

Conclusion

The dynamics of globalization and their associated violence are posing some of the most severe challenges to ordinary people in India and throughout the world. While this chapter has been pessimistic, outlining the character and strength of globalization and its ability to thwart citizen accountability, I take heart in the resistance movements mentioned in the last few sections. Continuous globalizing efforts may threaten democracy, the vibrancy and diversity of life forms, and ecological well-being in general. However, the human spirit, inspired by justice and environmental protection, can never be fully repressed. Despite the brutal violence of globalization, we have hope because we build alternatives in partnership with nature and people. [...]