

18. Decolonizing the North*

Vandana Shiva

The White Man's Burden is becoming increasingly heavy for the earth and especially for the South. The past 500 years of history reveal that each time a relationship of colonization has been established between the North and nature and people outside the North, the colonizing men and society have assumed a position of superiority, and thus of responsibility for the future of the earth and for other peoples and cultures. Out of the assumption of superiority flows the notion of the white man's burden. Out of the *idea* of the white man's burden flows the *reality* of the burdens imposed by the white man on nature, women and others. Therefore, decolonizing the South is intimately linked to the issue of decolonizing the North.

Gandhi clearly formulated the individuality of freedom, not only in the sense that the oppressed of the world are one, but also in the wider sense that the oppressor too, is caught in the culture of oppression. Decolonization is therefore as relevant in the context of the colonizer as in that of the colonized. Decolonization in the North is also essential because processes of wealth creation simultaneously create poverty, processes of knowledge creation simultaneously generate ignorance, and processes for the creation of freedom simultaneously generate unfreedom.

In the early phases of colonization, the white man's burden consisted of the need to 'civilize' the non-white peoples of the world — this meant, above all, depriving them of their resources and rights. In the later phase of colonization, the white man's burden consisted of the need to 'develop' the Third World, and this again involved depriving local communities of their resources and rights. We are now on the threshold of the third phase of colonization, in which the white man's burden is to protect the environment, especially the Third World's environment — and this, too, involves taking control of rights and resources.

* This is a revised version of a paper first prepared for the Festival of India in Germany, 1992.

It seems that each time the North has claimed new control over the lives of people in the South, it has been legitimized on the basis of some form of the white man's 'burden' arising from notions of superiority. The paradoxical consequence of the white man's burden is that the earth and other peoples carry new burdens in the form of environmental destruction and the creation of poverty and dispossession. Decolonization in the North becomes essential if what is called the 'environment and development' crisis in the South is to be overcome. The North's prescription for the South's salvation has always created new burdens and new bondages, and the salvation of the environment cannot be achieved through the old colonial order based on the white man's burden. The two are ethically, economically and epistemologically incongruent.

Ethical decolonization

From the democracy of all life to man's empire over nature. Most non-Western cultures have been based on the democracy of all life. As a schoolgirl, one lesson I learnt in the Hindi class was that human beings are part of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbam* or the earth family. As a part of the earth family, one participates in the democracy of all life. Rabindranath Tagore, our national poet, writing in *Tapovan* at the peak of the independence movement, stated that the distinctiveness of Indian culture consists in its having defined the principles of life in nature as the highest form of cultural evolution.

The culture of the forest has fuelled the culture of Indian society. The culture that has arisen from the forest has been influenced by the diverse processes of renewal of life which are always at play in the forest, varying from species to species, from season to season, in sight and sound and smell. The unifying principle of life in diversity, of democratic pluralism, thus became the principle of Indian civilization.¹

As a source of life, nature was venerated as sacred, and human evolution was measured in terms of the human capacity to interact in harmony with her rhythms and patterns, intellectually and emotionally. In the final analysis, the ecological crisis is rooted in the mistaken belief that human beings are not part of the democracy of nature's life, that they stand *apart* from and *above* nature. For example, Robert Boyle, the famous scientist who was also the Governor of the New England Company, saw the rise of mechanical

philosophy as an instrument of power not just over nature but also over the original inhabitants of America. He explicitly declared his intention of ridding the New England Indians of their absurd notions about the workings of nature. He attacked their perception of nature 'as a kind of goddess', and argued that 'the veneration, wherewith men are imbued for what they call nature, has been a discouraging impediment to the empire of man over the inferior creatures of God'.² 'Man's empire over the inferior creatures of God' was thus substituted for the 'earth family'.

This conceptual diminution was essential to the project of colonization and capitalism. The concept of an earth family excluded the possibilities of exploitation and domination, therefore a denial of the rights of nature and nature-based societies was essential in order to facilitate an uncontrolled right to exploitation and profits.

As Crosby observes: 'Again and again, during the centuries of European imperialism, the Christian view that all men are brothers was to lead to persecution of non-Europeans — he who is my brother sins to the extent that he is unlike me.'³ Whenever Europeans 'discovered' the native peoples of America, Africa or Asia, they projected upon them the identity of savages in need of redemption by a superior race. Even slavery was justified on these grounds, in so far as to carry Africans into slavery was seen as an act of benevolence, because at the same time they were carried out of an 'endless night of savage barbarism' into the embrace of a 'superior civilization'. All brutality was sanctioned on the basis of this assumed superiority and European men's exclusive status as fully human. The decimation of indigenous peoples everywhere was morally justified on the grounds that they were not really human; they were part of the fauna. As Pilger has observed for Australia, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*⁴ appeared to be in no doubt about this. 'Man in Australia is an animal of prey. More ferocious than the lynx, the leopard, or the hyena, he devours his own people'. In an Australian textbook *Triumph in the Tropics*,⁵ Australian aborigines were equated with their half-wild dogs. As animals, the indigenous Australians, Americans, Africans and Asians had no rights as humans. As Basil Davidson observes, the moral justification for invading and expropriating the territory and possessions of other peoples was the assumed 'natural' superiority of Europeans to the 'tribes without law' the 'fluttered folk and wild'.⁶

Scientific missions combined with religious missions to deny rights to nature. The rise of the mechanical philosophy with the

emergence of the scientific revolution was based on the destruction of concepts of a self-regenerative, self-organizing nature which sustained all life. For Bacon, who is called the father of modern science, nature was no longer Mother Nature, but a female nature, to be conquered by an aggressive masculine mind. As Carolyn Merchant points out,⁷ this transformation of nature from a living, nurturing mother to inert and manipulable matter was eminently suited to the exploitation imperative of growing capitalism.

The removal of animistic, organic assumptions about the cosmos constituted the death of nature — the most far-reaching effect of the scientific revolution. Because nature was now viewed as a system of dead, inert particles moved by external, rather than inherent forces, the mechanical framework itself could legitimate the manipulation of nature. Moreover, as a conceptual framework, the mechanical order had associated with it a framework of values based on power, fully compatible with the directions taken by commercial capitalism.⁸

While the ethical aspect of the ecological crisis can be traced to the white man's self-perceived burden as the only species with rights, the white man's burden is again seen as instrumental in solving the problems of the ecological crisis linked to the idea that the North's ethical discourse is generously expanding to concede rights to other peoples and other species. Most importantly, simultaneous with a pervasive Eurocentric assumption that an ethical expansion of rights to include nature in all its manifestations is taking place, is a blindness to the diminution and alienation of nature's rights at deeper levels than ever before, and a shrinkage of poor people's right to survival. This split is best exemplified in the area of biodiversity. While on the one hand biodiversity conservation is ethically justified on the grounds of the intrinsic value and rights of all species to exist, developments in biotechnology are predicated on the assumption that species have no intrinsic worth. Species are being robbed of their rights. And since the ethics based on the democracy of all life makes no distinction between rights of nature and rights of human communities, this new violation of the rights of nature is intimately linked to the violation of rights of farmers, tribals and women as knowers and users of biodiversity.

The population problem

Population 'explosions' have always emerged as images created by modern patriarchy in periods of increasing social and economic polarization. The latest concern with overpopulation is related to concern for the environment. Popularized through disquiet about degradation of the ecology of the earth the picture of the world's hungry hoards have made population control appear acceptable and even imperative.

This focus on numbers disguises people's unequal access to resources and the unequal environmental burden they place on the earth. In global terms, as we saw elsewhere in this book, a drastic decrease of population in the poorest areas of Asia, Africa and Latin America would make an environmental impact immeasurably less than a decrease of only five per cent in present consumption levels of the ten richest countries.⁹ The dominant economic and political processes, however, are concerned to protect the North's wasteful 'way of life' whatever the cost, and the poor are considered only when it comes to accusing them of overburdening the planet's resources and whose fertility must therefore be stringently controlled.

These strategies of triage create an artificial conflict of interest between women, children and the earth. Through population control programmes, women's bodies must be brutally invaded in order to protect the earth from the threat of overpopulation.

Economic colonization: The growth of affluence, the growth of poverty

Two economic myths facilitate a separation between two intimately linked processes: the growth of affluence and the growth of poverty. Firstly, growth is viewed only as growth of capital. What goes unperceived is the destruction in nature and in people's subsistence economy that this growth creates. The two simultaneously created 'externalities' of growth — environmental destruction and poverty creation — are then causally linked, not to the processes of growth, but to each other. Poverty, it is stated, *causes* environmental destruction. The disease is then offered as a cure: growth will solve the problems of poverty and the environmental crisis it has given rise to in the first place. This is the message of World Bank development reports, of the Bruntland report, *Our Common Future*¹⁰ and of the UNCED process.

Ris

The second myth that separates affluence from poverty, as we have noted earlier, is the assumption that if you produce what you consume, you do not produce. This is the basis on which the production boundary is drawn for national accounting that measures economic growth. Both myths contribute to the mystification of growth and consumerism, but they also hide the real processes that create poverty. First, the market economy dominated by capital is not the only economy; development has, however, been based on the growth of the market economy. The invisible costs of development have been the destruction of two other economies: nature's processes and people's survival. The ignorance or neglect of these two vital economies is the reason why development has posed a threat of ecological destruction and a threat to human survival, both of which, however, have remained 'hidden negative externalities' of the development process.

Trade and exchange of goods and services have always existed in human societies, but these were subjected to nature's and people's economies. The elevation of the domain of the market and man-made capital to the position of the highest organizing principle for societies has led to the neglect and destruction of the other two organizing principles — ecology and survival — which maintain and sustain life in nature and society.

Modern economics and concepts of development cover only a negligible part of the history of human interaction with nature. For centuries, principles of sustenance have given human societies the material basis of survival by deriving livelihoods directly from nature through self-provisioning mechanisms. Limits in nature have been respected and have guided the limits of human consumption. In most countries of the South large numbers of people continue to derive their sustenance in the survival economy which remains invisible to market-oriented development. All people in all societies depend on nature's economy for survival. When the organizing principle for society's relationship with nature is sustenance, nature exists as a commons. It becomes a resource when profits and accumulation become the organizing principles and create an imperative for the exploitation of resources for the market. Without clean water, fertile soils and crop and plant genetic diversity, human survival is not possible. These commons have been destroyed by economic development, resulting in the creation of a new

contradiction between the economy of natural processes and the survival economy, because those people deprived of their traditional land and means of survival by development are forced to survive on an increasingly eroded nature.

While development as economic growth, and commercialization are now recognized as the root of the ecological crisis in the South, they are, paradoxically, offered as a cure for the ecological crisis in the form of 'sustainable development'. The result is that the very meaning of sustainability is lost. The ideology of sustainable development is, however, contained within the limits of the market economy. It views the natural resource conflicts and ecological destruction as separate from the economic crisis, and proposes a solution to that crisis in the expansion of the market system. As a result, instead of programmes of gradual ecological regeneration of nature's and the survival economy, the solution prescribed is the immediate and augmented exploitation of natural resources with higher capital investment. Clausen, as the President of the World Bank, recommended that 'a better environment, more often than not, depends on continued growth'.¹¹ Later, Chandler¹² further renewed the argument in favour of a market-oriented solution to ecological problems, believing that viable steps toward conservation can come only through the market.

Economic growth is facilitated through overexploiting natural resources, and in turn this creates a scarcity of those resources. Further economic growth cannot help in the regeneration of the very spheres which must be destroyed to enable economic growth to take place; nature shrinks as capital grows. The growth of the market cannot solve the crisis it creates. Further, while natural resources can be transformed into cash, cash cannot be transformed into nature's ecological processes. But in nature's economy, the currency is not money, it is life. The neglect of people's economy and nature's economy is also linked to the failure to recognize production in these domains. In the self-provisioning economies of the South, producers are simultaneously consumers and conservers, but their production capacity is negated, and they are reduced to mere consumers. An illustration of this approach is the World Bank, World Resources Institute (WRI), International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), World Wildlife Fund (WWF) programme on biodiversity conservation.¹³ In this proposal, economic value is divided into the following categories:

- consumptive value: value of products consumed directly without passing through a market, such as firewood, fodder and game meat;
- productive use value: value of products commercially exploited; and
- non-consumptive use value: indirect value of ecosystem functions, such as watershed protection, photosynthesis, regulation of climate and production of soil.

An interesting value framework has thus been constructed which predetermines analysis and options. If the South's poor, who derive their livelihoods directly from nature, are only 'consumers', and the trading and commercial interests are the only 'producers' it follows quite naturally that the South is responsible for the destruction of its biological wealth, and the North alone has the capacity to conserve it. This ideologically constructed divide between consumption, production and conservation hides the political economy of the processes which underlie the destruction of biological diversity. Above all, it denies the South's role as the real donors to North, in terms of biological resources, most primary commodities, and even in terms of financial resources. The first myth that needs to be abandoned in the decolonization of the North is that goods and finances flow only from the industrial economies to the South. In fact, in the 1980s, the South's poor countries have been massive exporters of capital. The net transfer of resources from South to North is US\$50 billion per year.¹⁴ If the plants, germ plasm, cheap cassava, soya beans, fish and forest products that the South 'donates' to the North — in so far as the low commodity prices for these items reflect neither their environmental nor social value — are added, the reverse flow of resources is much greater. The South's poverty is generated through the very processes that generate the North's affluence.

**Intellectual colonization: the growth of knowledge,
the spread of ignorance**

Never before has human knowledge increased exponentially at such a high rate — never before has our ignorance about our world been deeper. And the ignorance has largely been created by the explosion of scientific knowledge. As Ravetz states,

We can no longer maintain the traditional view of science as rolling back the boundary with ignorance ... Ignorance

will always be with us, and indeed man-made ignorance constitutes a great and ever-increasing threat to our survival . . . The system maintains its plausibility by enforcing a sort of 'ignorance of ignorance'.¹⁵

When we consider the complexity and inter-relatedness of the cycles by which Gaia maintains her balances, the massiveness of the disruptions which we now impose on her, the primitive quality of the scientific materials by which we attempt to decipher her clues, then truly we can speak of a man-made ignorance, criminal or pitiful, depending on your point of view, in our relations with Gaia. A system of knowledge which enforces the 'ignorance of ignorance' has been assigned the prime place in creating the modern world. Science has been called the engine of growth and progress. On the one hand contemporary society perceives itself as a science-based civilization, with science providing both the logic and the impulse for social transformation. In this aspect science is self-consciously embedded in society. On the other hand, unlike all other forms of social organization and social production, science is assumed to be value neutral and universal and thus is placed *above* society. It can neither be judged, questioned, nor evaluated in the public domain. As Harding has observed:

Neither God nor tradition is privileged with the same credibility as scientific rationality in modern cultures . . .

The project that science's sacredness makes taboo is the examination of science in just the ways any other institution or set of social practices can be examined.¹⁶

While science itself is a product of social forces and has a social agenda determined by those who can mobilize scientific production, in contemporary times scientific activity has been assigned a privileged epistemological position of being socially and politically neutral. Thus science takes on a dual character: it offers technological fixes for social and political problems, but absolves and distances itself from the new social and political problems it creates. Reflecting the priorities and perceptions of particular class, gender, or cultural interests, scientific thought organizes and transforms the natural and social order. However, since both nature and society have their own organization, the superimposition of a new order does not necessarily take place in a faultless and orderly fashion. There is often resistance from people and nature, a resistance which is externalized as 'unanticipated side effects'.

Science remains immune from social assessment, and insulated from its own impacts. Through this split identity the 'sacredness' of science is created.

The issue of making visible the hidden links between science, technology and society and making manifest and vocal the kind of issues that are kept concealed and unspoken is linked with the relationship between the North and the South. Unless and until there can be social accountability of the science and technology structures and the systems to whose needs they respond, there can be no balance and no accountability in terms of relationships between North and South. This need for accountability will be extremely critical, more so than ever before, in the biotechnology revolution. In the absence of binding international conventions that create ethical and political boundaries, the biotechnology revolution will increase the polarization between the North and the South and the rich and poor. The asymmetrical relationship between science, technology and society will become further skewed as one part of society has a monopoly of the knowledge and profits linked to the biorevolution, and the rest of society is excluded from the knowledge and benefits but forced to bear the ecological, political and economic costs. Without the creation of institutions of social accountability and social control, the South will become the laboratory, providing the guinea pigs, the dump yards for all the risks that are to come while the benefits flow to the industrialized North. In fact, this has already started to happen; it is not a fear of the future, we are facing it already.

The UNCED process, instead of challenging the sanctity of science and technology and rendering these structures more transparent, actually makes technology more opaque, more mystical and magical. The environmental crisis was precipitated by the view that nature was inadequate, and that technology could improve on it. Now it seems that the dominant view is to propose the disease as the medicine, and 'technology transfer' has become the magical cure for every ecological illness. As Angus Wright has pointed out: 'Historically, science and technology made their first advances by rejecting the idea of miracles in the natural world. Perhaps it would be best to return to that position.'¹⁷

To question the omnipotence of science and technology's ability to solve ecological problems is an important step in the decolonization of the North. The second step is linked to a refusal to acquiesce to the growing, the pervasive power of 'intellectual property rights.' Even while the South still labours under the

burden of older colonization processes, new burdens of recolonization are added. The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade functions similarly to the old East India Company in demanding freedom for the North's financial and industrial interests and denying the South's citizens the freedom of their rights to survival — rights which are to be treated as 'non-tariff' trade barriers that interfere in global trade. As in the earlier phases of colonization, the South's original inhabitants are to be robbed of their rights as citizens to make way for the stateless corporations' rights as super-citizens in every state. Trade and plunder merge once again, especially in Trade-Related Intellectual Property Rights. The land, forests, rivers, oceans, having all been colonized, it becomes necessary to find new spaces to colonize because capital accumulation would otherwise stop. The only remaining spaces are those within — within plants, animals and women's bodies.

There seems to be an abandonment of the 'human' aspect. The dimensions that comprise human-ness and dynamic life have been subsumed by an assumption that the cerebral is superior and that the human aspect can only adulterate the purity of the cerebral; and because the North has lost touch with the bases of life-in-nature it has become intoxicated with what it sees as possibilities of recreating nature closer to its own perceived — arid — desires; playing God in fact. The horror of this is that the final outcome can only be a dead planet — and, if anything at all, a truly sub-human world, possibly within a totally artificial man-made atmosphere, submerged beneath the wastes of nature. Not so much 1984, as Aldous Huxley's earlier, satirical novel, *Brave New World*.

The construction of 'intellectual property' is linked to multiple levels of dispossession. At the first level, the creation of the disembodied knowing mind is linked to the destruction of knowledge as a commons. The Latin root of *private* property, *privare*, means 'to deprive'. The laws of private property which rose during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries simultaneously eroded people's common right to the use of forests and pastures, while creating the social conditions for capital accumulation through industrialization. The new laws of private property were aimed at protecting individual rights to property as a commodity, while destroying collective rights to commons as a basis of sustenance.

Trade negotiations are a strange place for products of the mind to be discussed. Yet that is precisely what has happened with the rich countries of the North having forced the so-called TRIPs onto

the agenda of the Uruguay Round of multilateral trade negotiations being held under the auspices of GATT. The multinationals of the North are sending their representatives to each country to ask for stricter intellectual property protection for everything that can be made in their laboratories. And with the new technologies, that includes life. From the MNCs' perspective intellectual property rights are essential for progress and development. Those countries which do not have them are accused of putting national interest above 'internationally' accepted principles of fair trade. They insist that the assertion of intellectual property rights is essential in order to stimulate investment and research.

On the other hand, countries in the South, such as India, have adapted their patent laws to promote technology transfer and defend themselves against subjugation. They have modified patent terms, excluded vital sectors such as food and health from monopoly control and strengthened compulsory licensing by stipulating that patents must be used in local production processes or the patent rights will be forfeited.¹⁸

During the 1960s and 1970s these discussions took place through the United Nations system. But in the 1980s the rich countries decided that the intellectual property discussions should be transferred from the UN, where the world's majority rules, to GATT, where the minority from the industrialized North effectively rules. The South's patent laws, designed to protect the public interest against monopolies, are no longer seen as a tool for development, but as a cover-up for economic embezzlement. The US international trade commissions estimate that US industry is losing anything between US\$100 and 300 million due to 'weak' patent laws. If the stricter intellectual property rights regime demanded by the US takes shape, the transfer of these extra funds from poor to rich countries would exacerbate the current debt crises of the South ten times over. The MNCs, from which citizens need protection, are to have new power to monitor markets. The industrialized countries want border controls, seizure and destruction of infringing goods, imprisonment, forfeiture, criminal sanctions, fines, compensation and the like.

While market power is the apparent motivation for this drive to privatize and own life itself, the social acceptability of the changes derives from a worldview that continues to see the white man as a privileged species upon whom other species (including other peoples) depend for survival and value.

The earth and the South have paid heavily for 500 years for the white man's burden. Probably the most significant step in striving towards re-establishing an earth community is the recognition that the democracy of all life is inconsistent with the idea that this beautiful planet is the white man's burden. Unlike the mythical Atlas, we do not carry the earth; the earth carries us.

Notes

1. Rabindranath Tagore, *Tapovan*, (Hindi). Gandhi Bhavan, Tikamgarh, undated.
2. Quoted in Brian Easlea, *Science and Sexual Oppression: Patriarchy's Confrontation with Woman and Nature*. London, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1981, p. 64.
3. Alfred Cosby, *The Columbian Exchange*, Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut, 1972, p. 36.
4. John Pilger, *A Secret Country*. Vintage, London, 1989, p. 26.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Basil Davidson, *Africa in History*, Collier Books, New York, 1974, p. 262.
7. Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*. New York, Harper & Row, 1980, p. 182.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 193.
9. 'Consumption', paper contributed by the Indira Gandhi Institute, Bombay, to UNCED, 1991.
10. WCED, *Our Common Future*. Geneva, 1987.
11. Edward Goldsmith, 'The World Bank: Global Financing of Impoverishment and Famine', *The Ecologist*, Vol. 15, No. 1/2, 1985.
12. W.D. Chandler, World Watch Paper 72. Washington, DC World Watch Institute.
13. WRI, IUCN, WWF, *Biodiversity Conservation*. Geneva, 1991.
14. NGLS, UNDP, *NGO Guide to Trade and Aid*, 1990.
15. J. Ravetz, 'Gaia and the Philosophy of Science', in Peter Bunyard and Edward Goldsmith, (ed) *GAIA, The Thesis, the Mechanisms and the Implications*. Cornwall, Wadebridge Ecological Centre, 1988, p. 133.
16. Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1986, p. 30.
17. Angus Wright, 'Innocents Abroad: American Agricultural Research in Mexico,' in Wes Jackson et. al, (ed), *Meeting the Expectations of the Land*. San Francisco, North Point Press, 1984.
18. Pocket book on Indian Patent Law, National Working Group on Patents, New York.