

Laudatio for
Dr. Vandana Shiva
for her *Doctoral*
Honorary Degree

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Namaskaar Dr Shiva, good morning Rector Nadal, distinguished guests and everyone present. Bon dia a tothom. It is with great honour and pleasure that I serve as the academic sponsor for Vandana Shiva's nomination as Doctor Honoris Causa at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra.

Dr Shiva's contribution to society is not easy to summarize. Her work transcends the boundaries of disciplines, geographies and ideologies. She is a scientist, philosopher, feminist, ecologist, pacifist and social justice activist. For more than four decades, she has been one of the most prominent and tireless advocates for planet Earth, and a pioneer in showing how violence within human society is directly linked to our violence against the rest of life.

Throughout these decades, she has become one of the most influential voices in the global discourse on environmental justice and sustainable agriculture, earning descriptions such as "radical scientist", "fierce intellect", and, as Jane Goodall put it, "a powerful voice to which everyone who cares about life on this planet must be grateful". Not least, she has also become, as some have called her, "the worst nightmare of big corporate power".

Indeed, she is one of the brightest and most formidable critics of the global power structures undermining democracy, and in particular a formidable opponent of what she has called "agriculture imperialism" and the "poison cartel": that is, the agrochemical and biotech oligopoly of interests that pollute, degrade and threaten life on our planet.

Dr Shiva has intellectually championed the idea that science should serve the common good, not greed. And she has embodied that idea by putting it into practice. Through her actions, she has demonstrated that it is not only urgent but also feasible to align knowledge with social justice and the reduction of suffering. This is why it is almost impossible to separate the scientist from the activist and the thinker in Vandana Shiva.

Roots of freedom

Vandana Shiva was born in 1952 in the Doon Valley, in northern India, in what is today the state of Uttarakhand—a Himalayan region bordering Tibet and Nepal. She was the daughter of a forest conservator and of a mother who had abandoned a senior government job to become a farmer.

As a result, Dr Shiva grew up in close contact with nature and in a unique family environment. Her parents gave her the opportunity to grow up in the dual worlds of India's rural majority and westernised elite, with her and her siblings learning as

much from the forest as from privileged education. This allowed them to develop, in her own words, as “free spirits”. A freedom that Vandana Shiva has vigorously defended throughout her life.

Thus, after earning a degree in physics in India and being attracted to nuclear physics, she realized that much of science is partial. The trigger for Dr Shiva’s first awareness was actually her sister, a medical doctor who exposed to her the dramatic effects of nuclear energy on human and planetary health—effects that her training as a nuclear physicist had overlooked.

She was subsequently attracted to quantum theory for its non-reductionist, non-mechanistic paradigm and in 1979, she earned a PhD on quantum theory in Canada. On her return to India, she chose, as she put it, “the difficult and challenging path of trying to combine scientific research with social and environmental responsibility”.

Chipko and reductionist forestry

The catalyst for Vandana Shiva’s career was her involvement with the Chipko movement in the 1970s. Chipko was a grassroots response to widespread environmental degradation threatening local ecosystems and the livelihoods of rural villagers in Dr Shiva’s birth region. Although men were involved in the movement, women were its backbone. It was women who started hugging trees to physically stop the loggers from cutting them down. This turned into a massive nonviolent protest that inspired the world, making tree-hugging a global symbol of environmental activism.

Through this experience, Dr Shiva identified the root of the problem: the reductionist, extractivist view of nature promoted by men in power. This led to the publication of her first book in 1988, which explored the links between women’s activism, environmental issues and social justice. In this book, *Staying Alive*, she identified development policies as a project of Western patriarchy, a project based on a reductionist view and on the displacement of women and the care principle.

Reductionist forestry was led at the time by the World Bank’s Tropical Forest Action Plan, a plan based on replacing biodiversity with single species. These were single commodity plantations that divorced forestry from agriculture and water management, as well as the needs of communities, and ignorantly equated planting - any tree planting, such as eucalyptus monocultures - with nature restoration.

Dr Shiva pioneered showing how the reckless exploitation of tropical forests contributed to the material basis for industrialization and economic growth in the colonial and post-colonial periods for the sake of the colonial and post-colonial elites.

She also denounced that these same elites were imposing policies of forest conservation that were in fact policies of *deforestation*.

The pattern identified by her in these *deforestation* policies would reappear again and again in the various areas she researched and engaged with thereafter. This pattern involves four main ideas. First, it blames ordinary people, rather than profit, as the root of problems. Second, it regards the reductionist knowledge of privileged Western male elites as superior and necessary to non-Westerners. Third, it promotes privatization as a solution to scarcity among the poor. And, finally, it involves the belief that market-oriented commercial solutions will ensure care for all sentient beings and the planet.

Connecting the dots

This pattern has since been extensively documented and discussed by Dr Shiva in the rest of her work, including her eye-opening research into the so-called Green Revolution in India. Her role on this topic was pivotal, showing how the violence that erupted in Punjab in the 1980s was not religious at its core, but resource-related, and directly linked to the introduction of chemical-based Western agriculture in the region.

In the volume *The Violence of the Green Revolution*, she dismantled the “miracle” rhetoric promoted by private US foundations, the World Bank, and multinational seed and chemical companies that profited from the so-called miracle. Through her work, we discovered that although high crop yields alone are a convenient measure for business, they are a very poor indicator of real success, because they neglect the immense hidden costs of the increasing yields.

These costs include the destruction of genetic diversity of food crops; the pollution of soil and water with chemical fertilizers, pesticides, fungicides and herbicides; the resulting destruction of soil fertility; the creation of new “pests”; and the increased demand for water due to an increased need for irrigation of the new crops, which at the same time triggers water conflicts. The result is increased yields, but at dramatically high environmental and social costs that have been neglected by the proponents of industrial agriculture to this day. Dr Shiva showed how the “miracle seed” rhetoric was part of a development ideology that, under the guise of scientific and technological modernization, led not only to environmental and social disruption, but also to uniformity, centralization, and the undemocratic takeover of world agriculture.

Her critique of the downsides of the Green Revolution in India was instrumental in later encouraging critical research on similar neo-colonial policies imposed on other countries of the Global South.

After the Green Revolution, her major life project has been the seed *satyagraha*, the seed campaign, which has projected her as the “Gandhi of grains”. This Gandhian campaign is a peaceful non-cooperation movement against the appropriation of agriculture by multinational corporations. It represents a commitment not to cooperate with what she calls the “patenting of life” and “biopiracy”.

Dr Shiva has persistently reported on the unsustainable nature of chemical, intensive agriculture, being one of the first to denounce the insanity of a highly polluting agriculture, which, moreover, is oriented not to feeding humans but to feeding other animals, which we exploit massively in a most cruel way.

However, where Dr Shiva has been a most prominent voice is in the field of the biogenetic modification of organisms, or GMOs. She has scrutinized what is behind GMOs in agriculture, exposing not only the environmental implications but also the vested interests behind them. Her work in this area has brought international attention to the issues of intellectual property rights in agriculture. Her scientific background has been crucial in this regard, consistently debunking what she calls the myths of the “GMO miracle” and its “parade” as cutting-edge science. She has shown how behind GMOs we don’t find knowledge, wisdom or care, but rather ignorance of life cycles, arrogance and greed.

It is largely thanks to scientists like Dr Shiva that our current understanding of GMOs, and agrobiotechnology in general, is not limited to the propaganda of agrochemical PR machines.

Obsolete science in the capitalist scientific paradigm

Finally, I would like to focus on what is probably Vandana Shiva’s most important intellectual contribution: her demystification of Western science and technology, and her contribution to unmasking the patriarchal project that sustains them.

Her work has been instrumental in exposing the hidden reality of Western science and technology. These are considered successful only because we systematically neglect their full impacts, externalizing and detaching these impacts from the science and technology itself.

Mainstream science today is in fact, as Dr Shiva puts it, “a very narrow patriarchal project for a very short period of history”. A project that was conceived for the sake of privileged male elites and that presents the exploiters of nature as experts. A project that wants us to forget that the modern agrochemical industry is a greenwashing of the chemical industry created to sow death during the second World War. A project based on an obsolete paradigm of genetic determinism, which assumes that genes are atoms of biological determinism. As Dr Shiva has brilliantly exposed, these are assumptions

that come from the idea of control and domination: this is ideology, mostly patriarchal ideology, not modern science.

Celebrating her legacy and courage

Let me conclude this speech by celebrating what I see as Vandana Shiva's four greatest legacies:

First, let's celebrate her significant and courageous contribution to independent knowledge. Dr Siva has bravely confronted the powerful and exposed the flaws in their approach: the fact that the paradigm based on a biotechnological, chemical, mechanistic war on nature has not alleviated but exacerbated suffering on this planet.

Second, let's celebrate her example in action. Dr Shiva's platform, Navdanya, has created dozens of seed banks to preserve food biodiversity, defended small farmers' rights and food sovereignty, researched and taught organic and agroecological practices, and fought the biopiracy of traditional knowledge and indigenous biodiversity. The successful campaigns against patents on wheat, the basmati rice, and the neem tree represent significant victories against the privatization of natural resources and traditional knowledge – that is, knowledge that is “historically validated”, as opposed to lab-created and PR-promoted.

Third, let's celebrate her strength based on compassion and care. Her ecofeminist ideas, first articulated together with German feminist sociologist Maria Mies, have become the ethical foundation of all her work, including the over 20 books she has written throughout her career, and the countless reports, consultations and trainings she has provided to all sorts of institutions, organizations and people. Dr Shiva's ecofeminist approach is essentially a radical counterpoint to the androcentric Cartesian paradigm that dominates modern capitalist societies. It involves the empowerment of women; the replacement of competition and violence with cooperation and compassion; and, above all, the understanding that everything in life is interconnected, and therefore that the continuation of the old project of human domination over nature is not only unjust and destructive, but also highly inefficient and short-sighted.

And finally, let's celebrate her inspiring example in breaking stereotypes. Let's not forget that Vandana Shiva started her career in a time when, even more than today, peasants, women, youth and developing countries were expected to silently obey the dictates of the “knowledgeable” West as imposed by men in suits. When Dr Shiva burst onto the scene in her bright sari, she dramatically shattered society's most entrenched norms.

Let's express our deepest gratitude to Dr Shiva with this Honoris Causa.

