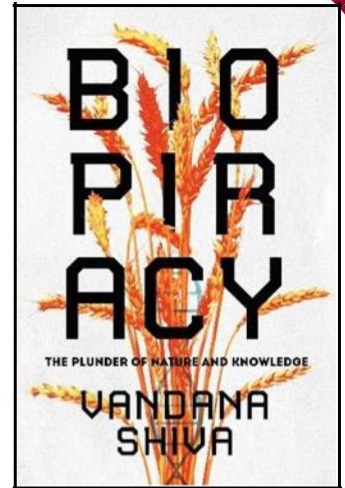


THE SOCIAL SCIENCE PERSPECTIVE

Volume 1, Issue 2, 2021

What the Reader Thinks -

BioImperialism: The Anomaly of BioDemocracy



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What the Reader Thinks

BioImperialism: The Anomaly of BioDemocracy

The 2020-21 farmers' protest against the three agricultural bills that were passed in September 2020 is an ongoing march. It is considered as one of the largest organised strikes in the history of world, with about 25 crore participants. The farmers are still protesting to get these bills repealed. The main reason why many have got-ten to opposing the 'progressive' laws is because there is no clarity on 'whose' progress these bills target. The three agricultural bills promise liberalisation but in real-ity, farmers will face the privatisation of the agricultural sphere. This brings to the

forefront the protest that happened almost thirty years ago, which also raised larger questions of democracy and liberalisation. It was a protest led by Mahendra Singh Tikait, the leader of Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU), placing strong complaints that spoke of agrarian distress, delayed payments and complicated bureaucratic rules. Though protests such as these have defined the power of democracy, it is imperative to note as to why the government has and still is indifferent to the agrarian sector which in fact makes a significant contribution to the nation's economy. It is in this context that Vandana Shiva's *Biopiracy* becomes an integral text that highlights the paradox of democracy and liberalisation.

Biopiracy, although published in 1997, stands absolutely relevant in today's crisis. Spread across an Introduction and seven chapters, with each chapter dedicated to an integral aspect that makes, connects, and sustains biodiversity; the book explores ethical, ecological and economic consequences of 'patents' on life forms. Apart from the voice to conserve natural resources, there is yet another common link that underlines the sustainability of biodiversity – indigenous knowledge. Shiva conceptualises the connection between the institu-

tion of IPR (Intellectual Property Rights), Genetic Engineering and Corporations [the six 'gene giants' – Monsanto, Syngenta, Dupont, Dow, Bayer and BASF (p.xv)], and how the trio acts on biodiversity, commodifying it for monetary gain while completely ignoring the larger picture of displacing nature beyond repair. Shiva is strongly against the patenting of seeds, for she argues that seed exchange between farmers have

been in the culture for a very long time and that alone has sustained the agrarian civilisation. The corporate monopoly's claim to take ownership of seeds, altering it by

simply inserting a gene, is ethically and legally wrong. According to Shiva, a seed which is the first entity in the food chain is self-evolving, it has "intrinsic worth, value and standing" (p.ix). Thus, she argues for a sustainable biodiversity, a green movement that does not get politicised under 'conservation' according to the West and result in monocultures.

Shiva elaborates on how monocultures become an essential cog in globalisation. In order to attain a global control of raw materials and markets, homogenisation and destruction of diversity become necessary. Although the war against diversity is not entirely new, it is still threatened whenever it is seen as an obstacle. The environmentalist explains how homogenisation and monocultures introduce violence politically and ecologically. Politically, the violence is perpetuated through "the use of coercion, control, and centralization" (p.101); and ecologically, the "uniformity implies that a disturbance to one part of a system is translated into a disturbance to other parts" (p.102). The vulnerability of monocultures is well illustrated in the historical event of Green Revolution, where thousands of local rice varieties were replaced with uniform varieties in 1966, and these new crops eventually succumbed to a bacterial blight and a virus infestation in 1967-68. It is important to note what the corporates missed, seeds grow in tandem with whatever its environment holds, therefore, the old indigenous varieties were resistant to local pests and diseases, while the new seeds became a vehicle for introducing and fostering pests.

While Biopiracy heavily criticises the mechanisation and monoculturalisation of life forms and processes, it also pro-vides a compelling argument for a criti-cal inquiry of IPR and legal regimes that conveniently neglect the true meaning of biodiversity

Further, Shiva critiques the strategies used for conserving biodiversity. These strategies are still aligned to the methods as dictated by the Western knowledge, and the colonial conquests of nature and culture have metamorphosed into 'biopiracy'. She justly demonstrates how the entry of multinational firms exploit biodiversity and indigenous knowledge of biodiversity. The Indian Patent Act still and rightly so excludes methods of agriculture and plants from patentability to ensure that seed is to be "held as a common property resource in the public domain and that farmers' inalienable right to save, exchange, and improve seed [is] not violated" (p.x). The "bioprospecting" (p.72), a word used to define this new form of enclosure, is what is alienating both knowledge and resources from the original custodians and donors and legitimising the privatisation of biodiversity and the intellectual commons. Shiva calls this new science (producing genetically engineered organisms) as reductionist for this technology can only classify the genetic composition of a species, "but its ecological impact is determined by the nature and magnitude of the interaction between genes, their expression in different organisms, and the environment" (p.94). She raises these critical ecological questions that call attention towards the natural interactions of species in an ecosystem, thereby its critical role in the processes of sustaining the biodiversity at large.

Biopiracy also urges the readers to lookout for the process of theft that is legitimised under the name of property rights. Shiva's decisive critique of John Locke's treatise on property illustrates how "property is created by removing resources from nature and mixing them with labor" (p.3). The 'labor' here is not the physical one, instead it is one in its spiritual form as perpetuated by the capital investors. Critiquing Locke's statement that "only those who own capital have the natural right to own natural resources" (p.3), Shiva extends this in the context of how the Eurocentric notions of property and piracy have become the basis of the present IPR laws of GATT (The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) and WTO (World Trade Organization). The discover-and

-conquer game of colonisers in the past have now seeped into the interior spaces, to the genetic codes of living organisms. The entry of the 'new' capitalist/colonisers is compared to the "Second Coming of Columbus", for

they too are looking for new colonies to invade and exploit. Today,

these colonies are more likely to be "the interior spaces of the bodies of women, plants, and animals" (p.5).

Ultimately, Shiva calls for a staunch resistance to biopiracy, thereby a complete resistance to the colonisation of life itself. While *Biopiracy* heavily criticises the mechanisation and monoculturalisation of life forms and processes, it also provides a compelling argument for a critical inquiry of IPR and legal regimes that

conveniently neglect the true meaning of biodiversity. The book also informs the readers of how the corporates have hijacked the farmers' shares but have manipulated the prices heavily for the consumers to pay. Rest of the details in the book is dedicated in establishing how nature's diversity is produced in tandem with culture, a reality that is dismissed by IPR and ignored by the corporate giants. The indigenous knowledge is mostly disregarded and appropriated when seemed profitable. Thus, the work is an open call for legal reforms that will respect the diversity of knowledge which in turn would preserve the diversity of nature. It is crucial to read *Biopiracy* and more of such books especially in today's times to understand the shift in hegemony. We are becoming the victims of food imperialism, bound to serve those who control the food and not those who produce it.

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