

BY EUGENE YIGA

Seeding Freedom in the Age of Climate Chaos

IMAGE: AdobeStock



As the world grapples with the escalating impacts of climate change, renowned scholar and activist Vandana Shiva offers a compelling vision for humanity's path forward.

We like to believe that progress is a straight line, with society marching onwards and upwards towards ever greater heights of prosperity. But what if this narrative of linear progress is fundamentally flawed? What if, instead of a one-way street to Utopia, we are caught in a cyclical dance with forces far more powerful than we realise?

“In India, we always talk about the end of cycles because we don’t believe in linear time,” explains scholar and activist Vandana Shiva. “Climate havoc and climate chaos means the rupture of the Earth’s amazing systems of creating the climate that have allowed us as human beings to be around for thousands of years.”

Extraction leads to rupture

At the heart of this rupture lies an extractive economic model powered by fossil fuels. Shiva argues that by taking what the Earth put underground over hundreds of millions of years and burning it at an unprecedented rate, we have disturbed the planet’s metabolism and caused climate instability.

“Every year in the industrial system, we are burning more than 20 million years of nature’s work,” she says. “All of that burning beyond the Earth’s capacity to absorb, while simultaneously destroying the systems that absorb the carbon – the forests, the

living soils – has built up all the pollution that is leading to the metabolic disease, which is called climate change.”

This metabolic disease manifests as extreme weather events, droughts, floods, and rising sea levels – phenomena businesses can no longer ignore. Supply chain disruptions, resource scarcities, and infrastructural damage tied to climate shocks pose serious financial risks.

Inefficiency breeds instability

Shiva highlights how the industrial agricultural model, heavily dependent on chemicals, fertilisers, and monocultures, is inherently inefficient and unstable. For example, synthetic nitrogen fertilisers made using fossil fuels can degrade soil fertility when overused and lead to emissions of nitrous oxide, a greenhouse gas roughly 300 times more potent than carbon dioxide.

**We have disturbed the
planet’s metabolism.**

“Industrial farming is a fossil fuel agriculture,” she states. “Of course, the mechanisation is a big part of it, but synthetic nitrogen fertilisers come from fossil fuels [and] around a third of all greenhouse gases are from industrial agriculture and globalised food systems.”

This systemic inefficiency leads to long-term productivity loss and resource depletion. That’s why having businesses transition to sustainable models that work with nature, rather than against it, is not just an ethical imperative but an economic necessity.

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Geopolitical instability threatens business

Climate change’s destabilising effects extend beyond ecosystems to geopolitics. Shiva draws attention to how environmental degradation and resource scarcity have fuelled conflicts in regions like the Middle East and Africa.

She cites the example of Lake Chad, once one of Africa’s largest water bodies, which has lost more than 90% of its surface area since the 1960s, primarily due to reduced rainfall from climate change and extensive water diversion for irrigation. The resulting conflicts between pastoralists, farmers, and fishermen, exacerbated by drought, sowed the seeds for the rise of Boko Haram.

For companies operating internationally, climate-induced shocks can quickly escalate into political instability, disrupted labour markets, and compromised investments. These are the kinds of risks that businesses must factor into their strategic planning.

Regenerating agricultural systems

Industrial agriculture’s reliance on monocultures, global distribution networks, and chemical inputs creates a food system rife with waste, dietary deficiencies, and health costs. Shiva advocates for a shift towards biodiverse, localised agricultural systems that prioritise soil health, nutritional value, and community resilience.

“In India alone, billions are spent annually on the destruction of nature and the destruction of our health and the killing of our farmers,” she says. “Globally, it would be into trillions and trillions, which would be much bigger than the formal economy.”

By aligning with regenerative agricultural practices, businesses can build stable supply chains, craft compelling brand narratives around authenticity and quality, and contribute to long-term food security.

Navigating the data dilemma

As artificial intelligence makes inroads into agriculture, Shiva cautions against the pitfalls of viewing technologies as magic bullets. While precision farming tools are often marketed as climate solutions, they risk becoming new forms of extraction that monetise traditional knowledge and biodiversity for corporate gain.

“Big Data should not be the new religion,” she warns. “All the deep knowledge people have, all the deep knowledge our grandmothers have, all the deep knowledge the farmers have, is treated as nothing... Companies team up with the farm machine manufacturers to put spyware into the tractors to collect the data, send it to [headquarters], who then sends it back as a commodity and sells it to you.”

This highlights the need for businesses to approach digital innovations in agriculture ethically to ensure that technology empowers rather than displaces local expertise and agency.

Sowing seeds of resilience

Despite the scale of the climate crisis, Shiva remains hopeful. She shares examples of community-led initiatives in seed saving, organic farming, and regenerative soil management that, if scaled, have the potential to reverse climate change within a decade.

“With biodiverse, fossil fuel-free, chemical-free farming, we are producing more nutrition per acre, enough to feed two times the world,” she affirms. “Our rural communities are earning 10 times more because this system is not just extracting from the Earth.”

Again, these regenerative approaches open doors to resilient supply chains, powerful brand stories, and sustained profitability. But they’re also a path that demands a fundamental rewiring of business models and metrics so that society moves away from extraction and towards symbiosis with the Earth.

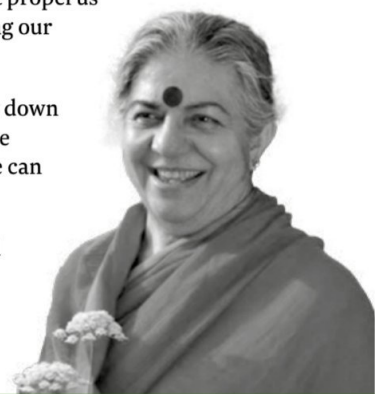
Seeding freedom and reaping resilience

Ultimately, Shiva’s message is one of choice and responsibility. Humanity now stands at a crossroads. Our choice is between persisting with destructive practices that propel us towards extinction or radically embracing our role as conscious stewards of the planet.

“Extinction is inevitable if we keep going down the way that is destroying the planet,” she says. “But we have another way where we can rejuvenate biodiversity.”

For the business community, this is a call to innovate in harmony with ecological boundaries and to measure success

Vandana Shiva



‘Seeding of freedom is embracing our species’ being.’

not just in quarterly returns but in the health of the soils, the vitality of communities, and the resilience of ecosystems. It is an invitation to “seed freedom”, whether it’s freedom from fossil fuels, freedom from chemical dependence, or freedom from monopolistic control over seeds and data.

In choosing this path of regeneration, Shiva believes that businesses can not only ensure their own long-term viability but also become active participants in writing a new story for humanity

“where prosperity is not pitted against the planet, but rather flows from a deep alignment with Earth’s rhythms and resources”.

“Seeding of freedom is embracing our species’ being, embracing our humanity, embracing our Earth citizenship,” she says. Indeed, for businesses ready to take on this challenge, the rewards are not just financial but existential – the chance to help steer humanity towards a future where economy and ecology, profit and planet, finally thrive as one.

THE RISE OF BILLIONAIRE MONOPOLIES

The concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few billionaires has reached unprecedented levels. According to Oxfam reports, the number of billionaires whose combined wealth equals that of the poorest half of the world’s population decreased from 388 in 2010 to just 26 in 2018.

“The billionaires are a system,” Shiva explains. “And they’re a system of exclusion of the 99%, even though they’re also a system of including our resources and our knowledge into their wealth. We are now entering a new phase, which is a rent-collecting economy.”

This trend towards monopolistic control has far-reaching implications for businesses and society. It stifles competition, concentrates political influence, and widens the wealth gap. Small and medium-sized

enterprises find themselves squeezed out of markets, while consumers face fewer choices and higher prices.

Navigating this landscape requires businesses to be agile, innovative, and attuned to the needs of their communities. Developing niche expertise, cultivating loyal customer bases, and forming strategic partnerships can help businesses carve out spaces for themselves in an economy increasingly dominated by a few players.

“I do feel that as an ordinary citizen, we have to realise that we are outside, because we are not part of the value system,” Shiva says. “We are not part of the appropriation and extraction system. We are part of the Earth system.”

GANDHI’S LEGACY OF SWADESHI AND SELF-RELIANCE

Mahatma Gandhi’s philosophy of Swadeshi, or self-reliance, holds powerful lessons for businesses in an era of globalisation and ecological crisis. Swadeshi emphasises local production and consumption, decentralised economies, and harmony with nature.

Applying Swadeshi principles to business means prioritising local sourcing, supporting artisanal and small-scale producers, and building resilient, diversified supply chains. It also means creating products that are durable, repairable, and aligned with the needs and values of the communities they serve.

“It’s so important to know where things begin and where things go,” Shiva says. ‘And Gandhi distilled this into a very beautiful, simple phrase. He said that the earth provides enough for everyone’s needs, but not for a few people’s greed.’

Beyond economics, Swadeshi implies a moral commitment to non-violence, simplicity, and trusteeship. It challenges

businesses to see themselves not merely as profit-maximising entities but as custodians of public trust that are responsible for the well-being of all stakeholders, including the environment.

“If that is being barbaric, we’d all better be barbaric,” Shiva says. “Because barbarianism, in the original term, didn’t mean they were violent. They were just not Christian. That was the problem. They had other faiths.”

Today, in an age of ecological upheaval and social dislocation, Gandhi’s vision of self-reliance and harmony with nature offers a compass for businesses seeking to balance profit with purpose. Growth and sustainability go hand in hand. **GIBS**

