

Book Review

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST:

MY JOURNEY THROUGH INDIA'S GREEN MOVEMENT

Author: Sunita Narain, **Year of Publication:** 2017,

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This is one of the best books I have ever read. It is a boldest taking stock of the state of affairs with respect to environmental harm and welfare in our country, without any apriori ideological blinkers, that leaves the reader with so many uncomfortable truths that evoke “the deepest sighs and the frankest shadows”, so to speak.

The author, Sunita Narain (who also represents the spirit of Anil Agarwal the journalist and environmentalist) is the Director General of the Centre for Science and Environment, New Delhi; Director of the Society for Environmental Communications, and the editor of the fortnightly magazine, *Down to Earth*. She indeed represents the most exemplary tradition of political activism for common good in our country, and gives us its concrete flavour through this book.

It is worth underlining what she says at the outset thus: “In fact, in the kind of work we do, which is mostly frustrating and often deeply disturbing, the only way to stay ahead is to keep a tunnel view—focus on where we need to go—with a single-minded obsession. Or desperation. That is what keeps my adrenaline going. And frankly it's the only way not to let the sense of helplessness—given the immensity and often the sheer futility of the task—make you go under.”

Some signature statements in the book are worth noting: “...there are two distinct versions of environmentalism—of the rich and of the poor.” “...we have never built a development model for natural resources that is both sustainable and can still benefit local economies and people.” “...environmental degradation goes unchecked.” “...the system is today designed to obstruct and prevaricate, not to scrutinize and assess environmental damage.” “...the slogan for the next-gen environmentalism must be different. Not-in-my-backyard should give way to in-my-backyard, because only then can we plan for development, which is sustainable, because we know we have to live with it. The planet then becomes our backyard.

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This has to be the next forty-year slogan for India's environmental movement. It is time to make real change happen—now and forever.”

“Our work over thirty years shows that each issue is contested and it takes time to get results...every issue is contested because of conflicts of interest. It is contested because it is the contest of ideas and the contest of realities. To engage in this contest requires research and an ability to stand against the stated truth—or what I have called the established fact. This is where we have faced our biggest enemies.”

Now assume that, like her or her mentor Anil Agarwal who had taught her and others the art and science of environment in which people matter, you are a passionate activist against air pollution, pesticides, pesticide residues in colas, carbon dioxide emissions, wildlife destruction, water crisis, how excreta business is managed now, and the like issues in our country. You might encounter experiences as follows.

Diesel car manufacturers, pesticide companies and cola companies can kill you and the public, so to say through “slow murder” and “fast and deliberate murder”, if you question them and their science.

You can get a legal notice for defamation from an auto company for a whopping Rs. 100 crore, apart from personal attacks and well-orchestrated disinformation for public consumption about pollution and the activist concerned against pollution. Consider toxic gas emissions from the car industry. In early 2016, a batter of lawyers had filed separate petitions against the odd-even scheme of the Delhi government. “Their arguments were that the scheme had led to enormous inconvenience and worse, daily pollution data showed no impact on air quality. Cars, they said, were not responsible for pollution.” The author goes further to say thus: “I have also heard this argument in the Supreme Court. The court was listening to our urgent appeal to take steps to reduce toxic air pollution in the city. It was packed with the country's most powerful lawyers—many of them former ministers—all representing automobile companies. They were agitated about the court's direction to stop the sale of new diesel vehicles above 2000 cc in the NCR, the area contiguous with Delhi and where work and offices are seamlessly spread. Their vehement argument that their diesel-fuelled luxury vehicles are so clean made the otherwise sober and restrained former Chief Justice T.S. Thakur remark, 'So do they emit oxygen?' ” Chapter 1 titled “Air Pollution: Breathless” discusses whether one should leave Delhi in search of clean air or stay in Delhi and fight for clean air.

Consider yourself pitted against the rich and powerful owners of the pesticide industry because you are concerned about pesticides in colas, about terrible mental and physical ailments due to spraying of endosulfan, transfat in edible oil, antibiotics in honey, antibiotic residue in chicken, junk food and so on and so forth. You are bothered about the fact that

pesticides are toxins and the companies have not bothered to clean up the water which they use to manufacture the soft drinks. But they first slam research on pesticide residues in food, in the blood of farmers in the Punjab and in the soil, water and food of the diseased and deformed villagers of Padre in Kerala. They then liberally shower legal notices threatening dire consequences for doing research on these lines. They hire protesters and intimidate and harass so that you shut up. They hire reputed public relations companies to engage on their behalf in dirty tricks and intimidation. They use their money power, and especially enjoy screwing you with SLAPP—"strategic lawsuits against public participation.". These lawsuits are not to get any justice but to threaten, intimidate and gag individuals and, in particular, professionals who refuse to prostitute their science to suit the industry's profits at the cost of people. The companies which file such cases rarely win in the court, but make the defendants spend a huge amount of time and money running to the courts to fight the case. Their science is manufactured by 'biostitutes'—scientific prostitutes to serve industrial interests. Chapter 2 titled "Endosulfan's Curse" is how you can take on such vested interests.

Chapter 3 is about "Cola Wars" from bottled water companies and soft drinks manufacturers against you concerned about pesticide residues in water and cola drinks, about your analysis of study on pesticides in groundwater and how they make it to products we consume and what this means for our bodies, our health. Great film stars are unabashedly at work to convince people that you are wrong, that the drinks are absolutely safe. There are virtually no regulatory standards in this industry. In the face of large corporations, governments are either trusting or just weak and spineless. Possible action on regulations has been stymied because of corporate pressure.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 are more complicated, intriguing and absorbing discussions. Man-made climate change is happening as seen in extreme weather events and it is impacting the poorest in the world, the ones who have least contributed to the stock of emissions in the atmosphere. Should we and can we cut emissions of greenhouse gases, particularly carbon dioxide, fast and drastically, if we want to keep the temperature increase capped at 20 C? How can climate negotiations be done not just for emission cuts but for the right to development? How to share the atmosphere as the global commons equally among all? Again, here too, the rich and powerful in the world are least bothered about stark realities and hard solutions. The tiger protection issue is another very fascinating controversy. The author highlights and criticizes how conservation is still happening in ways that exacerbates the conflict between animals and villagers. In the process the vested interests of the so-called die-hard pro-tiger conservationists and their money interests along with their vested interests in organizing tourism as a business, are vividly exposed. The discussion on traditional knowledge and modern knowledge with respect to water management is revelatory indeed. Droughts are man-made or government made disasters. Note what she emphasizes thus:

“Over the last 100 years or so, the country has seen three paradigmatic shifts in water management. One is that individuals and communities have steadily given over their role almost completely to the state. The second is that the simple technology of using rainwater has declined. Instead, the key source of water is the exploitation of rivers and groundwater through dams and tube wells. As water in rivers and aquifers is only a small portion of total rainwater availability, there is an inevitable growing and, in many cases, unbearable stress on these sources. The third is that we have become an increasingly water-wasteful and inefficient society, misusing water in our industries, farms and toilets.” It is a shame that there is no water policy that recognizes that water management must involve communities and households to become the biggest cooperative enterprise in the country. It is also a shame that there is no policy for our common lands—forest or grazing lands—so that these are seen as the base to rebuild shattered rural economies.

To conclude, unbridled economic growth fuelled by the elites with its fallout in terms of the growing cost of toxicity in our air, water, land, and food, and of course in the ultimate cost of a changing climate, is not even working for the rich and the middle class, leave alone the poor. Environmental management cannot work if it does not address inequality and poverty. In other words, policies that add to inequity and social injustice will just not work for sustainability.

The clarity with which the author comes to these conclusions of the people-centred environmentalism will go a long way in building a new environmental consciousness in the country that is not hijacked by the views and actions of the rich and the powerful. A cheaper paperback edition of the book will diffuse the contents of the book among a larger community of people looking for sound solutions to our deplorable green matters.